Teens telling tales: How maternal and peer audiences support narrative identity development

Kate C. McLean*, Lauren E. Jennings

Western Washington University, USA

A B S T R A C T

Prior research has shown that parents help children to develop the requisite skills to construct an autobiographical self in past event conversations, yet research in adolescence is lacking. Further, friendships increase in importance during adolescence, and these new relationships may play a role in narrative identity development. The current study examined past event conversations between adolescents ($n = 22$; mean age = 13) and their friends, and adolescents and their mothers. Conversations were reliably coded for degree of personal meaning communicated and listener scaffolding behavior. Results showed that friends showed less frequent explicit scaffolding of narrative identity than mothers, although listener scaffolding behavior was associated with adolescent meaning-making for both friends and mothers. Additional qualitative analysis of the conversations suggests that friends may be more engaged in scaffolding the self-presentational aspects of narrative identity, as well as providing a safe arena for exploration away from mothers.

The creation of a coherent narrative identity is critical for various developmental outcomes including identity achievement (McLean & Pratt, 2006) and mental health (e.g., Bohanek, Marin, & Fivush, 2008; Pals, 2006). The development of the specific narrative skills needed to form that identity is situated in early childhood past event conversations with mothers, who are viewed as scaffolders in this process; that is, mothers are experts who are able to provide structure and support so that their children can learn the skill of narrating past events (for a review see Fivush, Reese, & Haden, 2006). In adolescence, the stage at which identity becomes the prominent developmental task (Erikson, 1968), there is far less research on how the process of acquiring a coherent narrative identity continues to unfold. Existing studies in adolescence have primarily focused on internalized representations of narrative identity and the development of narrative processes central to constructing a life story (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010), as well as on the continued role that mothers play as scaffolders of narrative identity in past event conversations (McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Yet, in adolescence a new relationship network emerges that may play a role in the development of narrative identity – friendships. In an attempt to begin exploration of an area that has received little empirical attention (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007; cf., Shapiro, Thorne, Nelson, & Hoicka, submitted for publication; Thorne & Shapiro, submitted for publication), we sought to answer the question: What is the role of friends (in comparison to mothers) in adolescent narrative identity development in the context of past event conversations?

* Corresponding author. Western Washington University, Department of Psychology, MS 9172, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225, USA. Tel.: +1 360 650 3570; fax: +1 360 650 7305.
E-mail address: Kate.McLean@wwu.edu (K.C. McLean).

0140-1971/5 – see front matter © 2011 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Narrative identity development in conversational contexts

Our investigation of narrative identity development focused on meaning-making processes, defined for the current study as the degree to which one learns about oneself in reflecting on past events (e.g., McLean & Pratt, 2006). Meaning-making provides a sense of personal continuity (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007), and is viewed as a learned skill that develops within social contexts and relationships (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Conversations about past events provide opportunities to articulate one’s own feelings and thoughts about events, as well as opportunities for others to validate, challenge, or help to develop the meaning of past events (Fivush et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000).

A robust area of research has shown that mothers\(^1\) scaffold their children’s narrative development in early childhood. In particular, mothers help children to organize and interpret past events by elaborating on those events with their children and support the child’s point of view via confirming the child’s contributions to the conversation (e.g., Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush, Marin, McWilliams, & Bohanek, 2009; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Mothers who engage in elaborative narration encourage their children to produce novel information about past events, and provide a richer and more detailed reminiscing context in which children can begin to locate their selves in the context of an extended autobiographical history (e.g., Bird & Reese, 2006; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Reese et al., 1993). Over time, children of more elaborative mothers display more elaborated event narratives, a richer understanding of emotion, and a more consistent self-concept, to name just a few outcomes examined (see Fivush et al., 2006 for a review).

Listeners can also facilitate the development of meaning by confirming the teller’s interpretations and evaluations of past events. Broadly, responsive listening is thought to help people to consolidate personal self-views (e.g., Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). Specifically, within mother–child conversations about the past, researchers have found that maternal confirmations are important correlates of elaborative questions that help children feel they are competent contributors, encouraging them to engage in conversation (Fivush et al., 2006).

Our recent research has shown that mothers who ask elaborative questions and express confirmations during conversations have adolescents with more sophisticated meaning in their narratives (McLean & Mansfield, 2011). That is, in adolescence, as in early childhood, elaboration continues to be a tool that is associated with the narrative conceptualization of self. However, given that the task in adolescence is different from early childhood – self-concept versus identity (see McLean et al., 2007) – and that the adolescent has more sophisticated tools for understanding past events than in early childhood (see Habermas & de Silveira, 2008), there are also differences in how maternal scaffolding predicts meaning-making in adolescence. Notably, we found that mothers who both confirmed and negated (i.e., disagreed with) their adolescents’ narrative reports had adolescents who expressed more personal meaning in those narratives, especially for older adolescents (McLean & Mansfield, 2011; see also Bohanek et al., 2009). This suggests that new scaffolding processes, such as negation, may become important in adolescence, and this finding also nicely mirrors findings on conflict negotiation and identity development in related research areas (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; see also McLean et al., 2010).

Adolescent friendships: implications for narrative identity development

While an extensive body of research has shown that mothers scaffold their young children’s narrative development, it is important to consider how this process evolves as the child reaches adolescence. Given that the development of a narrative identity is often situated within relationship contexts, the large body of literature revealing a major shift in the adolescent’s social world begs an exploration of potentially new scaffolding contexts during adolescence, specifically friendships.

One of the relational dynamics that unfolds in adolescence is increasing independence from parents while friendships deepen (Sullivan, 1953). For example, friendships take on an exceedingly important role as adolescents spend more time with their friends (Hartup, 1993), who become a source of value-learning and behavioral changes via conformity, particularly in early adolescence when fitting in is a primary concern (e.g., Berndt & Perry, 1990). Friends can also provide opportunities for self-identification and validation of one’s identity (Kuperminc, Blatt, Shahar, Henrich, & Leadbeater, 2004), especially as the adolescent begins to see the self in new contexts outside of the family.

