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Telling Tales: Enacting Family Relationships in Joint Storytelling about Difficult Family Experiences

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Abstract

Narratives help people make sense of difficult experiences. In addition, stories provide insight into people's conceptualizations of the world, including their understanding of their family relationships. Given these two functions of storytelling, the ways in which family members tell stories about difficult experiences together should reveal or reflect relational qualities. This project focused on how the family relational context relates to jointly enacted sense-making behaviors as families tell stories of shared difficult experiences. Findings indicate that interactional sense-making behaviors, in particular coherence and perspective-taking, predict important family relational qualities. This suggests that family qualities affect and are reflected in the likelihood that family members will engage in productive sense-making behaviors as a unit when talking about a shared difficult experience.

Keywords: family stress, family functioning, interactional sense-making, storytelling

Stories help people to make sense of their experiences and develop a sense of control and understanding (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Harvey, 1996; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987). Additionally, research in health psychology indicates that disclosure about distressing experiences positively affects individuals' well-being (Pennebaker & Keough, 1997; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988). Telling the story of a difficult experience, then, is potentially good for us both psychologically and physically. Researchers have identified a number of characteristics of disclosure and narrative (i.e., creating organized

sequences, identifying emotions, labeling experiences) that explain these benefits for individuals (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Clark, 1993; Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Pennebaker & Keough, 1997). But stories more often than not are created in conversations with others, making them joint constructions.

The coconstruction of difficult stories is a relational process since stories are often told in the context of personal relationships and because relational partners frequently experience difficulty, stress, or trauma together in relationships. When the difficulty is shared, either because all members of the relationship experienced the stressor or because one person's hardship impacts interdependent others, stories about those stressors also become shared. As stories of shared difficulties are told, control of story development shifts out of the hands of the individual and becomes a relational-level activity. The processes of narrative that contribute to well-being, such as articulating experiences in an organized way, then, become joint accomplishments.

Although researchers looking at individual narratives have established the value of narrative processes for individual health and well-being, sense-making behaviors in joint family storytelling also should relate to *relational* well-being. The stories people tell both individually and jointly reveal information about how they feel and think about their personal relationships (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999; Harvey, Agnostelli, & Weber, 1989; Koenig Kellas, 2005; Orbuch, 1997; Sternberg, 1998; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Although the research on family storytelling typically has not focused on stories about difficult experiences, the process of jointly telling difficult stories is particularly salient in the family, since one of the important functions of families is to provide social support and share in the process of coping with stressful experiences (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006; Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). In addition, *how* families manage such conversations introduces a set of complexities, such as the possibility of differing perspectives and/or attempts to dominate the conversation and meaning of the story, not at work in individual storytelling. Thus, the process by which families make sense of difficulty together merits additional attention, particularly as it provides a window into the family culture, including relational qualities such as satisfaction, functioning, and social support. Understanding the links between these processes and family relational qualities is the purpose of the current study. After providing an overview of research on making sense of difficulties through narrative as well as family storytelling and its connection to relationship quality, this study investigates the relationship between family relational qualities and families' sense-making behaviors in jointly told family stories about recent difficult experiences.

Making Sense of Difficult Experiences through Storytelling

A substantial body of research indicates that disclosure about difficult experiences is beneficial for physical health and psychological well-being. Pennebaker (1989), for example, found that not confiding about a traumatic event is associated with illness and distress. Although the benefits of telling the story of difficulty may vary (e.g., expressive writing may be less helpful in cases of severe depression, Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), for the most part research on narrative demonstrates value in telling the story of difficult experiences (Harvey, 1996; Monk, 1997; Pennebaker, 2003). Explanations for these benefits suggest that

actively inhibiting thoughts about difficult experiences takes psychological work, creating stress on the body. Writing about or talking about one's experience, on the other hand, helps to create insight or make sense of the problem (Harvey, 1996; Pennebaker, 1989), develop a reappraisal of the situation (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998), establish a greater sense of control over experiences (Weiss, 1975), and facilitate catharsis through emotional expression (Pennebaker, 1997). Telling about one's problems aids in creating meaning by forcing one to *label emotions and experiences* and place them in a logical, *organized* structure (Clark, 1993; Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003). In addition, telling the story of a difficult experience necessitates a *consideration of multiple perspectives*, which provides an opportunity for personal insight and encourages development of a *coherent* interpretation of events (Clark, 1993; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000). Each of these story features constitutes an important activity in the process of making sense of difficult experiences. As Harvey (1996) puts it, through stories we "construct versions of reality that endow experience with meaning" (p. 207).

Much of this research on storytelling about difficult experiences has focused on individuals writing about distressing events (see Sales & Fivush, 2005, for an exception). Stories, however, are often joint constructions (Gergen & Gergen, 1987; Mandelbaum, 1989), either collaboratively created with the listener (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Mandelbaum, 1989; Polanyi, 1985) or coconstructed by people who participated in the event together (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Mandelbaum, 1987; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993a). In addition, stressors often are experienced and talked about with others in the relational network, such as family members (Mickelson, Lyons, Sullivan, & Coyne, 2001). In the family, in fact, therapists have noted the importance of family narrative processes for coping with stressors (e.g., Monk, 1997; Reiss, 1981). Narrative about difficult experiences, then, can be a shared activity in the family.

