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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine storytelling of ethnicity-related events among college-going, emerging adults. A total of 280 ethnically diverse participants recounted a memory about a time in which they told a previously reported, ethnicity-related story to others. Analysis centered on the function of the telling and on to whom the story was told. The findings indicated that stories were most often told to share experiences with others, followed by for emotion regulation and validation, and that friends were the most frequent audience. The pattern of story content, telling function, and audience suggests that stories are differentially channeled to various audiences for different purposes. Furthermore, 40% of all stories had never been told to others, suggesting continued barriers in the ability to talk to others about ethnicity-related experiences in the United States.

Keywords

ethnicity, storytelling, college, narratives, memories

Stories are a part of everyday life. They are the thread with which we weave an integrated, coherent sense of self, and thus serve as a representation of our

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identities (McAdams, 2001). From this narrative perspective, emerging adulthood is a key period for identity development, facilitated by advances in cognitive abilities and expanding social milieus that allow individuals to construct complex notions of the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; see also Arnett, 2006; Erikson, 1968). While there has been substantial inquiry into the form and content of narratives, there has been relatively less research on storytelling, or how individuals tell their stories to others (Thorne & Nam, 2009). This is particularly the case for ethnicity-related stories, despite the fact that ethnic identity is an important component of identity development for young people (Pahl & Way, 2006; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to address this gap by examining storytelling of ethnicity-related events among college-going, emerging adults.

Storytelling as a Vehicle for Identity Development

McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) outlined a process model of self-development, in which individuals' identities are constructed, maintained, and revised by telling stories to others. Their model builds on a growing literature highlighting how the life story is actively coconstructed with others, in part through the process of storytelling (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Bruner, 1990; Thorne, 2000; see also Schachter & Ventura, 2008). In particular, McLean et al. suggest that storytelling is the mechanism through which individuals' life experiences are integrated into the self. This proposal has garnered some empirical support, in that telling stories to others has been linked to a greater degree of personal insight (McLean, 2005). However, the focus on storytelling is relatively recent, with the majority of narrative-based research focusing on the content of a story irrespective of the context in which it is told (see Thorne & Nam, 2009). The research that has been conducted has pertained to how parents engage in storytelling processes with their young children (e.g., Bohanek et al., 2006; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). Thus, the hows and whys of storytelling in older populations, such as emerging adults, are not well understood.

At the heart of the McLean et al. (2007) process model is what they called situated stories. A *situated story* is a narrative that "is created within a specific situation, by particular individuals, for particular audiences, and to fulfill particular goals" (p. 262). These parameters of a situated story are a useful roadmap for identity research, as they suggest that to whom individuals tell their stories and for what purpose are important questions for understanding individuals' identity development. The analysis in the present study is

situated within this framework, as described in more detail below. Following frequent definitions used in the field, *stories* and *narratives* refer to the form and structure of the memories recounted by the participants, and *storytelling* is the process through which individuals share their stories with others (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005; McLean et al., 2007).

The Context of Storytelling: The Intersection of Ethnicity and Academics

Although a great deal of narrative research has been conducted with college students, few researchers have considered the unique context that college students inhabit in their study design and analysis. Particularly for youth who attend residential colleges, leaving home and transitioning to college can be a disruptive experience that prompts a reconsideration of their identities and provides fodder for good stories to be told to others (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). In terms of ethnicity, research has demonstrated that over time emerging adults who attend college become more facile in being able to discuss ethnicity-related issues and increasingly connect their ethnicity to their life experiences (Azmitia et al., 2008; Hurtado, 2003; Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007). Thus, the college years appear to be a period in which young people are wrestling with ethnicity-related issues.