A major characteristic of the change in friendships from childhood to adolescence is increased feelings of intimacy. Adolescents increasingly rely on their friends for emotional support, which sometimes exceeds that sought in parental relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Further, Baumer, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, and Har-Even (2008) found that intimacy in adolescent friendships predicted a sense of coherence and self-continuity across contexts. Much of this intimacy development is achieved via personal self-disclosure (e.g., Buhrmester, 1990), which suggests that friend conversations may become a context for narrative identity development (Shapiro et al., submitted for publication; Thorne & Shapiro, submitted for publication).

We propose that friends and mothers should take complementary, but distinct, roles in the process of narrative identity development. Friendships are not antithetical to parental relationships (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), with the internal working models that are developed with parents transferred to peer relationships (see Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001 for

---

1 We note that the bulk of research on parent–child conversations is with mothers, and we only examined mothers in the current study. However, fathers do play a role in these processes (e.g., Reese et al., 1996).
a review). Broadly, higher quality relationships predict identity exploration and commitment (Meeus & Deković, 1995; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002). Specifically, increasing support from mothers and decreasing conflict with friends predicts increases in identity achievement during adolescence (Reis & Youniss, 2004), and higher emotional self-disclosure with friends predicts lower levels of identity diffusion (Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka, & Barnett, 1990).

However, the nature of friend and mother relationships is different. In one of the only studies on friends and mothers as potential scaffolders of narrative identity in adolescence of which we are aware, Weeks and Pasupathi (2010) concluded that friends and mothers differ in the degree to which they scaffold narrative identity (McLean & Mans, 2007). Specifically, increasing support from mothers and decreasing conflict with friends predicts increases in identity achievement during adolescence (Reis & Youniss, 2004), and higher emotional self-disclosure with friends predicts lower levels of identity diffusion. Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka, and Barnett (1990).

However, the nature of friend and mother relationships is different. In one of the only studies on friends and mothers as potential scaffolders of narrative identity in adolescence of which we are aware, Weeks and Pasupathi (2010) concluded that friends and mothers have different concerns in past event conversations, and elicit different stories about the same events. While Weeks and Pasupathi did not focus on explicit types of scaffolding that were the focus in the present study, their qualitative exploration showed that mothers supported their adolescents’ stories to enforce moral standards, while the same stories shared with friends were told for entertainment or relationship concerns.

**Present study**

Our primary aim was to examine the degree to which friends and mothers engaged in scaffolding of narrative identity with a mixed-methods design. We examined the mean levels of scaffolding behavior across these two audiences, and also examined whether friends differed from mothers in the degree to which scaffolding was associated with the expression of meaning-making. We propose that friends may take a less explicit scaffolding role than mothers. Mothers differ from friends in that they have an already established relationship history with their children and likely have a greater long-term investment in their children’s development (e.g., Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985) as well as have greater knowledge of the child’s life history (Habermas, Negele, & Mayer, 2010). Further, friends should have less experience and expertise at scaffolding narrative identity than mothers, and are likely to be at similar levels of cognitive and identity development (see Akers, Jones, & Coyl, 1998). However, we expected that when scaffolding did occur, it would be associated with meaning-making for both audiences. Finally, while we expected friends to be engaged in less scaffolding, we conducted a qualitative examination of the conversations to reveal what friends were doing in these conversations, if not traditional scaffolding.

Finally, we note that research on narrative development and narrative identity has found gender to be a critical component to understanding these processes (e.g., Bohanek et al., 2008; Fivush & Buckner, 2003; McLean & Mansfield, 2011; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996). While we examined gender differences quantitatively, we were underpowered to detect them. However, in our qualitative analysis, we considered research on gender differences in narrative processes, as well as theories of gender and identity to aid in our interpretations. Most relevant to the present study are suggestions that males may story themselves in more autonomous ways than females, who tend toward emotional and relational self-disclosures (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Fivush & Buckner, 2003; Gilligan, 1982), and these gender differences may be amplified in social situations, such as conversations, given the power relations and gendered expectations that different individuals hold (Fivush & Marin, 2007).**

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were drawn from a larger study on mother–adolescent conversations about the past (McLean & Mansfield, 2011; McLean & Morrison-Cohen, submitted for publication). The original sample consisted of 63 adolescents (n = 32 boys) and their mothers from Northwest Washington State. The present analyses included 22 target adolescents who completed both a conversation with their mother and with a friend (12 male, 10 female; mean age = 13, range = 11–18, with just under half of the sample between 12 and 15 years). The sample was 97% Caucasian. Family income ranged from less than $20,000 to more than $100,000 (m = $65,000). Fifty percent of mothers had a college degree, 33% had some graduate education, 13% has some college education, and 3% reported a high school education. We compared those adolescents who completed a friend conversation to those who did not and found no differences on mother education, family income, age, or gender. In terms of narrative and scaffolding variables, those who completed a friend conversation were more likely to have more meaning in the conversation with mother than those who did not complete a friend conversation, t(56) = −2.38, p < .05, but were not different on scores of scaffolding variables. Friends were almost all same-sex pairs, with the exception of one. Friends were all similar in age to the target adolescent (r = .89), and friendship length ranged from 1 to 15 years (m = 5.1 years, sd = 3.72).

**Procedure**

Families were recruited via postings around town (ice cream shops, restaurants, fitness centers, libraries, book stores, farmer’s markets, grocery stores, YMCA, etc.), on Craigslist, and via snowball sampling techniques. Two research assistants visited the family home to conduct the study. Questions about the study were answered, if necessary, and mother and adolescent signed consent forms, after which the pair had an audio-recorded conversation in a private and comfortable location without the researchers present. When the conversation was over, mother and child completed surveys in separate locations. Participants were thanked, debriefed, and paid $15 each. Adolescents were then asked if they wanted to participate.

in a similar conversation with a friend. If so, the family contacted the friend's family and if parent and friend agreed, they contacted the researcher who set up a second visit, which followed the same procedure as the mother–child conversation.