Joint storytelling about shared problems, however, creates constraints and possibilities that are not present in individual stories. Activities such as emotional expression may be considered at the individual level, but other features of narrative like organization and coherence become a joint accomplishment when coconstructing a story (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005). Additionally, joint storytelling presents the opportunity to hear and learn from multiple perspectives, but also creates the possibility that perspectives may be disconfirmed or that views presented may be ignored as the story is developed (Bohanek et al., 2006; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005). Given this complexity, Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) investigated families jointly telling stories of family difficulty and identified four dimensions of interactional storytelling behaviors—engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence—that are particularly important for making sense of such experiences. These interactional sense-making behaviors facilitated the negotiation and development of a shared meaning as families worked to coconstruct a story of a stressful experience.

Engagement refers to the degree of warmth and involvement present in the storytelling (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). This includes verbal and nonverbal liveliness and expressions of affection and warmth, even in the context of conflict or disagreement. For turn-taking, the degree to which families are polite (i.e., wait their turn) or dynamic (i.e., interrupt) in taking turns and the degree to which they balance talk time across the storytelling

interaction helps to differentiate the ways in which families make sense of their experiences. Perspective-taking behavior also plays an important role in interactional sense-making. This includes both attentiveness to others' perspectives, or the degree to which family members solicit, listen to, and incorporate others' perspectives into the telling of the story, as well as confirmation of others' perspective through positive verbal and nonverbal responses to their contributions. Finally, the coherence of the story's structure and content is an important dimension of interaction in joint storytelling. Both the organization of the narrative and the integration of the various contributions from members as families construct a story together help to shape the overall coherence of the story.

Koenig Kellas and Trees (2006) found that family stories in which all members were actively engaged in a dynamic and fluid narrative process with a balance in talk time across family members also contained a greater degree of shared sense-making regarding the difficult experience. Additionally, the degree to which families participated in a narrative process with attention to and confirmation of other's perspectives as they built a coherent, organized story played an important role in families' ability to create a family-level understanding of stressful experiences. They also found that families with moderate levels of these behaviors tended to come to more individual, separate conclusions about the meanings of difficulties, and families with minimal amounts of these behaviors failed to explicitly make sense of the experience either jointly or individually. When telling the story of a family stressor, these joint storytelling behaviors seem to facilitate family-level insight into the difficult experience. Qualities of the family relationship, however, likely affect and reflect the degree to which families engage in more productive interactional sense-making behaviors during joint storytelling.

Family Stories and Relational Qualities

Research has established generally the ways in which family stories reveal information about family life and the quality of family relationships (e.g., Stone, 1988). However, family research primarily has looked at what we can learn about family relationship quality from the *content* of both individually and jointly told family stories (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). For example, research has shown that the themes present in stories individuals told about their families were associated with individuals' family satisfaction (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 1999). Specifically, people whose stories contained themes such as togetherness, care, humor, reconstruction, adaptability (Vangelisti et al., 1999) and accomplishment (Koenig Kellas, 2005) were more satisfied with their families, whereas people whose stories contained themes of hostility, divergent values, chaos, personality attributes, hostility (Vangelisti et al., 1999) and stress (Koenig Kellas, 2005) were less satisfied. Similarly, research identified a positive relationship between the relationship *beliefs* that are revealed in couples' jointly told narratives and couple satisfaction (Dickstein, St. Andre, Sameroff, Seifer, & Schiller, 1999; Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999). The content of stories that people tell about family experiences reflect the quality of family relationships.

In addition to considering representations of the family in the content of stories, however, it is also important to attend to how stories are told. Mandelbaum (1987), for example, argued that the way in which a couple tells a shared story together reveals information

about their couplehood as couples “do their relationships” through stories. This is echoed in the research on family storytelling by Langellier and Peterson (2006). This becomes particularly salient in stories about difficult experiences. The pain or stress involved in telling the story, along with the potential for conflicting perspectives or viewpoints, may make telling a stressful story particularly challenging. How families jointly make sense of difficult experiences likely reflects a family’s coping and meaning-making process (Berger & Luckman, 1966). How this is managed, then, should reveal information about family qualities, such as satisfaction, functioning, and supportiveness.

