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Adolescent Meaning Making of Past Experience

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Adolescent Meaning Making of Past Experience

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Abstract

This study examined the meaning making processes of self-defining memories in adolescents, as well as how they co-construct the narratives of these events with their parents. The sample consisted of 53 students, aged 12-14, who came in for recorded laboratory sessions to discuss self-defining memories with their parents. These sessions were later coded on levels of meaning making and co-construction. These codes were, then, analyzed with the adolescents' questionnaire scores regarding friendship quality, internalizing, and externalizing behaviors. The data revealed that adolescents and parents were both rated higher for more complex levels of meaning making and that those rated higher for more complex meaning making abilities had better friendship qualities. The implications of these findings were discussed in terms of their importance for parents supporting their children's emotional expressivity, narrative abilities, and meaning making strategies.

The period of adolescence marks a significant transition during development, involving more dense personal memories and cognitive processes, adult and peer attachment modifications, and autonomy seeking (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Several influential factors determine the trajectory of these changes and whether they promote positive or negative adjustment in the individual (e.g. friendship quality, internalizing and externalizing behaviors) (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006; Eisenberg, Gershoff, Fabes, Shepard, Cumberland, Losoya, Guthrie, & Murphy, 2001; Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Up until this age, parents are essential in promoting positive social behaviors including competence and understanding as well decreased levels of hostility, and in helping their children to create coherent and emotionally expressive narratives of the events in their lives (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Fivush & Sales, 2006). Peers also begin to hold more influence over adolescents, as a primary task of this developmental period is the creation of high quality friendships. The determinant of adolescents' involvement in internalizing and externalizing behaviors often lies with what their peers are engaging in (Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). In this study, we examined how elements of meaning making processes and parental co-constructive abilities specifically relate to positive adjustment, as indicated by high friendship quality and low levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Meaning Making

Self-definition is an ambiguous topic that is difficult to measure, as individuals often have different versions of their own self-definition depending on the setting, surrounding people, and mood. It is clear, however, that every person has some sort of definition of themselves set in their mind at all times, regardless of the stability of this definition. Where, though, do people tend to extract their self-proclaimed attributes and identity from? This is where the process of

meaning making of memories comes to the forefront: in order to process the question, who am I? When a particularly impactful event occurs in a person's life or a new individual becomes a more integral part of a person's daily life, these experiences need to be processed and incorporated into how the person conceptualizes themselves and the changes they may bring about. These types of past events and people are considered self-defining memories.

Self-defining memories are what people reference when evaluating how we see ourselves. What has been the sequence of events that have occurred in people's lives to have helped them become who they are today? This is an essential process that occurs almost all of the time, even if under the surface of consciousness. As an event is happening, the mind evaluates the individual's role, opinion, and actions in response to initiators in the environment, in order to process how that complies or violates the predicted response. If it complies, it strengthens the individual's self-definition; if not, then it must be re-assessed.

Clearly, not every event that occurs in a person's life is as impactful or relevant as others. If every occurrence was weighted evenly, the amount of cognitive energy necessary to process and analyze every interaction and memory, daily events would be too taxing. More practically, memories are weighted, so that a truly self-defining memory, for example a family member's death, getting married, or meeting one's best friend, will make a more lasting impression. These are the memories that are more interesting: those that the individual gives more weight to. In order to determine how a memory is given more importance, an equation-like formula is calculated by taking into account individual's model of self in combination with the recognition of how that person's personality processes interact with their already existing cognitive process to create a goal-based hierarchy of autobiographical knowledge. These particular autobiographical accounts are later accessed as a way to measure the individual's global goal

pursuits, obstacles, and outcomes (Singer, 2004). Typically, then, these are the memories that are weighted as more important. They are considered more central to the individual's self-assessed identity and speak to how the individual views himself or herself.

After each of these new accounts have been processed into one's self-definition, they become schematic, so as to not require every memory be evaluated in full each time it needs to be accessed. By shortening a memory and keeping it on hand by title, for example "when I learned how to ride a bike," it is only necessary to remember the already-processed evaluation, rather than having to reevaluate every detail. In this way, the schematic representation only contains the relevant information about the sequences of events and the causal linkages that bind these sequences together (Singer, 2004). These resulting schemas are incorporated into the self as the building blocks of ongoing identity formation and recognition (Singer, 2004). More specifically, the schematic interpretation of a person's life events provides causal, temporal, and thematic coherence to an overall sense of identity, resulting in concrete details with which to comment on one's self-definition (Bluck & Habermas, 2001). In addition to relying on schematic memorization of individual memories, it is also highly effective in narratives that describe a set of related events that occur over a larger temporal period (Singer, 2004). In terms of the "life story schema," the consolidation of one's self-identity, it can be interpreted that the process of schematizing several events into a shorter, unified memory allows the individual to reduce the cognitive cost even further (Bluck & Gluck, 2004).

This process of meaning making of self-defining memories is integral to the self-disclosure process with others, in addition to the more individually based self-meaning exploration processes. In meeting another person for the first time or furthering the level of intimacy between two people, self-defining memories are often the key tool utilized in this

process. This practice of disclosing one's own self-defining memories is expressed to others as a method of self-explanation (McLean, 2005). Typically, instead of simply listing one's attributes, individuals tend to provide narrative examples of their characteristics and personality, as well as allowing the other person to use their own insight as to how to interpret the narrative. In this way, the shared bond between people who have a better understanding of each other is strengthened. In imparting these narratives to others, however, people are more likely to construct narratives that put themselves in a certain framework in which they wish to be viewed. By the individual being able to select which self-defining memories to express and which to omit, or which details to leave in or out, the speaker has the power to construct whatever image he or she would like to represent.

There are even further advantages to being proficient in meaning making abilities that extend past being able to better understand oneself and describing this self-definition to others. For example, adolescents who are accomplished in creating coherent and emotionally expressive narratives of stressful events in their lives show better physical and psychological health later in life (Fivush, Sales, and Bohanek, 2008). This would suggest that adolescents who are rated higher on making meaning of self-defining memories, which tend to involve a stressful event, will live a healthier life. During emotional development in childhood, parents are most definitely the key contributor, in terms of being both a model and an instructor, to this process.