**Tasks and measures**

**Conversation task**
Each conversation partner (adolescent and mother; adolescent and friend) was asked to share three memories, which had the following definitions on a laminated page that they could hold during the conversation: 1) an important, distinctive, specific personal memory that says something about you as a person; 2) an important, specific, and extremely sad memory; 3) an important, specific, and extremely happy memory. Thus, six total memories were shared in each conversation – three for the adolescent and three for the conversational partner. Dyads were told that they could proceed in any order that they wanted, and to have as normal a conversation as possible. There were no specifications about the age of the memory, whether or not the memories were shared experiences, or whether or not they had been discussed previously.

**Narrative coding: memory narratives**

All conversations were transcribed, checked, and the target adolescent's responses were scored by the first author and three research assistants who were blind to the age and gender of the adolescent. Coders independently scored each case, and then met to resolve disagreements. Reliability was conducted using the consensus of the first four coders on 20% of the cases with a separate reliability coder who was blind to the age and gender of the participants, as well as the aims of the study. Intraclass correlations and kappas for reliability are reported below. Coding manuals are available from the first author.

**Meaning-making**

Each of the three memory narratives for the target adolescent was coded for sophistication of meaning, based on McLean and Pratt's (2006) adaptation of the system developed by McLean and Thorne (2003). Memories were coded according to a four-point scale that captures the degree of meaning-making (range per memory, intraclass r = .79–.92). A score of zero was assigned to narratives that contained no explanation of the meaning of the event to the self. Narratives were scored as one if there was mention of a specific lesson that the reporter learned from the event. A score of two was assigned to narratives that contained “vague meaning;” narratives of this sort describe some growth or change in the self, but the specifics of the change are not clear. Narratives were scored as three if there was evidence that the reporter gleaned specific emotional, psychological, or relational insight from the event that applies to broader areas of the reporter’s life.

**Scaffolding**

Coding for scaffolding behavior was adapted from Haden et al. (1997) and Bird and Reese (2006), as the coding scheme was originally designed for pre-schoolers. Each of the mothers’ or friends’ turn in the conversations was coded for several types of responses by two research assistants who were blind to gender, age, and aims of the study. Note that one turn might have more than one kind of code – a question and an evaluation, for example once trained, reliability was conducted on ten conversations. After reliability was reached, the same two research assistants proceeded to code the rest of the conversations, consulting with each other and the first author when there were disagreements.

Elaborative questions (kappa = .88) were those in which the mother or friend asked the child to provide new information about the event under discussion, which could be new factual information or the child’s evaluation or point of view on the event (e.g., "How did you feel about that?"). Reiteration questions (kappa = .88) were questions that required only a yes or no answer or repeated what someone had just said in question form ("So you went to the store yesterday?"). Confirmations (kappa = .96) were statements that indicate agreement or confirmation of what the teller is saying (e.g., "uh-huh," "yeah") or statements of confirmation or support ("You’re right."). Negations (kappa = .84) were statements of disagreement with the teller ("No, that is not what happened."). Yes/No questions were those that were set up for a yes–no answer ("You love popcorn, don’t you?"); "Were there lots of people or not so many?") (kappa = .89). Move Along statements make no demand on the teller, but just add to the conversation; that is, the teller is not required to respond ("Sarah was there too.") (kappa = .89). New Interpretations offer a different interpretation on the topic of discussion, which are not factual ("Couldn’t he have felt sad about that?") (kappa = .89).

Our results are presented within the context of a mixed-methods design. Due to our small sample size and the novelty of the research area we examined the conversations from a qualitative perspective and showcase several cases that suggest a possible role for friends in narrative identity development other than traditional scaffolding. We followed Tashakkori and Teddie’s (1998) recommendations for combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of the same data to garner a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (see also Creswell, 1999). Thus, in this study we examined conversational processes quantitatively to uncover general trends, and we employed qualitative analyses to flesh out quantitative data to see what the phenomena “look like.” We engaged in multiple reads of the conversations, aided by note-taking and discussion, which allowed us to suggest several roles that friends might play in these conversations. In reporting our results we also want to emphasize the reciprocal nature of these conversations. We do not view these processes as one-way processes, but expect that adolescents have an active role in these conversations and are not simply ‘receiving’ scaffolding behavior from a listener.
Results and discussion

Friends and mothers: a quantitative comparison

Paired t-tests showed that conversations with friends were marginally shorter than conversations with mothers as assessed by number of turns (see Table 1, Panel A), though there was a good deal of variability. The gender of the target child was not related to conversation length (t’s range -.14 to .49). We did not control for conversation length in these analyses following prior research that suggests that the length of a conversation is meaningful in giving children practice at narration (see Fivush, 2000).

Not surprisingly, scaffolding variables were intercorrelated, so we aggregated these variables in several ways. First, we created one composite scaffolding variable, which we refer to as positive responsiveness. This variable was an average of all scaffolding variables, which were intercorrelated (r’s range .25 to .63) and generally indicated the behavior of a good listener (question elaborations and repetitions, yes/no questions, statements that moved the conversation along, new interpretations, repetitions, and confirmations) (for mothers, alpha = .85; for friends, alpha = .78). We retained negations as a separate variable because it was not correlated with the other types of scaffolding. Second, we aggregated the separate scaffolding variables across memories. These latter results should be taken with caution as they are intercorrelated, however, we include them to guide future research about specific kinds of scaffolding behavior.

Friends versus mothers as scaffolders

Table 1 (Panel A) shows that friends do significantly less positive responding than do mothers, as well as less of every scaffolding variable individually, except for negations. The differences were particularly pronounced for positive responsiveness, elaborate questions, and yes/no questions, each of which had associated Cohen’s d’s which exceeded 1.0. There were no gender differences in scaffolding (r’s range .79 to 1.74), with the exception that friends were marginally less likely than mothers to ask reiterative questions of males than females, t(19) = 1.86, p = .08, d = .81.