Family Satisfaction

Although research has not yet examined links between jointly telling difficult stories and family well-being, past research demonstrates the connection between joint storytelling behavior and relational qualities in spouses’ stories about relational development (e.g., Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000; Veroff et al., 1993a; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993b). For example, Veroff and colleagues in the Early Years of Marriage Study (i.e., Veroff et al., 1993a, 1993b) collected newlyweds’ stories and found that the more similarity between husband and wives’ styles of interacting, the more satisfied the couples were three years later. Similarly, researchers using the Oral History Interview argued that the perceptions and behaviors revealed in the narrative provide insight into marital quality and experiences over time (Carrere et al., 2000). For example, Shapiro, Gottman, and Carrere (2000) found that husbands’ and wives’ awareness of their partner and their relationship as well as husbands’ expressions of fondness toward their wives in the Oral History Interview predicted stable or increasing marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood later in the couples’ relationship. Finally, researchers in the Family Narrative Consortium found that smoother coordination was related to relationship satisfaction for premarital couples (Wamboldt, 1999), and collaborative narrative style was positively related to the wives’ satisfaction and to healthier family functioning as reflected in dinnertime interaction for married couples (Dickstein et al., 1999). These studies on marital storytelling demonstrate that the process of telling stories about relationships reflects couples’ relationship qualities. The way that couples negotiate a shared experience and identity in narrative are indicative of the way they negotiate their relationships.

In contrast to stories of family or relational development, difficulties facing families are inherently stressful and often sad, making the storytelling process itself potentially difficult and emotionally charged. Despite this difference, the ways in which families jointly construct such stories ought to reflect and affect the family’s climate. For example, more positive feelings about the family should be reflected in more coherent stories told in a warm, engaged manner that attends to various perspectives. Moreover, based on the literature that lauds the positive functions of telling traumatic stories, families who can successfully negotiate jointly telling a difficult story may also feel more satisfied by virtue of the interaction itself. Thus, it is likely that the behaviors demonstrated during jointly told difficult family stories also will reflect information about family satisfaction. For these reasons, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Families' interactional sense-making behaviors in a jointly told difficult story, including (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence, will positively predict family satisfaction.

Family Functioning

Relationship satisfaction is the primary measure of overall relationship quality typically attended to in research on relational contexts and has been connected to marital storytelling behaviors in existing research. More specific features of family functioning, however, also are likely to be relevant to how families jointly construct stories together. Family functioning reflects a healthy balance of family closeness, as well as an appropriate negotiation of its rules, role relationships, and hierarchy and is often assessed by examining cohesion and adaptability as features of family relational qualities (e.g., Olson, 2000; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). Cohesion deals with "*emotional bonding that family members have towards one another*" and adaptability, or flexibility, references "*the amount of change in [a family's] leadership, role relationships and relationship rules*" (Olson, 2000, pp. 145, 147, emphasis in original). Olson and his colleagues (e.g., Olson, 2000; Olson et al., 1983) use the concepts of cohesion and adaptability (or flexibility) to measure family functionality in their Circumplex Model of Family Systems.

The central hypothesis of this model is that families more balanced on both cohesion and adaptability will function better than those that are unbalanced (Olson, 2000). In terms of cohesion, rigid boundaries between individuals reflect disengaged relationships where family members are independent and isolated. Diffuse boundaries indicate enmeshment between family members and the breakdown of clear hierarchical roles essential to normal family functioning. Additionally, families whose adaptability is rigid have formally established roles and rules, whereas chaotic families operate with little to any structure or formality. Families who fall in between the extremes on cohesion and adaptability are considered to function optimally.

Family functioning (Olson, 2000) offers a measure of family relationship quality that goes beyond simply measuring satisfaction. Although implemented less often in communication research than other measures of relational quality (see Koenig Kellas, 2005; Schrodtt, 2005, for exceptions), the Circumplex Model's measure of family functioning considers communication an integral and facilitating aspect of cohesion and flexibility, is often cited in communication textbooks as an important indicator of family quality (e.g., Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2004; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993), and offers an alternative for measuring relationship qualities beyond satisfaction—something advocated by many family communication researchers (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1988). Moreover, communication patterns in the family facilitate family functioning (Olson et al., 1983; Schrodtt, 2005). For example, using the Circumplex Model, Rodick, Hengler, and Hanson (1986) found mothers who reported balanced levels of cohesion and adaptability were more supportive, provided more explicit information, and demonstrated more positive affect in parent-adolescent interactions than mothers reporting unbalanced levels of cohesion and adaptability. Additionally, Schrodtt (2005) found that family expressiveness positively related to family cohesiveness and flexibility. In contrast, conflict avoidance and structural traditionalism, communica-

tion patterns that encourage greater family conformity, negatively related to both dimensions of family functioning. This research supports the underlying assumption in this study that communication behavior reflects and facilitates family relationship qualities.

Family cohesion and adaptability likely relate to interactional sense-making behavior during joint family storytelling as well. Koenig Kellas (2005) found that perspective-taking was particularly important in explaining families' cohesion, adaptability, and functioning when telling a family identity story. Perspective-taking might be especially important to the telling of a story that "best represents the family" since the family must balance the interests of both individual and family identities. In telling a difficult family story, however, it is likely that engagement, turn-taking, and coherence also relate to family functioning. The degree to which family members are warm and engaged with one another likely reflects their sense of cohesion. Moreover, given the links between family functioning and more expressive, more supportive, and less conforming behavior (Rodick et al., 1986; Schrodtt, 2005), cohesion and adaptability should be related to the more dynamic and affirming behaviors in storytelling that facilitate productive sense-making. The degree to which family members can take turns, confirm one another's feelings, and coherently make sense of a traumatic experience should all be signs that the family is able to adapt to difficulty and function despite environmental stress. These associations, however, have yet to be tested empirically. Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses:

H2: Families' interactional sense-making behaviors in a jointly told difficult story, including (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence, will positively predict family cohesion.