Co-Construction

When parents discuss the emotional issues that accompany stressful memories with their adolescent children, it can work to diminish the possible emergence of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This process is called co-construction. When a parent joins together with

his or her child to co-construct the narrative of a stressful event, whether the parent was involved first-hand or not, it can be more effective in overcoming the potential negative effects of the child recreating and analyzing the event alone. Because self-defining memories are often related to stressful moments, the co-construction process allows the child to use the resource of his or her parents and their higher cognitive ability and experience to better evaluate the situation from a more mature standpoint. By understanding an event through the eyes of a parent, the child can learn to how to better understand and give more proper meaning to the experience, which leads to better coping skills in terms of difficult emotions and negative feelings (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Getzler-Yosef, 2004). These coping skills can provide examples of what emotions are acceptable in each circumstance and which are appropriate to discuss based on the setting. Due to the more stressful nature of self-defining memories, it is more important and more difficult to learn how to regulate one's emotions during these experiences than any others.

All of these skills and abilities are continuously instilled by one's parents throughout a child's development from birth. Every interaction a child sees his or her mother take part in is a study on appropriate reactions and responses to possible situations, as well as methods for recreating the narrative. At each level of development, parents are expected to modulate the level of guidance and support they provide, based on their child's capacity for emotional understanding and narrative construction (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Getzler-Yosef, 2004). Early on in a child's life, parents are expected to provide structure to narratives given by their children, weaving their contributions, as minimal as they may be, into more complex narratives (Oppenheim, Emde, & Wamboldt, 1996). Thus, later on, when a child's linguistic skills improve, parents begin to take a more understated role in comparison to the child's active role in the construction of conversation. In early adolescence, linguistic ability is not yet fully developed;

therefore, parents are still required to take a larger role in shaping narratives (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Getzler-Yosef, 2004). This process shows how children's narrative skills are rooted in their parental co-construction experiences (Oppenheim, Emde, & Wamboldt, 1996). Because every individual's ability to self-construct a narrative is framed by the ability of their parents to provide a co-constructive path, it is important to analyze a parent's co-constructive ability compared to their child's at all stages of development.

While narratives are often considered to be an individual's personal account of an event or memory, they are typically social in nature, involving others, and can thus be shaped by others' actions and accounts (Oppenheim, Emde, & Wamboldt, 1996). Because it is in this social setting, it seems that meaning can be derived from memories by the co-construction and sharing of the event with others, rather than simply mirroring the objective event within the individual's mind (Ødegaard, 2006). Since early adolescents are only beginning to spend less time with their parents at this point, most of their meaningful memories involve situations their parents were directly a part of or later co-constructed. Because parents play such a large role in these early memories, throughout development parents are helping to co-construct the array of narratives a child has to extract meaning from.

A pattern begins to be revealed that gives more support to this idea as to how adolescents become more coherent in their narrative ability in retelling self-defining memories. When children narrate the stressful events of their lives alone and include more emotion and explanation, they tend to show increased levels of anxiety and depression (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007). Therefore, those who are classically better narrators, in terms of how adults are measured, tend to be less psychologically healthy. The key variable in this situation is the independent narrative, because children who co-construct the narratives of

the stressful events in their lives with more emotion and explanation show better coping skills and internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Sales & Fivush, 2005). These findings suggest that children do not have the psychological capacity to regulate negative emotion brought about by stressful narratives on their own and depend on adults to help co-construct and process the narratives (Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008). As such, in order for children and adolescents to receive proper narrative instruction and emotion regulation strategies, parents need to help process the negative events in their children's lives and help make meaning of them to best help them become physically and psychologically healthy adults.

Gaining Insight and Lesson Learning

One of the key components to a person's self-definition is the experiences an individual has and the potential lessons learned and insight gained from them. As a qualitative measure, *lesson learning* is derived by having an experience that results in an unwanted outcome, which later helps the individual understand what needs to be done in order to result in a desired outcome in a similar situation (McLean, 2005). *Lesson learning* can result in either a positive lesson, as in continuing the behavior, or negative lesson, as in extinguishing the behavior (McLean & Thorne, 2003). *Lesson learning* puts an emphasis on literal lessons of factual and procedural knowledge, resulting in a more practical and tangible understanding of the event (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; McLean, 2005; Singer, 2004). Findings in previous research on *lesson learning* has found that memories formed in early adolescence lead to much more frequent usage of *lesson learning* in reminiscence than those formed in early childhood (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Youth who tend to express self-defining memories that took place at even younger ages are more likely to learn more concrete lessons, rather than abstract insight (McLean, 2005).

Logically, *lesson learning* is a less sophisticated form of reasoning, while *gaining insight*, another qualitative measure used in this study, requires a more complex level of thought.

This more abstract learning measure, so called “*gaining insight*,” is a more in-depth type of reflection based on a self-defining memory, where meaning is extracted and can be applied to broader areas of life than simply a specific behavior or situation (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Often it is the case that insight gained results in a further understanding of oneself or one’s relationships with others as a whole. Whereas *lesson learning* was based on knowledge gained through individual situations or events to aid in similar situations, *gaining insight* connotes a greater level of comprehension, since it applies to many various areas of life. From this understanding, individuals draw inferences from stories with particular self-relevance in order to gain insight into our own nature, values, and goals (Singer, 2004). Extracting an understanding of an inherent personality trait, for example, based on one individual experience requires a complex understanding of the individual, relationships, what led up to this event, and what should be expected to follow it. There are many more interrelated factors that must be connected, in order for insight to be properly understood based on an event. In terms of adolescents, this is a great period of desired change within the power dynamic and relationships within the household. As such, it has been found that the most common type of insight gained at this age involves the emerging understanding of one’s own independence and greater need for self-sufficiency (McLean & Thorne, 2003).

Outcomes associated with Meaning Making in Adolescence

Internalizing and externalizing symptoms as well as friendship quality are all important developmental indicators of adolescents’ functioning and adaptation, reflecting adolescents’

socio-emotional health. We hypothesize that low levels of meaning making and co-construction may undermine adolescents' ability to engage others, demonstrate markers of positive health, or to inhibit these indicators of difficulty.

Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors.