Adolescent meaning-making in relation to scaffolding behavior

Using paired t-tests, we found no mean-level differences in how much the target adolescent expressed meaning in the friend and mother conversations (all r’s < 1.00, p’s > .05). As can be seen in Table 1 (Panel B), the more mothers engaged in positive responding in the conversation and the more negations the mother provided, the more meaning the adolescent reported. In the friend conversation, the more elaborate questions, new interpretations, and negations the friend provided, the more meaning the target adolescent reported. Thus, our results thus far suggest that friends provide less explicit scaffolding for adolescents than do mothers, but that both friends’ and mothers’ scaffolding behavior is associated with adolescent meaning-making.

Friends as scaffolders: a qualitative analysis

The second aim of our investigation was to examine what friends were doing in these conversations, besides engaging in less traditional scaffolding behavior. We suggest two possibilities for the role of friends. First, friends are enabling the speaker...
to practice the self-presentational aspects of narrative identity, encouraging one another to approach the past from an external perspective, considering the expectations and judgments of their audience (see Bamberg, 2004). Second, friendships are an arena where adolescents can practice presenting their burgeoning narrative identity to a different, but still safe, audience. Finally, within these two possibilities we also see how these conversations can also provide a context for deepening intimacy in relationships with both mothers and friends.

Though not part of the instructions, a notable number of the same events were shared with mothers and friends \((n = 7\) for important memories; \(n = 13\) for sad memories; and \(n = 5\) for happy memories), and we elected to examine these twice-told stories qualitatively. While the design of the study (which was partly constrained by the necessity of collecting data on mothers and adolescents before the friend conversations\(^2\)) did not allow us to rule out our order effects, we argue that these are useful because they are rarely studied (cf., Josselson, 2009; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998) and may be more ecologically valid given that stories are often retold. In particular, examining twice-told stories allows us to examine the idea that stories are dynamic and can change depending on the context – in this case, the audience – in which they are shared (Josselson, 2009; Mishler, 2004; Thorne et al., 1998).

Friends aid in scaffolding self-presentation

A 13-year-old girl, whom we call Katie, shared the same sad memory with both her mother and her friend about the death of her pet chicken. In the following conversation Katie and her mother begin by talking about getting the chicken.

Katie: Well we got um twenty-five baby chicks from a hatchery, and we got them mailed to us. And ever since we had them I had a bond with one of them. Oh dear, I'm going to cry...[The rooster] would hang out in the yard and I would sit out there with him, and he would just hang out with me...

Mother: His name was Melbourne, and we both got pretty attached to him.

Katie: Yeah.

Mother: ...[you] would always go get him every night out of the chicken coop and bring him in the bathroom, and keep him in the bathroom at night so he wouldn't crow too loudly in the morning. And I think it was just one of those situations where you get a little bonded with things you put a lot of effort into...

Katie: [but the] neighbor got worse and worse about him, so we took him out to a temporary boarding home, the people were really nice. And I don't know, like a month after? We got the email that their dog had gotten in and killed him. And...I just remember my mom telling me that. That was really terrible. Probably one of my saddest memories.

Mother: Yep it was very sad. We went out and got his little rooster body, and got him back home, and... buried him out in our yard. [Both crying.]

In talking about this sad story, Katie's mother notes some traits about Katie – how attached she was to the chicken and, beyond the story of the chicken, how she puts a lot of effort into things she cares about. This is the kind of traditional scaffolding we see reflected in our quantitative results, such that the mother actively participates in telling the story, and in doing so, helps the child to connect past events to the aspects of the self via her interpretive comments. Further, within the family, this is labeled as an extremely sad event, and the mother is participating in this construction, amplifying the expressed sadness over the death of the chicken, which may make them feel closer in sharing this family story (McLean & Morrison-Cohen, submitted for publication). Yet to other people, crying over a chicken may seem ridiculous. Katie's friend seems aware of this, and helps Katie tell the story differently.

Katie: Last year I had this chicken and his name was Melbourne.

Friend: Not just a chicken, a chick you raised.

Katie: Yeah he liked me and I liked him.

Friend: He was cute.

Katie: And I'm not gonna cry this time, cause I'm just not...So we had to give our chicken to um, um, like a foster lady saying their dog had eaten him and that was really, really sad and that's like the worse thing ever...(Friend: yeah.)...that's ever happened to me.

Friend: And she's putting this bluntly but Katie and that chicken were like peanut butter and jelly.

Katie: ok ok [both laughing together].

Friend: Leave me alone, there was no other, Melbourne hated everyone, everybody but Katie.

Katie: He attacked people.

\(^2\) We note that we employed this design because many mothers wanted to engage in the conversation first, before allowing their adolescents to engage in the friend conversation, thus precluding our ability to counter-balance.
In this excerpt, Katie’s friend does not help her to connect the story to herself, reflecting our quantitative analyses. In contrast, Katie’s friend helps to tell the story in a way that acknowledges the humor of having such love for a chicken. She helps to justify the extent of her friends' feelings (“not just a chick, but a chick you raised”) when she feels her friend is not relaying the story in a way that will make her audience feel that the intensity of her emotion is valid, as well as supports Katie’s feelings, perhaps in an intimacy display. We suggest that Katie’s friend is helping Katie to explore what may be a more socially acceptable version of the story – one that acknowledges the humor in her love for a chicken along with sadness over the death. While the audience-oriented humor replaces the mother’s explicit scaffolding of personal meaning-making, this shift in how the story is narrated may actually allow Katie a safe space for additional narrative identity exploration (Shapiro et al., submitted for publication). In particular, friends might be a critical testing ground on which an adolescent’s most important memories are first shared outside the family. This safe environment is an opportunity to learn whether or not a wider audience will accept the stories, and it provides a chance to explore different narration styles in preparation for the responses of others.