H3: Families' interactional sense-making behaviors in a jointly told difficult story, including (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence, will positively predict family adaptability.

Family Supportiveness

In addition to more general indicators of family quality and functioning, perceptions of the family as a source of support in time of need reflects an important relational quality for families talking about difficult experiences. As a relational quality, supportiveness refers to the perceived availability of encouragement, comfort, and assistance when needed (Pierce, 1994). Family supportiveness contributes in important ways to family members' well-being (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). Beliefs about social support can be important for well-being in general, exerting a main effect on physical and mental health (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000). For example, adolescents with behavioral or emotional problems are less likely to have supportive families (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1996; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). In the context of specific stressors, it also may play a stress-buffering role, mitigating the effect of stressors on individuals (Cohen et al., 2000). Cohen et al. argued that this may be the case because beliefs about support "prevent or alter maladaptive behavioral responses" (p. 14), encouraging more functional responses to difficulties. The importance of perceived supportiveness in coping with stressors makes it a

meaningful relational construct when focusing on narratives about stressful family experiences.

In the family, a supportive relational context provides a safe, secure environment for talking about difficult experiences (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Past experiences communicating caring and regard build a sense of acceptance and belonging, and the supportive quality of a relationship influences interaction and perceptions of supportive processes (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1992; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990; Sarason et al., 1990). The confidence created by a supportive relational context may encourage behaviors that aid in sense-making about a specific stressor. Dynamic turn-taking and integration of multiple perspectives, for example, facilitate space for all family members to talk and require security and comfort with taking those opportunities. The understanding of the family as a support resource should shape interaction as families communicatively cope with stressors.

At the same time, the supportive qualities of interactional sense-making behaviors suggest that these behaviors also should help to create a sense that the family is available for support if needed. Interactional sense-making expresses the warmth and other person-centeredness that characterizes more sophisticated and effective comforting behavior (Burlinson, 1994; Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Interactional sense-making, then, may create a sense of comfort and support that facilitates a stronger sense of family supportiveness in general. Taken together, these arguments lead to the final hypothesis.

H4: Families' interactional sense-making behaviors in a jointly told difficult story, including (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence, will positively predict perceived family supportiveness.

Methods

Participants

The data for this study included 54 stories of difficult family experiences. Two family triads were removed due to video recording problems, leaving a final sample of 52 families. To recruit participants, students in introductory communication courses were offered extra credit to participate in the study with two other immediate family members (either a parent and sibling or two parents). Students received extra credit and family members received \$10. The sample contained 33 fathers/stepfathers, 44 mothers/stepmothers, 60 daughters, and 19 sons. Family combinations included 21 mother-father-daughter and 4 mother-father-son groups. Of the 19 triads with mothers and siblings, 9 had a son and a daughter, 9 had two daughters, and 1 had two sons. In 8 groups with fathers and siblings, 2 had a son and a daughter, 5 had two daughters, and 1 had two sons. The average age for the children in the study was 20.16 ($SD = 3.18$), the average age for mothers was 48.7 ($SD = 5.45$), and the average age for fathers was 50.4 ($SD = 10.36$). One hundred twenty-eight participants were Caucasian, 15 were Asian/Asian-American, 3 were Hispanic, 2 were African American, 1 was Indian, and 7 did not indicate their ethnicity.

Procedure

Participants returned signed consent forms from all three family members to the researcher. At that time, they were given three relationship questionnaires that included demographic questions and several family relationship quality measures in addition to other scales not relevant to this study. Each family member completed a questionnaire, and they brought the questionnaires to the communication lab when they arrived to participate in the interaction part of the study.

At the lab, family members were asked to jointly identify a stressful event the family recently experienced to serve as the topic for their story in the study. They were given the following instructions:

As a family, please think of a time recently in which your family had a stressful experience. We would like you to think of a *specific story* to tell us about this stressful event. You should all have some working knowledge of the story (i.e., know enough about it to be able to tell it), but don't necessarily have to be a character in the story. In deciding on your story, please include any relevant information including what led up to the story, what happened, and what happened as a result. Please select the story you will tell, but do not tell the story until we ask you to do so.

To ensure that all family members felt comfortable telling this story, they were given time to discuss and come to agreement on the story they wanted to tell the researcher. After deciding on the story topic, each of the three family members were then separated and taken to different rooms to complete a preinteraction questionnaire containing questions about the story topic and their family structure.

After completing this questionnaire, family members were brought back together in the observation room. After first telling a story that best represents their family (see Koenig Kellas, 2005), participants were asked to tell the story of their stressful family experience to the researcher. To keep the researcher influence consistent across stories and allow the story to emerge as the family might typically tell it, the researcher kept her comments to a minimum. The storytelling conversations were video recorded.