During adolescence, there is a vast array of behavioral, physical, and psychological changes taking place. During this time period, adolescents allocate much more importance to the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of their peers, allowing them to influence their psychological processes (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007). With the added influence teenagers designate to their peers' opinions and behaviors, it becomes more important in the adolescent's mind to be seen in a positive light by others. Therefore, adolescents tend to focus much more attention on these social interactions while also placing greater importance upon them. At the same time, relationships with parents are often more stressful and strained as the adolescent searches for more opportunities to gain autonomy, usually in opposition to the wishes of the adolescent's parents (Qin, Pomerantz, & Wang, 2009). Due to this clash over autonomy between parents and adolescents, internalizing behaviors, such as depression and anxiety, will often develop in response, resulting in heightened levels of internalizing behavior that permeates through the adolescent's life (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006). Externalizing behaviors, on the other hand, intensify, rather than develop, especially when adolescents face a parental rejection or a lack of parental involvement (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Substance abuse in adolescence and adulthood, for example, is strongly related to conduct problems, aggression, and delinquency in childhood and early adolescence (Hayatbakhsh, McGee, Bor, Najman, Jamrozik, & Mamun, 2008).

With the strain that often coincides with this age, it is common for adolescents to internalize their feelings and thoughts, leading to more serious psychological problems and familial disorder (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006). In order to avoid such issues, emotional expressivity is essential. When parents can encourage their children to be emotionally expressive and be able to discuss the emotional worries they have, then it relieves some of those potential problems and promotes healthier expression and thinking. This would benefit not only the day-to-day stressors that tend to be more minor, but also all of the pervasive long-term stressors and the possible negative emotional history that has preceded this point. When parents review particularly impactful memories from the past, it can lead to the adolescent displaying better coping skills, in relation to both past and forthcoming stressors (Fivush, Sales, & Bohanek, 2008).

Externalizing behaviors can also be helped by encouraged emotional expressivity. When children and adolescents inhibit their emotional expressivity, they appear to be at risk for internalizing and externalizing psychopathology (Sim, Adrian, Zeman, Cassano, & Friedrich, 2009). Children who display more open and honest emotional expressivity often learn these skills from their parents, especially when parents are considered high in warmth or positive emotion and low in negativity in interactions (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Antisocial behaviors, such as drinking alcohol underage, doing drugs, and skipping school, often emerge among children who are low in social competence. When parental and family expressiveness, especially positive expressiveness, is more common in the home, then children tend to demonstrate both more prosocial behaviors and higher social competence (Eisenberg et al., 2001). As such, it would seem that these adolescents would not feel the same need to act out or make bids for attention with unproductive actions, as they are already receiving attention from their families.

Friendship Quality.

During adolescence, children move from spending the majority of their time with their parents to spending more time with their peers. As time with friends increases, so does peers' influence on the individual. Adolescents begin to become more concerned with acceptance and popularity (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). This is counterintuitive, however, as high quality dyadic relationships are better associated with social adaptation and emotional health. Acceptance is based on the more global quality of being accepted into a group, which is what adolescents tend to focus on, leading to feelings of loneliness when rejected by their peer group (Parker & Asher, 1993). High quality friendships, on the other hand, are classified between only two people, and, thus, may allow for healthier social adjustment through dyadic relationships. In addition, children start to turn more to their friends as sources of advice and comfort, rather than their parents. When adolescents receive better advice and support from their peers, they tend to have more positive outcomes in normative adjustment. This adjustment quality indicates that the individual has at least one friend, whom he or she can refer to for support, protection and intimacy, and is much less likely to exhibit internalizing and social problems, when rated by their teachers. For adolescents, it is not as important as having a larger quantity of friends as much as it is to have better quality friendships. Having even one friend that is supportive and can be seen as a positive resource is a predictive buffer against social maladjustment (Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). Positive peer relationships can even moderate the negative effects of poor parenting and minimize later externalizing behaviors (Lansford, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003). With such important potential positive outcomes associated with positive peer relationships, it is important to study how adolescents rate the quality of their relationships.

Purpose

The purpose of this current study was to examine how meaning making of self-defining memories affected overall adjustment for adolescents, more specifically in terms of friendship quality, internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and total behaviors. In observing conversations between adolescents and their parents about the memories in their children's lives that most represents their current identity, we were able to utilize measures to pinpoint several associations between meaning making and co-construction that we predicted would relate to the data. As an exploratory question, we were interested in examining what adolescents memories were about and whether these memories were more frequently positive or negative. In regards to our hypotheses, we first anticipated that as children move developmentally from earlier stages into adolescence, meaning making strategies would also move from *lesson learning* to *gaining insight*, as their growing cognitive and emotional complexity would be reflected in the higher incidence of *gaining insight*. Next, we hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between both *lesson learning* and *gaining insight* with internalizing symptoms, externalizing symptoms, and total problems scores, and a positive association with friendship quality. Given the greater importance of *gaining insight* during this developmental stage we anticipated that the associations between *gaining insight* and the outcomes would be stronger than between *lesson learning* and these same outcomes. Finally, we anticipated that high levels of intersubjectivity, a measure of co-construction, would be negatively associated with internalizing, externalizing, and total problem symptoms and positively associated with friendship quality. We deduced this premise based on the thought that being able to effectively communicate with parents would translate to better communication skills when conversing with peers, thus better adjustment in the social realm.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 53 ninth grade students (40 female, 13 male) aged 12-14 who attended five suburban middle schools in the Northeastern United States. They were selected from a sample of 279 ninth-grade students participating in a larger study examining the social and academic development of youth. Participants in the larger study were recruited via a letter addressed to them and their parents that invited all eighth grade students to participate. Within the five schools involved in the study, consent forms were returned by 62% of the families (n=388). Of these, 72% of parents gave consent for their child's participation (n=281, 53% of the total population). Only students who obtained parental permission and provided assent participated in the larger study. Participation rates ranged from 27-72% in each of the five school districts. Within the selected sample, participants' ethnicities as indicated by self-reports were 87% Caucasian, less than 1% Latino, and the other 12% had an unidentified ethnicity. Participants were enrolled in public schooling within five towns whose socioeconomic status ranged from \$35,087 to \$77,794. According to school records, 2-57% of children were eligible for free/reduced lunch. The average family Hollingshead score for the sample was 49.62