Friends may be particularly important for providing self-presentation scaffolding because, mothers may be ill suited for introducing their children to adolescent norms (Collins, 1997; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). While Katie, at age 13, may not yet have internalized these norms, older adolescents show an awareness of wider social expectations. One example of this is from 16-year-old Clare, whose sad memory is of the first time she got drunk with friends and committed some social faux pas. With her mother, Clare emphasizes how much she regrets her actions (see Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010 for a similar discussion). With her friend, she plays up her drunken state and the hilarity of the situation, showing a mastery of humor that Katie had yet to demonstrate. Clare and her friend both agree that “everyone drinks” and that it’s no big deal. Clare appears aware of the different expectations of her two audiences, and is able to modify her story accordingly to meet those expectations. Given that our qualitative analysis suggests mothers and friends are unique contexts with different implications for narrative identity work, it is important that adolescents can successfully narrate personal experiences for different audiences, a skill that Pasupathi (2011) terms narrative flexibility. The concern with producing audience-appropriate stories is important practice at tailoring stories to any social context in which they are shared, and may be a deft skill that increases with age and experience.

Friends provide a safe arena for exploration away from mothers

Navigation of norms and expectations can be challenging, but particularly so during the teenage years when parents, friends, and other groups may have very different, or even conflicting standards to which a person needs to adhere (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). However, these shifting self-presentation demands may allow teenagers to develop their own voices as authors or owners of the stories they tell. Maternal scaffolding is clearly important for narrative identity development, but it may be that after a certain level of autonomy is reached, mothers actually silence their teen’s stories, closing them off to certain identities by limiting their verbal experimentation. Although this type of interpretation is typically applied to marginalized groups in society, the politics of voice and silence may also play out in the stories that teenagers tell to their friends and their mothers, as each of these conversation “places” have very different norms and power structures (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010; see also Fivush, 2000, 2010).

In one example, 12-year-old Kelly has difficulty coming up with a sad memory to share. She even asks her mother “Do you remember when I ever cried really hard?” Her mother suggests the memory of when her friend moved many years ago, which Kelly discusses briefly, but ultimately closes with “That’s probably pretty sad. I can’t think of anything really that sad right now.” However, when Kelly reaches the sad memory prompt with her friend, she is ready:

Kelly: I can think of a few. Yah, I think the biggest sad memory I remember is being mad at my mom when my stepdad came back ‘cause I don’t really like my stepdad, as I’m sure you know.

Friend: I am aware of that.

Kelly: Yah I kinda got mad at her for a while and that made me a little upset.

Friend: I see why that would happen.

Here is a space where Kelly can give voice to her experiences and receive validation of her emotions and her interpretation of the event. At home, her mother may have the power to define her reality, but the norm of maternal authority loosens its grip in other situations. Kelly does not have to like her stepdad and she is free to be angry about his return when she is on equal terms with her friend. This also suggests that some stories are not subject to the traditional scaffolding of the mother, putting a big responsibility on peers. Kelly’s friend does not engage in many forms of scaffolding, but she does clearly confirm Kelly’s point of view, an important part of the process of helping to connect past events to the self (e.g., Fivush et al., 2006), as well as to feeling intimate with others (McAdams, 1988; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

In another example of differing interpretations between friends and mothers, 16-year-old Danielle shares her happy memory with her skeptical mother.

Danielle: When you decided to tell me that we weren’t moving to Florida. I think that’s one of the best things you’ve ever told me.

Mother: Really?

Danielle: Yeah. Because it’s really important for me that we stay here. I think that’s one of the best things you’ve ever told me.

Mother: Really?

Danielle: Yeah. Because it’s really important for me that we stay here and I mean I don’t know if you now how important it is to me but it’s really...

Mother: That we stay in Washington?

Danielle: Bellingham, but Washington is good.

Mother: Yeah.

Danielle: But if we leave here, um, I’ll be crushed.

Mother: Yeah I mean you’re supposed to be talking about something that’s extremely...

Danielle: It was really happy when you said that um...

Mother: Alright okay give me this [instruction card] since you don’t know what to say.

Danielle: I just said it!

Mother: An important, specific, and extremely happy memory.

Danielle: Extreme, that was I was extremely happy I was ecstatic when you totally gave up on Florida.

Mother: Extremely happy.

Danielle: Extremely happy.

Mother: Extremely happy.

Danielle: When we got out of Jeff’s house…and we came here.

Mother: Okay that was an extremely

Danielle: Yeah I was glad...

Mother: Tell them.

This case is an example of negation – something that was relatively rare in our sample, but also a kind of scaffolding that was positively associated with age in the mother–adolescent conversations (see also McLean & Mansfield, 2011). As adolescents get older, their mothers may engage in more challenge, which may prompt adolescents to think more clearly about the relationship between past events and the self or, in this case, it may prompt defense of one’s stories (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). Danielle’s mother appears resistant to accepting that she could be extremely happy about this experience, such that she steers her daughter into sharing another memory that she feels is more suited to the prompt (see Fivush & Marin, 2007 for a discussion of power dynamics in conversations). Perhaps surprisingly, this exchange could potentially strengthen Danielle’s growing narrative identity if she is able to defend it (see Pasupathi & Rich, 2005), but this part of her narrative identity may also be strengthened because she has another context in which to explore this story – with a friend:

Danielle: And then another happy moment was when my mom told me that we weren’t going to move to Florida, because I don’t think she’ll ever really understand how important it is for me to stay in one place…and actually have something stable. Cause seeing as how we’ve moved, like almost everywhere...

Friend: Yeah.

Danielle: and never really being at the same school or something and it’s like, if I can’t have stability in my personal life, if I can have stability in my school or something outside of it, then that’s great. And to have friends in my personal life…but its like, I don’t know, it’s something that makes me feel …well, sane in a way.

In this conversation, Danielle is able to fully articulate the meaning behind the memory and connect it to her own values, beliefs, and narrative identity. It is interesting to note that Danielle’s friend is providing very little explicit scaffolding of the story, but she is providing Danielle with an empowering space for her to practice and perfect her own version of the past, the version her mother rejected. Indeed, given that the conversations with mothers occurred first, it is interesting to note that

maternal negations were associated with more meaning in the friend conversation, $r(14) = .47, p = .073$. By 16 years of age, teenagers have acquired the basic ability to make sense of their pasts (see Habermas et al., 2010; McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean et al., 2010), likely through the scaffolding of their mothers, but they may now need an arena in which they are empowered to use this new skill.