At the end of the storytelling episode, participants were separated once again to complete a final set of questions about their appraisal of the storytelling (e.g., interaction satisfaction) not relevant to the current study. Upon completing the questionnaires, participants were told about the study's specific research questions and asked if they had any questions or concerns regarding their participation in the study.

Measures

Family satisfaction

The quality of the family relationship was measured using Vangelisti's (1992) modification of Huston, McCale, and Crouter's (1986) marital satisfaction measure. This scale consists of 10 semantic differential items that ask family members to rate their feelings about their family over the past 2 months on a 7-point scale. For example, participants were asked to

rate the degree to which they felt their family had been “rewarding” or “disappointing,” “lonely” or “friendly.” Based on Huston et al.’s specifications, two filler items (“free” or “tied down” and “easy” or “hard”) were removed before calculating the satisfaction score. The remaining eight items had good reliability for parents and children in the sample (fathers $\alpha = .92$; mothers $\alpha = .94$; child1 $\alpha = .92$; child2 $\alpha = .93$). A final item asked participants to rate their overall feelings of family satisfaction, from completely satisfied to completely dissatisfied. Individual scores were then obtained by averaging scores on the eight semantic differential items and then adding the score on the global assessment and dividing by two. Overall family satisfaction ($M = 5.83$, $SD = .83$) was calculated by averaging all three family members’ individual scores (for similar procedures in the family literature, see Guthrie & Snyder, 1988; Olson, 2000).

Cohesion and adaptability

The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES II) (Olson, 2000; Olson et al., 1983), were used to measure family functioning. FACES II is a 30-item scale that assesses both cohesion and flexibility according to 5-point Likert-type items (e.g., “In our family, it is easy for everyone to express his/her opinion”). Research using the Circumplex Model has been criticized, primarily due to the notion of “balance” in the model. Specifically researchers have challenged Olson and colleagues’ original articulation of a curvilinear relationship between levels of cohesion, adaptability, and family functioning (see Perosa & Perosa, 2001; Schrodtt, 2005 for in-depth discussions of these critiques). In response to these types of critiques, Olson (2000) revised the model as well as the survey instrument to measure family functioning, resulting in the FACES II measure. The new model and measure consider cohesion and adaptability as linear dimensions with higher scores reflecting balanced systems and lower scores reflecting unbalanced (less functional) systems (Olson, 2000; Schrodtt, 2005). Thus, according to Olson’s (2000) revised methods, higher scores on both dimensions reflect more balanced systems and thus higher levels of family functioning. Conversely, lower scores suggest unbalanced or extreme levels of functioning. Cronbach’s alphas indicated that both cohesion and adaptability were measured reliably across family members in the current sample (father cohesion $\alpha = .90$, adaptability $\alpha = .87$; mother cohesion $\alpha = .91$, adaptability $\alpha = .86$; child1 cohesion $\alpha = .89$, adaptability $\alpha = .87$; child2 cohesion $\alpha = .90$, adaptability $\alpha = .87$). According to methods outlined by Olson (2000), scores for cohesion and flexibility were calculated for each individual and then averaged to provide the mean family score for each variable (cohesion $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.56$; adaptability $M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.42$).

Family social support

Perceived family supportiveness was measured using the Provisions of Social Relationships Family Version (Turner, 1992). This measure consists of seven statements concerning available support in the family. Participants indicated the degree to which this was “like my experience” on a 5-point scale. Items included “Sometimes I’m not sure I can completely rely on my family,” and “People in my family provide me with help in finding solutions to my problems.” This measure offered an assessment of perceived availability of support in the family and was a reliable measure for parents and children (fathers $\alpha = .79$;

mothers $\alpha = .91$; child1 $\alpha = .91$; child2 $\alpha = .92$). Individual scores were obtained by averaging all seven items. As with family satisfaction, overall family supportiveness was calculated by averaging all three family members' supportiveness scores ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .54$).

Interactional sense-making behaviors

To assess the four global qualities of interactional sense-making (engagement, turntaking, perspective-taking, and coherence), each story was rated for family storytelling behavior along eight different dimensions using a 5-point rating system developed by Koenig Kellas and Trees (2005). Specifically, each global quality was measured using two items with one generally indicating low levels of interactional sense-making and five indicating high levels.

Raters measured engagement by judging *involvement* (uninvolved/involved) and *warmth* (cold/warm). Involvement included behavioral indicators such as kinesic/proxemic animation, eye contact, vocal animation, and verbal contributions. Behavioral indicators of warmth included nonverbal behaviors such as pleasant facial expressions and positive laughter as well as verbal statements of encouragement and affection. To assess turn-taking behavior, both the *dynamic* (structured/fluid) and *balanced* (uneven distribution/even distribution) nature of the turn-taking were considered. Interjections, interruptions, and additions to what others were saying are examples of behaviors reflecting a more fluid turn-taking style. Balance ratings considered the degree to which family members' distribution of turns were relatively even over the story as a whole. Perspective-taking ratings included both *attentiveness* to others' perspectives (ignored/integrated) as well as *confirmation* of others' perspectives (confirming/disconfirming). Examples of behaviors reflecting attentiveness included explicitly asking others about their perspectives and incorporating contributions by others into the telling of the story. Examples of confirming behaviors include head nodding, statements of affirmation (i.e., that's a good point), and approving facial/vocal expressions. The coherence of the story included *organization* (disorganized/organized) and overall *integration* (parallel/collaborative) ratings. Behavioral indicators of organization included a clear beginning, middle, and end as well as minimal jumping around from one part of the story to the other. *Integration* involved rating the degree to which the family told a single, intertwined, integrated story that hung together and made sense.