Procedure

Participants attended two lab sessions separated by approximately 12 months. During the first session, participants came to the laboratory with their best friend and completed the Friendship Quality Questionnaire along with a number of other interactional tasks. During a separate session about 1 year later, each participant came to the laboratory with their mother to complete questionnaires and tasks. Among the tasks was one that required the child to identify a

self-defining memory and explain the narrative, the details, and the event's impact as if he or she was telling it to a stranger. This is the prompt that was given to each mother-child dyad:

I would like you (child's name) to think of an important experience from the past, which helps to explain a part of who you are. This memory can be from any period of your life. It should be a memory of a specific event in your life that you remember clearly and that still feels important to you even as you think about it now. It may be a memory that is positive, negative, or both in how it makes you feel – but it is likely that it leads to a strong feeling. I want you to pick a memory that you have thought about many times and that feels familiar to you.

Imagine that you have just met someone you like very much and are going for a long walk together. You really want the other person to get to know the “real you.” You want to provide as much detail as possible so as to help your imagined friend understand your experience and how it has affected you. Think for a moment about who you are and try to come up with an experience and how it has affected you. Think for a moment about who you are and try to come up with an experience that represents an important part of yourself.

You (mother's name) can help (child's name) to describe this event and its impact on (child's name).

You may want to talk about where you were, whom you were with, what happened, how you and others reacted, as well as any other details that seem important to you both. Make sure to include enough details that will help an imagined friend see and feel as you did, (child's name). You'll have about ten minutes to complete this task.

From there, the child and mother discussed the child's memories for ten minutes together, before being interrupted by the research assistant. Each conversation was videotaped and later transcribed to enable easier evaluation of the data.

Lesson Learning and Gaining Insight

Two coders blind to the study hypotheses coded these transcripts for a number of meaning making constructs. The first coding was done on scales involving *lesson learning* and *gaining insight*. Each scale ranged from 1 to 4, with the parent and child each receiving independent scores for how they discussed the memory. A score of 1 was given, either in terms of *lesson learning* or *gaining insight*, to designate that there was no evidence of the meaning making criteria in the conversation. For *lesson learning*, a score of 2 was given if there was some discussion of a memory and a resulting lesson learned, but nothing explicit and not much in terms of quantity of information or learning involved. A score of 3 was given when there was more detail in the narrative and a higher level of *lesson learning* was exhibited, though there was no clear cut *lesson learning* statement. A score of 4 required there to be a full narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end, with a clear *lesson learning* statement expressed. For *gaining insight*, the scores ranged exactly the same as in *lesson learning*, but the evidence being observed was based on the insight gained from the experience, rather than the lessons learned.

Co-Construction

For coding the co-construction aspect of the conversations, there were four measures used to code the information. Each of the following three codes was scored on a -1 to 1 scale. The first was *parental guidance*, which focused on the match between parental input and the child's need for support. For a score of -1, the parent provided too little support for the child, so the child is required to tell most of the story by him or herself. For a score of 0, the parent provided optimal support for the child, and there was a consistent and appropriate balance

between the child's and parent's contributions to the story. For a score of 1, the parent dominated the conversation and left no room for the child's contributions.

The second code used was *emotional scaffolding*, which involved the parent's use of emotion in voice and gesture to help direct the narrative towards more of a conclusion or understanding of the child's affective state during the narrative. For a score of -1, the parent displayed very little affect during the conversation, especially in comparison to the child's level of affect. For a score of 0, the parent expressed genuine and vivid affect in a way that helped the child focus on the story and on key affective elements. Even further, the narrative felt like it was being shared more by both the parent and child. For a score of 1, the parent used affect in a confusing or overwhelming way, being overemotional in comparison to the child's narrative.

The third code used was *positive parental communication*, which focused on parental communicative behaviors that facilitated the child's contributions to the narrative. This scale was based on the responsiveness of the parent to the child and how engaged and attentive the parent seemed to be in regards to the child. As opposed to *parental guidance*, *Positive parental communication* was more of a response to the child's requests for acknowledgements, instead of who was contributing most to the narrative. For a score of -1, the parent was cold and aloof in response to the narrative. For this rating, the parent did not often respond to the child's narrative, verbally or non-verbally, refusing to acknowledge the child's story. For a score of 0, the parent was accepting of the child and included behaviors such as nodding, smiling, and elaborating on the child's contributions. For a score of 1, the parent criticized and rejected the child's contribution or constantly interrupted the child.

The fourth Co-Construction code used was *intersubjectivity*. This focused on the extent that the parent and child shared the focus, agenda, and meaning of the narrative during their conversation. This was a 3 point scale, from 1 to 3. For a score of 1, there was little shared focus or attention. This consisted of the dyad being completely disjointed in their conversation, with either both or one member of the dyad speaking off topic or not taking part in the conversation. Often, the parent and child would be talking, but not interacting much. For a score of 2, which represented an intermediate level of shared focus and attention, both members of the dyad were often talking about the same subject, but would often change the topic or focus of the conversation. When these types of conversations turned to different subjects, they were more abrupt and less smooth in nature. A score of 3 represented a shared agenda and meaning in the context of harmonious interaction. In these cases, the dyad would build off of one another with the same intentions of furthering the conversation and understanding each other's thoughts and emotions. Both members were always discussing the same topic, even if they transition to a different one.

Friendship Quality

The *Friendship Quality Questionnaire*, (FQQ; Parker & Asher, 1993) included 40 items describing youth perceptions of the quality of their best friendship. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'not at all true' to 'really true'. Subscales represent validation, intimacy, conflict, conflict resolution, help and guidance, and companionship within the relationship. For the purpose of this study, a mean of all items was used to reflect overall friendship quality (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$). Self-reports and best friend reports were scored separately and treated as two indices of pre-transition friendship quality.

Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors

Behavioral and emotional difficulties were measured at age 16 using the Child Behavior checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL includes 113 problem behavior items rated on a 3-point scale. The CBCL items are grouped in eight narrow band scales: Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Anxious/Depressed, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, Delinquent Behavior, and Aggressive Behavior. The items can also be grouped into two broad band scales, Internalizing (i.e. Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Anxious, and Depressed) and Externalizing (Delinquent Behavior, Aggressive Behavior). For the purposes of this study, broad band internalizing and externalizing scores were used as well as total problems.

Results

Content

Each dyad was coded for what the content of the discussed memory. They were grouped into nine different categories, including whether the content was positive or negative in nature. The most popular categories were *Activities/Sports*, consisting of 16 of the 54 dyads, and *Friends*, consisting of 15 dyads. Following these were *Family* with 11 dyads, *School* with 9 dyads, *Social Anxiety* with 8 dyads, *Death* with 5 dyads, *Family (Negative)* with 3 dyads, and both *Injury* and *Religion* with 2 dyads each. As far as positive versus negative content, there was a majority of positive events, with 31 dyads (57%), compared to negative, 20 dyads (43%).

Lesson Learning and Gaining Insight

We first hypothesized that during adolescence the meaning that adolescents' gave to their memories would transition from primarily *lesson learning* to *gaining insight*. Overall, this was found to generally be true. Judging from the results (shown in Figure 3), the ratings for *gaining*

insight included more threes and fours, rather than ones. For parents, there were low levels of *lesson learning*, with 47 dyads being designated a one, and the other five given threes. Their *gaining insight* ratings had a more varied distribution, with 15 dyads rated with a one, 19 dyads rated with a two, 12 dyads rated with a three, and the remaining 6 dyads rated with a four. For children, there was more evidence of *lesson learning* than in the parents, though still had higher total ratings for *gaining insight*. The distribution for the children for *lesson learning* was 34 dyads rated with a one, 6 dyads rated with a two, 9 dyads rated with a three, and 3 dyads rated with a four. The distribution for *gaining insight* was 15 dyads rated with a one, 16 dyads rated with a two, 13 dyads rated with a three, and 8 dyads rated with a four. As expected, both children and parents demonstrated more *gaining insight* than *lesson learning*, $t(52) = 3.96, p < .001$ and $t(52) = 6.81, p < .001$ respectively. For children, *lesson learning* $M = .163, SD = .97$ while *gaining insight* was $M = 2.27, SD = 1.05$. For parents, *lesson learning* $M = 1.19, SD = .60$ while *gaining insight* was $M = 2.17, SD = .99$.

Our second hypothesis stated that adolescents would develop more positive adjustment in terms of both social and emotional well-being when rated higher in *gaining insight* over *lesson learning*. Internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and the total behaviors were used as a measure to determine positive adjustment. Pearson correlations were used to assess the associations between the *gaining insight* and *lesson learning* measures and internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and total behaviors. At the bivariate level, these correlations were not found to be significant, though the data was moving towards significance. As seen in Table 1, *Lesson learning* for both the child (LL-C) and parent (LL-P) were both correlated negatively, but non-significantly correlation coefficients for *gaining insight* were similarly non-significant.

For friendship quality, a bivariate correlation was also utilized to examine the association with *lesson learning* and *gaining insight*. We found that these measures had trending and significant results. Analyses indicated that both parent and child indicators of gaining insight were associated with higher friendship quality. Findings for *lesson learning* were in a similar direction, such that more *lesson learning* was related to better friendship quality; however, these findings were not significant.

Co-construction

Our hypothesis in the case of co-construction was that higher co-construction levels would be associated with less internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and total behaviors, in other words skewing more towards positive adjustment. Analysis of Variance however did not support our hypotheses, as dyads that differed in the amount of parental guidance, emotional scaffolding, and positive parental communication did not differ in terms of internalizing, externalizing, or total problem symptoms. However, correlation coefficients indicated that *intersubjectivity* was associated with problematic outcomes such that those dyads who were communicated more effectively and were more attuned, exhibited more internalizing ($r = .31, p < .05$), externalizing ($r = .28, p = .06$), and total behavior problems ($r = .38, p < .01$).

Discussion

This study on meaning making of adolescents' self-defining memories and the co-construction of the narrative of those self-defining memories with their parents sought to examine the link between high levels of insight and co-construction with positive friendship qualities and low internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Using a sample of adolescents and their parents, we were able to support the previous research that children of this age would

exhibit more complex forms of insight. However, the rest of the findings of our study add to the literature in terms of the consideration of friendship quality and the unexpected association between *intersubjectivity* and internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Overall, there were several themes that ran throughout the self-defining memories discussed within our sample. Though previous research had reported mostly negative stories associated with self-definition, especially when it came to high levels of insight, we found different themes and an overall positivity among the conversations (Bluck and Gluck, 2004). For example, the two most prevalent content categories were activities and friends, which were more often than not discussed in a positive light. Being that 60% of memories discussed between the adolescents and parents were positive, it also likely skewed our data and results. It is possible that our scores for *gaining insight*, though higher than *lesson learning*, may have been somewhat dampened by the overall positivity of the memories' content. Often, *gaining insight* is a reaction to negative experiences, leading towards the individual to search for some sort of deeper meaning to make sense of the event. As most of our dyads did not use such negative self-defining memories, it can be speculated that the scores for insight may have been relatively low compared to other possible samples.

We did however find support for our hypothesis that the meaning that adolescents' gave to their memories would transition from primarily *lesson learning* to *gaining insight*. We found that both parents and children engaged in significantly more *gaining insight* than *lesson learning*, signifying the developmental graduation to more complex thought and analysis of earlier experiences. In childhood, *lesson learning* is the main contributor to meaning making, as it consists of a simpler method of extracting information from an experience into the self's definition. During adolescence, the shift into *gaining insight* begins to take hold, reacting to

novel events, as well as being able to reference past experiences and obtain a new understanding of what took place and why. Interestingly, our findings revealed that children and parents were exhibiting the same amount of *gaining insight* based on the memories, though the children were still in the stage of early adolescence. Our reasoning for this outcome was that the scores were weighted towards the child, in that if the adult proposed insight that was rejected by the child, it would be invalidated. Therefore, it is possible that parents displayed higher levels of *gaining insight* than their children, though it was not expressed in our measures.