Results presented earlier in this study join the long line of previous research that supports the idea that mothers are critical to developing the ability to understand the self from past experiences. Maternal scaffolding in conversations ensures that the project of building a narrative identity can lead to a reflective and sophisticated understanding of the self. Yet as with all great works there comes a time when the scaffolding needs to be removed, because the project has been constructed in such a way that it can stand on its own. At that point, any scaffolding obscures rather than supports the work. This may also be the case as teenagers develop autonomy and voice. Thus, we focus on one final case of a 17-year-old boy, Adam, who may be growing out of the need for his mothers’ help in understanding the past. Throughout his conversation with both his friend and his mother, Adam makes it clear that he has a strongly gendered identity. He even says “I’m a tough guy,” suggesting that he has internalized norms about the male role. However, his mother does not seem to understand this, leading to an interesting dynamic during the telling of the sad memory of his dog dying at age 10.

Adam: An important specific and extremely sad memory…Um probably when Dino died. That was pretty rough...

Mother. It was.

Adam: I remember it – I just remember crying a lot

Mother: Yeah. Well you remember it was while you were sleeping?

Adam: Yeah. I remember you woke me up and it was kind of like surreal, just kind of like I didn’t really now what was going on for a while. That was probably number one, not sure – not really any other sad stuff going on. I was too young when Grandpa died.

Mother: Yeah.

Adam: Way too young. And way too young when Grandmother died.

Mother: (laughs) Yeah.

Adam: I wasn’t even around.

It is interesting to note that Adams feels that he needs to justify why his story is about his dog dying and not a human. It is possible that he feels he is in violation of a norm, feeling that talking of his pet seems childish.

Mother: Yeah… The night that uh what do you remember about the night that Dino died?

Adam: Well you slept with him, didn’t you?

Mother: Well, we all slept with him. We made arrangements for the Vet to come. Remember we all sat down and talked about…

Adam: Well I didn’t really talk.

Mother: Yeah, and we decided it was time that he was being so loyal that I think he was ready to go. So we decided to all sleep on the floor with him in our bedroom on Sunday night and…you and Dad had went to bed, it just so happened that the space that I was sleeping was right next to Dino and I stayed up to do the dishes.

Adam: mm hmm

Mother: and I remember it was after midnight I think and I came back there and you were asleep and Dad was asleep and I laid down next to Dino and he tried to move back a little bit you know his back was to me so that he could rest his head on my shoulder and maybe ten or fifteen seconds later he took his last breathe and he died. Yeah I always felt like he waited for me so, you know, that we’d all be together.

Adam: Yeah.

Mother: It was really kind of a life changing thing for me in some ways. And so I woke Dad up first and we uh we thought about what would be best for you – we didn’t want to wait until morning.

Adam: yeah

Mother: Because you always snuggled with him you know and I didn’t want you to experience him after he’d already quit breathing for too long. Do you remember us coming out to the back yard?

$^3$ No other maternal scaffolding variables were significantly related to meaning in the friend conversation, and the magnitudes of any of the remaining scaffolding variables were no where near the strength of this effect.
Adam: Yeah I remember that. It was kind of nice – I mean its not nice the he’s dead, but it’s nice that I haven’t had a lot of, my death experience has been with a dog.

Here again, Adam is distancing himself from the memory, making it clear that he does not think that a dog dying is the end of the world. His mother, however, makes the memory seem important and continues to take over the telling of the memory while Adam disengages. She talks extensively about what Adam did at the “funeral,” painting him as a heartbroken little boy. However, at this point Adam merely acknowledges what she says and adds nothing of his own, letting her appropriate the storying of this event. This is indicative of the more frequent scaffolding done by mothers compared to friends, but this may be a case in which the mother’s commandeering of the storytelling does not allow Adam to express his own story.

For her sad memory Adam’s mother chooses to talk about the death of her father, about which Adam is fairly adamant that he remembers next to nothing. However, when Adam is asked to share a sad memory with his friend, he chooses to tell the story about his grandfather’s death. While his mother explained that Adam had been the only one crying at the funeral, Adam tells his friend that everyone but him was crying.

Adam: But what I remember it was kind of hard for me to understand for me what was going on, because everyone was just in there in black and they were all crying, and it was an old ugly funeral type of home sorta thing.

Friend: Yeah, hmm.

Adam: So, its not a happy atmosphere. And it was just really hard to understand. And um it was just...

Friend: Mmhm.

Adam: I don’t remember a lot of it, but from what I do, it’s just really strong images, and...

Friend: Yeah.

Adam: Feelings associated with it. But, I can still remember pretty well. Definitely not a happy memory, to say the least.

Friend: Well I’ve never had a close family member die…really.

Adam: I wouldn’t recommend it.

With his mother, Adam noted that he was lucky his sad memory was of a dog, however, with his friend he changes his story perhaps to fit the norm for sad memories – human death. Furthermore, he chooses an event he barely remembers, perhaps so he can demonstrate less emotional vulnerability to fit with his gendered identity (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). He doesn’t disclose specific emotions, but rather describes the memory as “not happy.” Further, like the other friends we have seen, Adam’s friend engages in some confirmations, but not much else. But perhaps this lack of explicit and involved scaffolding that we see in Adam’s and Danielle’s friend conversations is what allows them to more freely explore their identities. Adam and Danielle, who were among the oldest adolescents in the sub-sample, appear to have clear understandings of the identities they are trying to convey, and thus may only require the confirmation of their friends to successfully tell their stories.

However, the skills at narration come from somewhere, and it is unlikely that Adam would be so adept at storying the past if it weren’t for the scaffolding of his mother. In talking about his happy memory, Adam’s mother provides expert scaffolding.

Adam: Um, important, specific and extremely happy memory. Probably the Mexico, the trip in 8th grade to Mexico.

Mother: Huh

Adam: That trip was amazing cause I’d never really been anywhere like that before you know. Like I’ve been to Greece but, I dunno it was really cool just being out, unsupported, by ourselves. It was hot, the water was warm. It was just, just, ya know, almost could say paradise.

Mother: Mm hm

Adam: Minus the palm trees though. There were a few cactuses but no palm trees. I definitely wanna go back some day. It’s pretty sweet. Be more fun in a sailboat though. Kayaking was too much work.