The first author trained a rater to assess each narrative along the eight dimensions. The first author and research assistant then jointly rated six stories, reaching consensus on the appropriate rating and separately rated five more stories to check reliability, discussing any discrepant ratings to reach consensus. The remaining 41 stories were rated separately by the graduate student rater. Each story was viewed once before rating began and then viewed separately for each of the four dimensions of sense-making. Once the rating was completed, the first author randomly selected 12 stories to rate to check for rating reliability. For families' overall engagement in the storytelling process, rating reliabilities were adequate (engagement, $\alpha = .85$; warmth, $\alpha = .79$). An overall engagement composite was obtained by combining the two dimensions ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 3.17$, $SD = .82$). Reliability for turn-taking ratings also was acceptable (dynamic, $\alpha = .79$; balance, $\alpha = .92$). The two turn-taking assessments were combined ($\alpha = .68$, $M = 3.40$, $SD = .74$). Reliability checks indicated

very good reliability for the two perspective-taking ratings (attentiveness, $\alpha = .86$; confirmation, $\alpha = .91$). The two dimensions were then combined into a single perspective-taking composite ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 2.93$, $SD = .96$). Finally, reliability for the coherence ratings was also adequate (organization, $\alpha = .72$; coherence, $\alpha = .73$). The two ratings were also reliably combined into a single coherence composite rating ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.19$, $SD = .96$).

Results

To test the hypotheses for this study, four multiple regression analyses were run with interactional sense-making behaviors as the predictor variables. Because the predictors were correlated (see Table 1), standard multiple regression analyses were run, with all predictor variables entered into the equation at the same time.

Table 1. Relationships among Interactional Sense-making Behaviors and Relational Qualities

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Satisfaction							
2. Cohesion	.77**						
3. Adaptability	.64**	.77**					
4. Supportiveness	.65**	.60**	.55**				
5. Engagement	.20	.28*	.19	.10			
6. Perspective-taking	.30*	.41**	.18	.42**	.61**		
7. Turn-taking	.08	.13	.12	-.09	.75**	.42**	
8. Coherence	.05	.02	.24*	.32*	-.07	.10	-.25

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Hypothesis one proposed a positive relationship between families' interactional sense-making behaviors in jointly told stories and family satisfaction. A standard multiple regression with family satisfaction as the criterion variable was not significant, $R = .32$, $R^2 = .10$, $F(4, 43) = 1.23$, *ns*. The correlation analyses indicated that family perspective-taking behavior ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) was significantly correlated with family satisfaction. However, none of the interactional sense-making behaviors predicted variation in family satisfaction above and beyond that accounted for by the other behaviors. Thus, hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis two predicted a positive relationship between joint storytelling processes and family cohesion. The standard multiple regression analysis indicated a significant relationship, $R = .46$, $R^2 = .22$, $F(4, 43) = 2.95$, $p < .05$. As expected, family perspective-taking behaviors, $\beta = .45$, $t = 2.58$, $p = .01$, were positive predictors of family cohesion. This provided partial support for hypothesis two.

A positive relationship between joint storytelling processes and family adaptability was proposed in hypothesis three. The overall regression analysis with family adaptability as the criterion variable was significant, $R = .44$, $R^2 = .19$, $F(4, 43) = 2.58$, $p = .05$. The coherence of the family storytelling, $\beta = .36$, $t = 2.47$, $p < .05$, proved to be a significant positive predictor of family adaptability. Thus hypothesis three was partially supported as well.

The final hypothesis proposed a relationship between family supportiveness and the sense-making behaviors in families' stories. With family supportiveness as the criterion variable, the analyses indicated that interactional sense-making behaviors significantly predicted perceived supportiveness, $R = .59$, $R^2 = .35$, $F(4, 40) = 5.30$, $p < .01$. Both family perspective-taking behaviors, $\beta = .50$, $t = 3.07$, $p < .001$, and the coherence of the family storytelling, $\beta = .31$, $t = 2.28$, $p < .05$, were significant predictors of perceived family supportiveness. Hypothesis four, then, was partially supported.

Contrary to expectations, turn-taking was not related to any of the family relational qualities and engagement was minimally correlated with satisfaction. Perspective-taking and coherence, on the other hand, were more consistently associated with family qualities.