The extant narrative research has been predominantly conducted with U.S. college students of White ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, very little is known about the narratives of American ethnic minorities. Recent research on ethnicity-related narratives among ethnically diverse college students has revealed a rich set of experiences that serve as fertile ground for identity development, including becoming aware of differences between and within ethnic groups and experiencing various forms of discrimination (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010). In conducting this earlier work on students' ethnicity-related narratives, the importance of the immediate college environment became quite clear (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Many of the stories the participants told pertained to experiences in the classroom, on campus, or in interactions with other students. However, other stories were set in very early childhood or the high school years, thereby creating vast diversity in the context of the memories. Following McLean et al.'s (2007) suggestion that storytelling is situational and context dependent, inquires into storytelling processes may be best served by focusing in on a particular domain. The prior research on ethnicity-related stories among college students suggested that a wise focus for the content of the stories would be ethnicity-related experiences

in the academic domain. Thus, in the present study, participants were asked to recount a memory about a time they became aware of their ethnicity within their academic experiences, and subsequently describe a time that they shared that memory with someone else (described in more detail in the Method section). The focus of the present analysis is on the latter component—the time that they shared the memory—and how the sharing was contoured by why the story was told, who told the story, and to whom they told it.

Storytelling Dynamics: Why, Who, and to Whom?

Researchers have begun to explore the myriad reasons for why individuals tell their stories to others (Alea & Bluck, 2003). In a study of self-defining memory telling, McLean (2005) found that the most prevalent reason for telling the story to others, or telling function, was for the purposes of either self-explanation or entertainment. Importantly, telling for self-explanation was related to a higher degree of meaning making, indicating that some telling functions may have more implications for identities than others (see also Pasupathi, 2007). Other less frequent functions included validation, intimacy, meaning seeking, emotion regulation, and to share one's experiences. Thus, there are a variety of different reasons why people tell their stories to others, and these different functions play different roles for identity development. McLean (2005) conducted qualitative analysis of how the telling functions varied by the content of the story, but did not provide evidence for a clear pattern. In sum, how telling functions may be associated with different narrative content is not well understood.

In terms of who is telling the stories, it is important to appreciate that college-going, emerging adults are a diverse lot, and these elements of diversity are valuable to explore when investigating storytelling of ethnicity-related experiences. Although storytelling has not been examined, prior research on ethnicity-related narratives has demonstrated differences in the content of stories for ethnic minority versus White students (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). The differences, however, were not dramatic and do not necessarily imply that there will be ethnic differences in how students talk to others about their ethnicity-related experiences. Conversely, research on ethnic-racial socialization has firmly documented that ethnic minority parents communicate messages about ethnicity and race more often than do White parents (Hughes et al., 2006). This research relies heavily on rating-scale measures that include a wide variety of content, such as participating in cultural customs and decorations in the home, so the degree of ethnicity-related talk within families is not known.

In addition to ethnicity as an individual moderator, students' academic majors may serve as a contextual moderator that can facilitate or constrain the storytelling of ethnicity-related events. Although seldom considered in the research literature, majors can be thought of as microcontexts that students inhabit, as they dictate what classes they take, what others students they interact with, and what part of campus they spend time in (Syed, 2010a). Indeed, students majoring in social sciences or humanities fields have demonstrated greater awareness of their ethnicities and tend to view more connections between their ethnic identities and major than do students in engineering and science majors (Syed, 2010a). Accordingly, opportunities for sharing experiences around ethnicity may be contoured by the students' chosen major.

An additional component to storytelling is who the teller chooses to tell the story to. Developmentally, late adolescents and emerging adults begin to shift their audience for stories from their family to their friends (McLean, 2005). This shift is in concert with the changing nature of social support during this period in the United States, as young people begin to rely on their friends relatively more than family (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Thus, I expect to see a similar pattern in the present study. The degree to which the audience for stories varies in accordance with the content of the story, however, is less well understood. Research on positioning, or how individuals dynamically locate their selves within an interpersonal context, has been influential in documenting the contextual nature of storytelling (Bamberg, 1997). Different interactional contexts call for different positioning of the self in light of the teller's current identity goals, and thus individuals can provide different representations of the self in different contexts. Although illuminative of the contextual nature of storytelling, this research is largely idiographic, providing an analysis of one or two brief social interactions (e.g., Bamberg, 2004). As a result, there is little systematic research on patterns of how individuals select audiences across varieties of stories.