Mother: (laughs) Did you, do you think some of the happy memory part was because of who you were with?

Adam: Yeah. That definitely had something to do with it.

Mother: Did it feel, did it feel like it was celebrating the end of something pretty important to you?

Adam: That didn’t feel like the end so much. It was just… I don’t know, it didn’t feel like the end, it was just a good time. It was really fun. But no it wasn’t an end.

Mother: Mm hmm

Adam: It feels more like just a vacation. It was super laid back.
Mother: Kinda freedom?

Adam: I wouldn’t say freedom, but just I don’t know it was a pretty relaxing time, so yeah.

Here, Adam’s mother asks probing questions that encourage Adam to think about his experience. She is encouraging him to take a bigger picture (“the end of something”) as well as encouraging reflection on who he was with and new found freedom – two developmentally important topics for a 17-year-old. Interestingly, in this conversation Adam is resistant to her effort to help him find more meaning in the experience, and emphasizes that it was just a good time. Perhaps this resistance to maternal scaffolding in the stories of older adolescents helps to explain why, in our quantitative results, the higher prevalence of maternal scaffolding behaviors does not translate into more meaning being conveyed to mothers as compared to friends. Yet despite his resistance, Adam returns to this memory as his choice for an important experience.

Adam: A specific personal memory is Mexico again. It was from being out there kayaking, being outside for so long kind of gave me an idea partially about what I want to do.

Mother: Mm hmm

Adam: You know just being out there, outside, that’s a part of just hanging out and relaxing, you know, I think that was part of, that trip definitely taught me partially about... I’m not going to say something cheesy about who I am, but it kind of gave me ideas about who I want to be.

Mother: uh huh, mm hmm

Adam: You could say, uh, it gave me an idea that I want to do something outside. I had ideas before, but that really kinda helped solidify them, gave me ideas.

Mother: mm hmm

Adam: I’d say that would be the most specific one that says something about me as a person.

Mother: Those are both good, Adam. One of them kind of speaks to a quality you want to have, you know, and one speaks to kind of what you want to do.

Perhaps Adam is again feeling the pressure to act more masculine, and resists talking about the emotion-laden process of self-discovery. His mother respects this and does not encourage as much elaboration, although she does deftly provide support and offer some summary scaffolding. However, what makes this story particularly interesting is how Adam then recounts it to his friend.

Adam: Yeah. Ahh an important distinctive personal memory. Probably...um, 8th grade year, probably, actually. Because we spent a lot of time outside, what with Mezama and with the Mexico trip.

Friend: Oh yeah.

Adam: really kind of...I’m a pro at this.

Friend: Yeah (laughs). I’m really bad at this.

Adam: Yeah whatever. And it really, it kinda started to show me that I really liked being outside a lot more than I’ve ever thought of. Like I never really thought about what it meant for me to be outside and active all the time. And...those trips really kind of showed me that and it kinda showed me that I didn’t want to spend my life inside. I didn’t want to have...I was kind of already to the point where I realized I would never be able to have an office job, I’d never be able to sit at a computer screen from 9 to 5. I needed to be...I still think this, I need to be outside. And it was kind of a realization for me. And that memory, that memory, those two trips...really showed me that I’m an outdoorsy kind of person. I don’t want to sound too arrogant here...

Friend: Yeah, that’s you!

Adam: I’m outdoorsy! ...kind of showed me what I wanted to be, what image I wanted to have of myself...

Friend: That’s good.

Adam: It just really showed me things about myself that I’d never been truly aware of.

Here, Adam presents a rich interpretation of the event and what it means for who he is as a person. It is interesting that Adam puts a different spin on the story, framing his choice as a rejection of traditional capitalist society. He taps into the cultural metaphor of the “9 to 5 office job,” and thus he relates his experience not only to who he is as a person, but also how he fits in to the larger picture of society. This different take on the story elucidates an important point about our null finding when comparing the amount of meaning in stories told to friends and mothers. In some cases, the different conversation spaces appear to encourage practice at separate, unique meanings, allowing both to equally contribute to the shaping of a rich, context-sensitive self. Adam’s friend, again, mainly provides supportive confirmations. But he does provide a space that helps Adam to work out his relationship with these external, societal expectations. And because his friend must also figure out how
he plans to fit in to society, he may be a more fitting conversation partner than a mother. It appears that Adam may owe his developed sense of self to the scaffolding of his mother, but it may also be that Adam makes sense of that self as a member of society, with its expectations, judgments, and norms, through conversations with his friends.

Telling a story within one’s family makes it much more likely that speaker and audience share common history, values, and emotions. Families have their own logic, norms, and myths. However, if part of adolescence involves developing a story that can be told outside of the family circle, it requires acquisition of an understanding of societal norms, as they will be the new standard for behavior outside of the family. Friends may play a critical role in this shift, providing a testing ground for how teenagers voice their identities. Friends can gently guide one another toward their age-specific norms in a way that mothers cannot (or perhaps choose not to) do.

Conclusions and future directions

It is clear that friends provide less explicit scaffolding behavior in conversations about the past than do mothers. We suggest that this is partly because mothers, compared to friends, have a greater investment in the personal development of their children, greater expertise at this practice, and greater knowledge of their child’s life history (Habermas et al., 2010). Further, the work of past event conversations with friends may be more about getting to know each other, rather than the scaffolding each other’s identities. Indeed, much developmental research has found that intimacy is developing in adolescence (e.g., Rice & Mulkeen, 1995; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Thus, adolescent friendships may need to deepen before they become a context for focused narrative identity work, and the requisite skills necessary for scaffolding may also be developing during this period. However, friends do appear to be doing a different kind of scaffolding than mothers, which is more focused on self-presentational aspects of identity, and they also provide a safe arena for identity exploration away from mothers.