Discussion

In this study, we proposed positive relationships between the communicative processes through which family members jointly negotiate the telling of a difficult experience and family relationship qualities. Research suggests that telling stories about distressing experiences is both physically and psychologically beneficial (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Weber et al., 1987). While story features such as coherence and perspective-taking likely contribute to these benefits, in the context of a shared story concepts like coherence become family-level accomplishments rather than individual accomplishments. Additionally, narrative research indicates that the processes associated with joint tellings may offer information about relational qualities such as marital satisfaction (Dickstein et al., 1999; Veroff et al., 1993a; Wamboldt, 1999). Despite the connections already made in the literature, little research has extended this type of investigation to the family level or to the coconstruction of difficult stories. The larger body of research on family stories, however, suggests that they are significantly related to individuals' feelings about the family (Vangelisti et al., 1999) and that the family is a relational setting in which stories—including stories of difficult experiences—are often told (Stone, 1988).

The results indicated that some of the features of interactional sense-making positively predicted family functioning and supportiveness and some did not. Most notably, perspective-taking and storytelling coherence were consistently related to relationship quality indicators such as functionality and supportiveness. Surprisingly, however, interactional sense-making behaviors did not predict family satisfaction as in previous research. The following provides a discussion of these findings, the limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

Storytelling Processes and Relational Qualities

Perspective-taking

In this study, attentiveness to and confirmation of others' perspectives was a consistent predictor of family relationship measures. Specifically, this behavior occurred more frequently in families with more functional cohesion as well as greater perceived supportiveness. In stories with greater attentiveness to perspectives, family members solicited,

listened to, and incorporated others' perspectives into the telling of the story. There was recognition that everyone may not have experienced the event in the same way.

The techniques adopted in the field of family therapy may help to explain some of the relationships between perspective-taking and relational qualities in the current study. Certain schools of family therapy encourage acknowledging different perspectives and attending to others in more positive ways. In narrative therapy, for example, therapists gear their techniques toward making "people feel understood and empowered" and encourage their clients to "restory" their current perceptions of their lives and family relationships (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p. 410). In order to do this, family members are asked to acknowledge and sometimes reevaluate each other's perspectives in a new light. Family members are also sometimes recruited to serve as "nurturing teams" to help particular individuals rewrite difficult or negative stories. The results of the present study indicate that the techniques and goals implemented in narrative family therapy—such as attending to and confirming each other's perspectives—may help to explain more optimal methods of functioning, such as increased cohesion in families.

Perspective-taking also fits with important aspects of supportive communication in social support research (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). For example, being able to acknowledge and legitimate the emotions of others reflects a central dimension of effective comforting behavior (Burleson, 1994). It makes sense, then, that families with more attention to and confirmation of others' perspectives in their narratives would also report a greater sense of family supportiveness.

Because one of the benefits and goals of telling stories of difficult experiences is to make sense of the events (Weber et al., 1987), it stands to reason that this process is enhanced in negotiated tellings when relational partners recognize and accept the different experiences encountered by individual members. From a systems perspective, family members are interdependent (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Thus, recognizing and confirming one another's experiences described in a stressful story may also recognize the importance and impact of each family members' effect on one another. Having one's perspective attended to and confirmed in the face of a difficult family story may engender a sense of belonging and/or importance relevant to the functioning and supportiveness of family relationships. A sense of acceptance, in fact, constitutes an important part of perceived supportiveness (Sarason et al., 1990). At the same time, better family functioning also likely facilitates perspective-taking behaviors. The balance between independence and connection in cohesive families may more easily permit attention to the views of others and create greater awareness that there may be differences in perspective.

Coherence

Our results also indicated that overall story coherence was a positive predictor of adaptability and perceived supportiveness in the family. In other words, in more flexible and supportive families, the story they developed was a single, intertwined, and integrated story that made sense and hung together. Both collaborative behavior and a clear story framework reflected a more coherent family story. More incoherent stories were told by families who developed chaotic stories with no clear focus and development or by family members who told individually coherent stories that failed to connect or build toward a

common point. Coherence, by definition, refers to the extent to which the story might “hang together” for the audience (Read, 1992); thus, it is not surprising that it emerged as a significant predictor of relational qualities in interactional, or joint, storytelling. Koenig Kellas and Manusov (2003) found the coherence of breakup narratives to be significantly related to adjustment at the individual level, such that the more coherent their stories were, the better adjusted they were to the relationship’s end. The present study seems to indicate that coherence is also important at the relational level in that families in this study who collaboratively were able to create a more coherent story were also more adaptable and more supportive. It appears as though the flexibility and functionality of the family is reflected in their ability to work together to adapt their individual versions of the story into an acceptable and coherent whole.