We also anticipated that adolescents would develop more positive social and emotional adjustment when rated higher in *gaining insight* over *lesson learning*. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that higher levels of insight were associated with higher friendship quality. Hallmarks of high quality relationships involve intimate conversation and trust between both members of a dyad. In order for individuals to understand either their own cognitions and emotions or someone else's, some level of complex insight must be attained. Based on this foundation, adolescents, who are becoming more adept in processing events and experiences in more thoughtful and complex ways, begin to really form meaningful friendships that involve a deeper layer of understanding and emotion than is present in childhood relationships. Our hypothesis reflected this thought process and was substantiated in its finding that those who were rated higher in *gaining insight* were also rated higher for friendship quality. Our reasoning for this hypothesis was based on research previously done on friendship quality and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. When adolescents maintain positive relationships with their peers, it provides a positive resource for individuals and creates a buffer against externalizing behaviors (Lansford et al., 2003). At the same time, when there is a lack of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, prosocial behaviors and higher social competence are demonstrated more frequently,

which allow the individual to preserve friendships (Eisenberg et al., 2001). In order to maintain relationships with peers, the adolescent must have a real understanding of oneself and the individual's relationships with others. When adolescents exhibit higher levels of *gaining insight*, as opposed to *lesson learning*, it allows the individual to better comprehend how varying thoughts and behaviors affect the friendship, especially in terms of what is wanted in the relationship and what is not (Singer, 2004). By these means, we hypothesized and were substantiated that those rated higher in *gaining insight* would develop a more positively adjusted outlook on life.

Notably, links between meaning making processes (i.e. *lesson learning* and *gaining insight*) and emotional difficulties were not found. In contrast to previous findings, meaning making processes may not be key contributors to emotional functioning. Alternatively, a number of methodological factors may have made detection of these associations difficult. First, the relatively low variability may have made it difficult to identify these links. As previously reported, the sample consisted of 87% Caucasian subjects, 75% female subjects, who all lived within a nearby vicinity of each other. Therefore, it is possible that the lack of ethnic, gender, and location-based differences may have played a role in the lack of reportable findings. Another possible reason may have been the lack of variability within the *lesson learning* scores for both the parents and the children in this sample. Perhaps because all of the child subjects were already adolescents, they were more likely to be rated higher in *gaining insight* than *lesson learning*, as were their parents. Due to the minimal differences in *lesson learning* scores, it may have skewed the results of our data, providing inadequate totals for *lesson learning* to accurately predict whether this hypothesis was supported or unfounded.

The third possibility involves the CBCL and its structure, where parents answer questions about their child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors, rather than their children. It would seem that the adolescents would know more about their own behavior and thoughts than their parents, though the parents answered are responsible for the answers. One difficulty for parents, in answering about their children, is that cognitive features, primarily internalizing behaviors, are difficult to acknowledge and rate from the outside. Individuals of any age hold back certain thoughts for many different reasons, and the same goes for adolescents. It is possible that parents answered incorrectly for their children in this case (Cantwell, Lewinsohn, Rohde, & Seeley, 1997; Swenson & Rose, 2003). For externalizing behaviors, many of these actions are covert, restricting access to parents who could not, then, report them. When parents engage in low levels of parental monitoring, reducing the likelihood of access to their children's risky or illegal externalizing behaviors through self-disclosure, delinquent behavior tends to increase (Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003). Therefore, it would be reasonable for parents to report less internalizing and externalizing behaviors than their children were actually engaging in.

Our findings in regards to *intersubjectivity* were somewhat counterintuitive. We had anticipated that the parent's ability to create an effective and fluent narrative together with their children would facilitate children's ability to engage in similar dynamic ways across relationships. However, intersubjectivity was not correlated to friendship quality and was positively associated with internalizing, externalizing, and total problems scores. It is not clear whether these are spurious findings or are reflective of a process that was somewhat unexpected. For instance, intersubjectivity may be a marker of poor autonomy striving. As such, high levels of intersubjectivity actually may reflect overreliance on parents and may undermine adolescents'

adaptation while those adolescents who are demonstrating healthy levels of autonomy are less reliant on their parents to help in the co-construction of these narratives.

Limitations

Low variability in ethnicity, gender, and location, may have contributed to data that was not truly reflective of a wide range of adolescents and parents. In addition, this limited our ability to examine potential gender differences in our results. The other major limitation was also previously specified in that parents' reporting of their adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behaviors may fall short of the levels these children are actually engaging in.

Future Research

We would suggest that, in future research, levels of *intersubjectivity* and co-construction be measured for both parent-child relationships and peer relationships as a means for examining the interaction styles and capacities of youth. It is possible that these interactions have different meaning within these differing relationships and interactions within the parent-child relationship are simply not reflective of what may be possible or typical with peers. By completing the peer co-constructive analysis, it would be possible to attain data that would show whether parents' co-construction levels do, in fact, reflect on peer interactions.

Future studies that are based on measures of *gaining insight*, *lesson learning*, and co-construction may want to look at how these evaluations contribute to emotional expressivity and emotional regulation, both factors of positive adjustment. Much of the research studied prior to this project discussed emotional expressivity and its relation to friendship quality and low internalizing and externalizing behaviors. It is possible that emotional expressivity and regulation could mediate the factor in which these meaning making and co-construction levels reflect on

peer relationships. Associations have been made in previous research; however, the mechanism behind these findings is still unknown.

Though not all of the hypotheses were supported, these findings do suggest that higher levels of *lesson learning* and *gaining insight*, which are reflected in the memories that adolescents construct, promote more positive social adaptation. Given the salience of peer relationships during adolescence, these findings are significant and should be examined further for understanding how children's experiences inform their adaptation and, perhaps, may even serve as an important approach for intervention for children with social difficulties. In conclusion, a high level of importance should be placed on parents fostering and developing meaning making skills and qualities in their children, in order to promote more positive overall adjustment, especially in terms of emotion and social competence.