We hope that these data inspire researchers to further investigate the dynamics of intimacy and narrative identity development in peer conversation contexts. One possibility is that as friendships deepen and intimacy develops, friends become more active scaffolders of narrative identity. It is also possible that narrative identity development is co-occurring with intimacy development, such that these conversations are contexts in which friends are able to deepen their relationships and understand each other and themselves in new ways. Indeed, while we have been analyzing the adolescent’s narratives, we view these conversations as a reciprocal processes in which both teller and listener mutually influence each other. Of course, the length and quality of friendships is important in understanding the co-development of intimacy and identity processes.

We also expect that these conversations may shift for adolescent–mother pairs as well. For example, in a separate analysis of mother’s stories told to their teens, we saw that the degree to which mothers express personal vulnerability to their adolescents was positively associated with adolescent age, as well as with the degree to which the adolescent expresses vulnerability, suggesting mutual reciprocity in disclosure (McLean & Morrison-Cohen, submitted for publication). Indeed, in discussing the death of their family dog, Adam’s mother discloses her own feelings about the “life-changing” nature of that event. Adam is 17, and we suggest that mothers may not disclose as much, or in the same way, about their own lives to younger children who may be less well-equipped, emotionally and psychologically, to participate in such conversations (McLean & Morrison-Cohen, submitted for publication). Thus, we expect that the types of conversations in which adolescents engage will be different with relationship length and age, for both mothers and friends.

We also hope that longitudinal designs facilitate the examination of the dynamics of friend and maternal scaffolding over time. While both friend and mother scaffolding behavior predicted meaning-making processes in the current study, there were some differences in the types of scaffolding that were important, though we take these results with caution as specific scaffolding variables were intercorrelated. First, the more that both mothers and friends negated the target adolescent’s point of view, the more meaning was made. Challenge from audiences may be an important component of finding one’s voice in the storytelling process. However, mothers’ scaffolding behavior was only related to meaning when examining the composite positive response variable, suggesting that general good listening is important for mothers in adolescence. Interestingly, for friends it was elaborative questions and new interpretations that predicted meaning in the target adolescent. In a previous investigation of the mother conversations in this sample we found that mother’s scaffolding behavior was less predictive of adolescents’ meaning-making as they got older (see also McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Coupled with this previous examination, the current study suggests that friends may be taking on some of the scaffolding responsibilities that mothers had. Longitudinal designs will allow researchers to investigate these interpretations.

Further, while our research suggests that friends may be eclipsing mother’s influence on adolescents’ meaning-making, it may be erroneous to assume this trend continues through young adulthood. Our qualitative analysis suggests that the egalitarian nature of friendships is key to creating a space where adolescents can explore their self-meanings in relation to societal expectations. As adolescents move into young adulthood and the parent–child relationship becomes more egalitarian, this may again shift the mother’s role in scaffolding behavior. Additionally, as young adults move toward creating families of their own, their mothers may be a good source of information about the norms and expectations surrounding adult life.

Finally, although friends are clearly participating as engaged listeners, and like mothers, are asking questions and making supportive comments, perhaps it is inaccurate to refer to their responses as “scaffolding.” While we coded typical scaffolding behaviors based on the early childhood literature, our qualitative analyses showed that friends were not guiding the conversation like an expert. Unlike mothers, who are both highly invested in and somewhat responsible for their child’s
successful narrative identity development, peers are in a more likely position to judge and possibly reject the adolescent’s story. Therefore, before broadcasting one’s stories to larger social networks, testing stories with friends, those people who have already affirmed their affinity for the speaker, may allow the adolescent to learn how others may interpret (or misinterpret) their self stories, without risking rejection of their self. If this is the case, the value of listener’s response is not so much in how it makes the speaker think about his or her own story and its personal meaning, but rather in how it enables the speaker to understand how the story will interact with the relevant norms and expectations (see also Bamberg, 2004).

In concluding we note our limitations, which are primarily in our sample demographics and size. We were underpowered to detect some differences, which may have resulted in null findings in the current study, such as the finding that mean-making did not differ between audiences. We also did not find gender differences in the current study, however, previous research has shown that there are differences in the processes in boys’ and girls’ friendships in adolescence (e.g., Camarena, Sarigiana, & Petersen, 1990) and in narrative processes in adolescence (e.g., Bohanek et al., 2008; McLean & Breen, 2009), which may mean that boys and girls scaffold each other in different ways. Thus, our sample size and procedure precluded examining gender in more complex ways, as well as variables, such as relationship quality, length of friendship, and order effects of the mother conversation preceding the friend conversation. In terms of demographics, this was a self-selected sample, and we may be missing an important portion of the population who do not participate in such studies for a variety of reasons. Our sample was predominantly Caucasian with well-educated mothers. We do not yet know what these processes may look like in different groups, but we suspect that socio-economic status, in particular, will be important to investigate as emerging data suggest that the more challenging life events experienced by people at lower levels of socio-economic status, may make positive and growth promoting meaning more difficult (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McLean, Wood, & Breen, submitted for publication). Finally, we note that the mean levels for meaning were quite low. This could indicate that explicit meaning-making may be relatively rare for adolescents, though this is not necessarily the case in written assessments (see Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; McLean et al., 2010). It is also possible that nature of conversations and written assessments shifts the degree to which meaning is communicated (see Syed & Juan, submitted for publication).

In summary, our results show that friends are engaging in less skilled scaffolding of narrative identity development than mothers, however, developmentally important processes still appear to be unfolding in friend conversations. Friends encourage one another to consider their stories from an external perspective, helping to make those narratives, and the identities they portray, more likely to be accepted by others. Given that friends’ scaffolding and meaning-making abilities grow in parallel with one another, friends may first use stories as a way of developing intimate relationships that later become fruitful grounds for exploring identities. Thus, friends and mothers are unique, but complementary, audiences with whom adolescents share their pasts and come to understand who they are as individuals and in relation to others.

Acknowledgments
We thank the Narrative Lab at Western Washington University for data collection, transcription, and coding, Western Washington University for an internal summer grant to the first author and funds for participant payment, and Rebecca Goodvin, Trisha Weeks, Avril Thorne, Lauren Shapiro, and Paul Nelson for critiques on an earlier version of this paper. Finally, we thank the families for offering their time to our project.

References