Although perspective-taking and coherence emerged as important behavioral predictors of relationship qualities, we were somewhat surprised by the fact that engagement and turn-taking did not positively predict family relational qualities in the current study. Previous research indicates that these process features may be important indicators of couple satisfaction (e.g., Carrere et al., 2000), and warmth and engagement are important features of supportive interaction (e.g., Trees, 2000). However in the current study and in previous research on family identity stories (Koenig Kellas, 2005), neither variable emerged as highly predictive of family functioning, satisfaction, or supportiveness. This finding may mean that a combination of content *and* process is most important to understanding the links between interactional storytelling and family relational qualities. In other words, whereas engagement and turn-taking focus more on process, perspective-taking and coherence focus on the *process* of how participants negotiate storytelling *content*. Thus, the positive predictors of relational qualities in this study may reflect more complex interactional accomplishments. In other words, when families are able to achieve highly coherent narratives in which they acknowledge and confirm each other’s perspectives, they seem to be getting to a level that goes beyond smiling, warmth, touch, and the ability to evenly distribute turns among members.

It may also be that it is not the level of involvement or distribution of contributions, but rather whether or not the family is “on the same track” so to speak, telling the same story, that is most closely tied to family functioning. This would be consistent with Veroff et al.’s (1993a) findings that it is similarity of turn-taking behavior, rather than the type of behavior that relates to marital satisfaction. In addition, the nature of the story being told may help to make sense of these findings. For the stories about difficult family experiences, ownership of the problem varied, depending upon how various family members related to the problem. While involvement and turn-taking might be expected of those most closely impacted by the problem (i.e., a daughter with a tubal pregnancy), for other family members less directly affected, expressions of empathic listening might be a more appropriate and significant contribution to the story.

Story topic might also help to explain why engagement and turn-taking did not predict relational qualities and why family satisfaction was not predicted by any of the interactional sense-making behaviors. Previous research identifying significant links between storytelling behavior (e.g., engagement) and relational qualities (e.g., satisfaction), has been conducted with married couples on stories about relationship development (e.g., Carrere

et al., 2000; Veroff et al., 1993b). It makes sense that behaviors that signify high levels of energy, involvement, and regard, such as engagement and turn-taking, would predict one's relational happiness. In the current study, however, it may be that difficult stories engender a more somber behavioral environment, making engagement and turn-taking less important or appropriate. Similarly, the type of story told may help to explain the lack of significant findings regarding family satisfaction. Much of the literature on jointly told stories of relationship development focuses on relationship satisfaction and has found a logical link between how people tell stories about their relationship and their satisfaction with that relationship. Telling the story of family difficulty, on the other hand, may be more directly relevant to family functioning and supportiveness because those relational qualities facilitate coping with difficult experiences (Rodick et al., 1986; Gardener & Cutrona, 2004). Relationship satisfaction, thus, may not be as directly relevant to that type of story as it is to stories of relationship development. It is also possible, however, that the restricted range in satisfaction for this particular sample explains the lack of relationship.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In looking at the results of this study overall, it appears that family relational qualities are more closely connected to certain dimensions of joint storytelling processes than others, at least in stories about difficult family experiences. Several issues emerge both from these findings as well as from the limitations of this study that merit further consideration and attention in future research. Various family roles (i.e., brother, mother, husband, daughter) were present in this set of stories. Researchers have pointed out that behavior may take on different forms and values depending upon which subset of family members are present (Sameroff & Fiese, 1999), suggesting that it would be important to consider how family role as well as position in regard to the topic of the story may influence sense-making behaviors when creating a narrative about a stressful experience. It would also be beneficial to see how the coconstructed story changes shape when all members of a family are present. Research on communal coping suggests that perceptions of both ownership and responsibility in relationship to a stressor shape family coping responses (e.g., Afifi et al., 2006; Mickelson et al., 2001). Assessment of ownership and responsibility, then, may shape family sense-making and narrative processes in important ways. Additionally, given the pragmatic rationale driving these questions, it would be important to consider how joint storytelling processes may be related to adjustment and other outcomes related to managing the problem being experienced. These findings demonstrate that families vary in how effectively and constructively they create stories about distressing events in their lives.

Additionally, the constraints of a laboratory setting may have limited the type of difficult stories told by families in this study. We allowed family members time to agree on the story they would tell, suggesting that families may have chosen "safe" stories or stories that may have been more agreeable to all family members. Eliciting stories of discrepancy or discomfort for family members would likely reveal additional processes of import to predicting relational qualities. Also, families first told a story that best reflected their family. It is possible that this affected how they then told the story of their difficult experience.

Finally, the current study further supports the links between perspective-taking and family relational qualities found in other research (Koenig Kellas, 2005), suggesting a need for future research to investigate the properties of effective interactional perspective-taking. Moreover, the fact that coherence emerged as a unique predictor of relational well-being in jointly telling stories of difficulty further confirms the importance of the relationship between coherently narrating stress and positive outcomes for tellers. Future research should also investigate *how* families achieve coherence in functional ways.

The results of this study provide an initial glimpse into the kinds of interactional behaviors that accompany stories of difficult family experiences and may help to explain the connections between joint storytelling and positive feelings and functioning in family relationships. Just as gaining control over events, increasing self-esteem, and experiencing greater physical health represent benefits of therapeutic storytelling at the individual level, at the *relational* level family supportiveness and optimal family functioning may be seen as beneficial correlates associated with particular ways of talking about stress or hardship in the family.

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