Table 1

Pearson Correlation Values for Lesson Learning and Gaining Insight for Parents and Children Correlated with Internalizing Behaviors, Externalizing Behaviors, Total Behaviors, and Friendship Quality

	LL-P	GI-P	LL-C	GI-C	Intersubjectivity
Internalizing	-.11	.07	-.08	.03	.31*
Externalizing	-.12	.17	-.13	.09	.28 ^T
Total	-.07	.19	-.16	.08	.39**
FQQ	.03	.29*	.24	.29 ^T	-.04

Note. ^T=Trend, * p =.05, ** p <.01

Table 2

ANOVA Results for Co-Construction Variables with Internalizing Behaviors, Externalizing Behaviors, and Total Behaviors

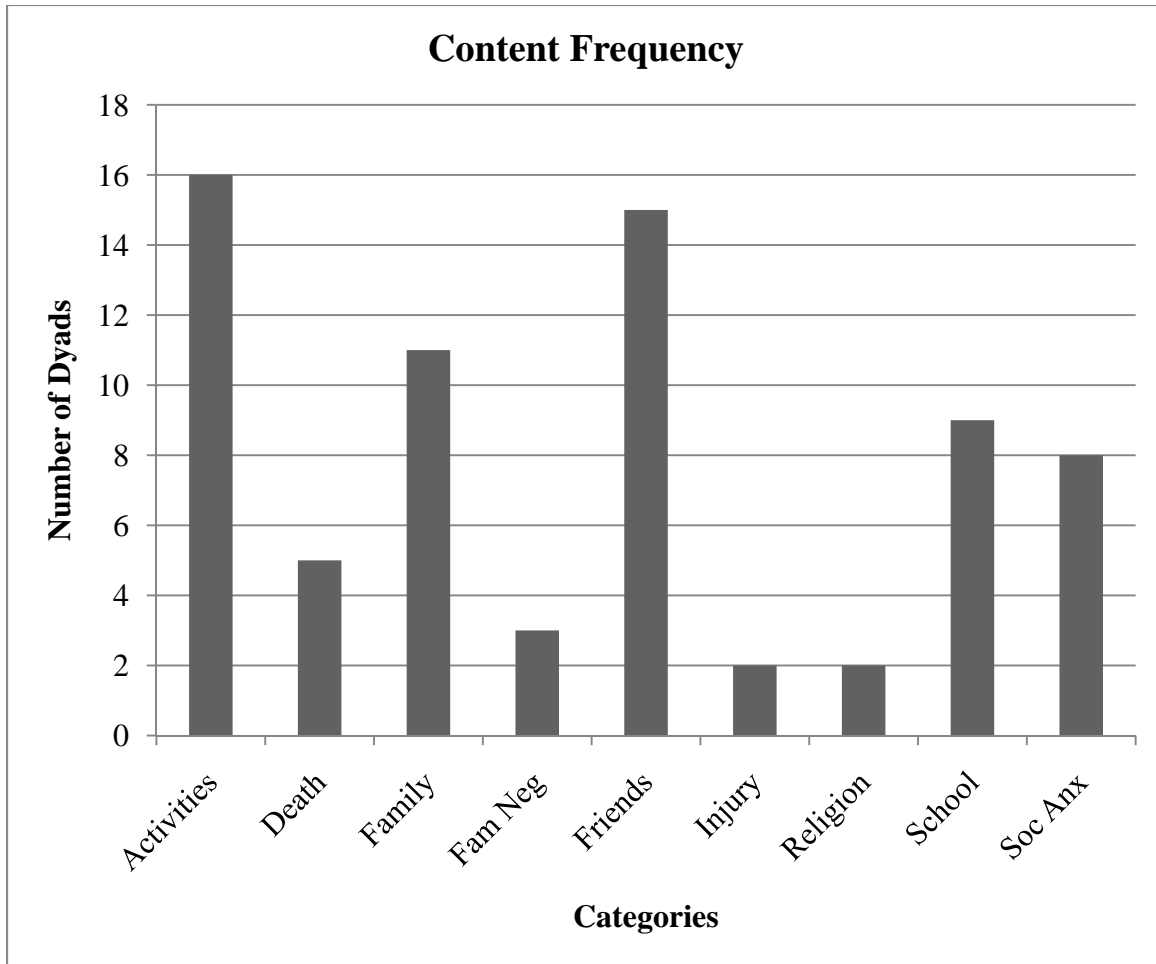
	Internalizing	Externalizing	Total
PG	F(17, 47) = .92; <i>ns</i>	F(11, 47) = .58; <i>ns</i>	F(21, 47) = .55; <i>ns</i>
ES	F(17, 47) = .35; <i>ns</i>	F(11, 47) = .69; <i>ns</i>	F(21, 47) = 1.25; <i>ns</i>
PPC	F(17, 47) = .64; <i>ns</i>	F(11, 47) = .86; <i>ns</i>	F(21, 47) = .41; <i>ns</i>

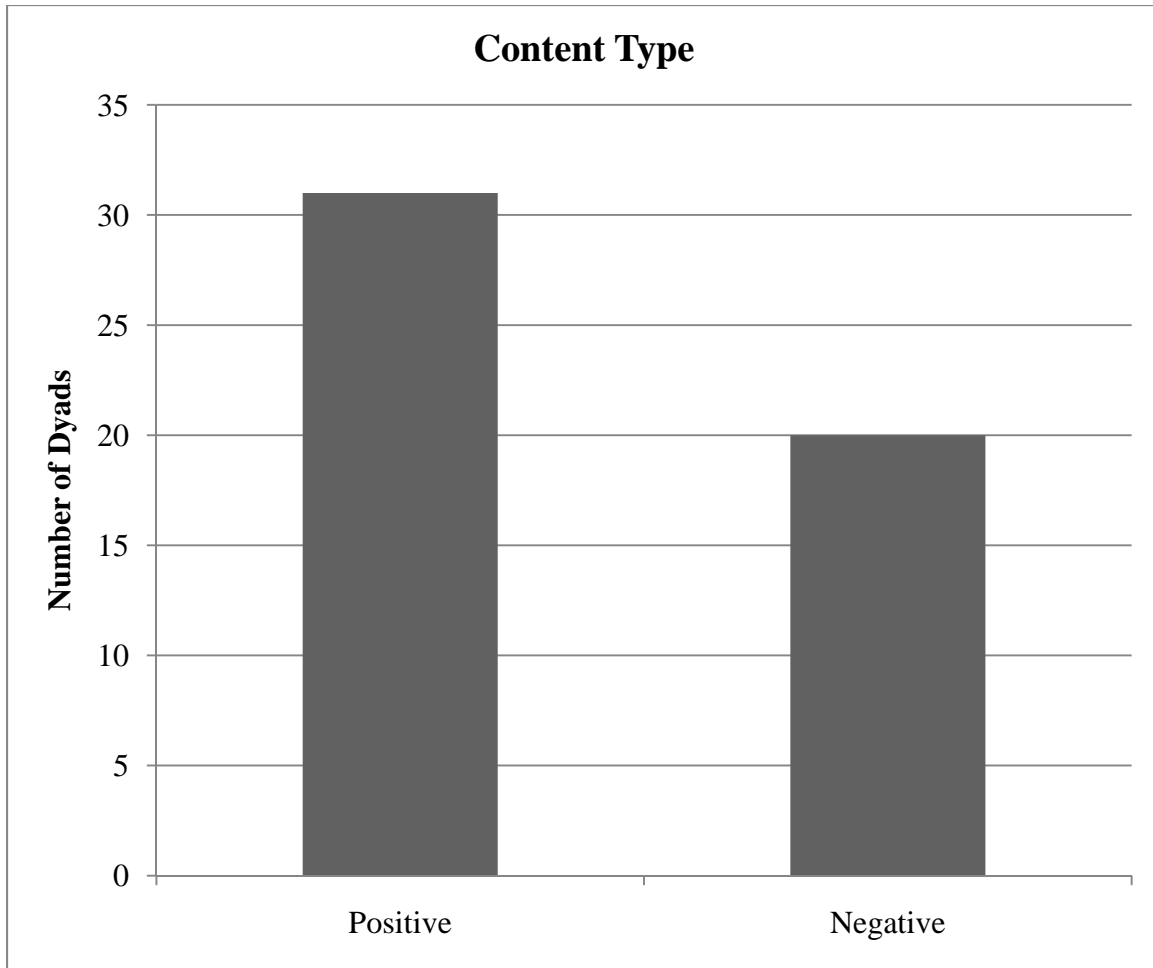
Figure Captions

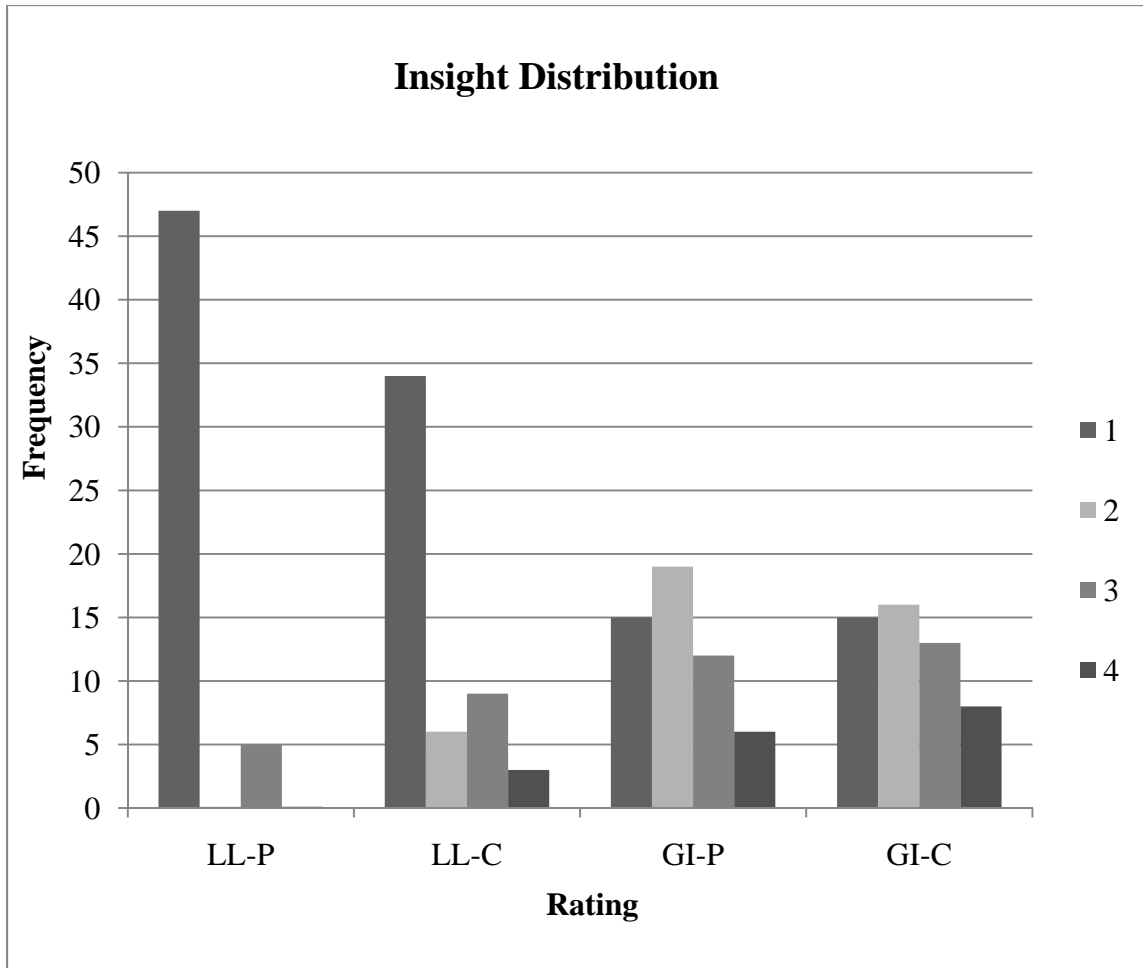
Figure 1. Chart for the Frequency of each Content Category that Dyads Discussed during the Meaning Making Discussion Task

Figure 2. Chart of the Frequency that Positive and Negative Memory Content Topics Were Discussed in during the Meaning Making Discussion Task

Figure 3. Chart of the Distribution of Scores Coded for *Lesson Learning* and *Gaining Insight* among Parents and Children during the Meaning Making Discussion Task







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