Stories Told and Untold: The Role of Emotionality

Researchers have increasingly become interested in stories that have not been told to others, or untold stories (e.g., Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009). Past studies have found that approximately 90% of self-defining memories have been told to others (McLean, 2005; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). That Self-defining memories have been told to others with

such high frequency should not be a surprise, as these are memories that are profoundly important to who the teller is, not to mention the fact that the definition of self-defining memory sometimes encourages respondents to report a previously told memory (Singer & Moffitt, 1991-1992). However, when moving away from self-defining memories toward more “everyday events”—those occurrences that are not self-defining in nature but are remembered nonetheless—the rates of telling are relatively lower (Pasupathi et al., 2009). This point may be particularly important when one is interested in domain-specific memories, such as ethnicity-related stories. That is, requesting self-defining memories for a particular domain, such as ethnicity, is potentially problematic because many individuals do not define themselves in terms of their ethnicity, and thus would have no such story. Given the focus on ethnicity-related events in the present study, I therefore examined everyday stories rather than the self-defining memories that are widely represented in the literature.

Research has shown that whether a story is shared with others seems to be guided by the emotionality of the event (Pals, 2006; Singer, 2004). Negative life experiences are commonly told to others and can frequently take on positive meanings over time as a result of seeking meaning of the event from others and enacting successful coping strategies (McAdams, 2006; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Phillipot, 1998; Thorne, 2000). Across three studies researchers found strong evidence that stories imbued with negative emotions were more likely to be told to others than emotionally positive stories, leading to the conclusion that, “the primary factor in what we do and do not tell seems to be emotionality” (Pasupathi et al., 2009, p. 114). Accordingly, in the present study I hypothesized that stories that are relatively more emotionally negative would be more likely to be told to others.

The Present Study

In sum, storytelling is an important aspect of the identity-development process and is contextualized by why the story is being told (telling function), who is telling the story (ethnicity, major), to whom the story is told (e.g., parents, friends), and the emotionality of the story. However, little is known about how young people talk about ethnicity-related stories. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine storytelling of ethnicity-related events in the academic domain among emerging adults attending college. The analysis in the current study was driven by four exploratory research questions:

Research Question 1: What telling functions are apparent in the telling narratives of ethnicity-related experiences?

Research Question 2: Are different types of stories told to different audiences?

Research Question 3: Are certain types of ethnicity-related stories more likely to be told than others? Past research suggests that emotionally negative stories will be more likely to be told.

Research Question 4: How are the preceding moderated by ethnicity, college major, and year in school?

Method

Participants

A total of 280 college students attending a public university in California participated in the study. However 43 participants were removed due to incomplete data or due to very small number of ethnic representation (i.e., $n = 3$ African American students, and $n = 6$ Arabic/Middle Eastern students). This left a sample of 237 students who were included in all analyses (68% women; mean age = 19.06, $SD = 2.07$, Range = 18-30; 90% U.S. born). Ethnicity was categorized into four pan-ethnic categories based on participants' response to the open-ended question: "What ethnic group(s) do you identify with being a member of (you may list as many as you wish)?" The ethnic distribution was White (53%), mixed ethnic (20%), Asian American (15%), and Latino (11%). Socioeconomic status (SES) of the participants was assessed using the Hollingshead (1957) two-factor index. Scores on the Hollingshead spanned the full range of the scale, 1-5, with a mean of 3.48, which is just above the midpoint, and a standard deviation of 0.98.

The participants varied in their year in college, with 42% first years, 18% second, 22% third, and 18% fourth or more. For all analyses the first and second years were combined and the third years and fourth or more were combined to create an early college/late college dichotomous variable. This decision is supported by past research demonstrating an increase in the second half of college in both levels of ethnic identity and the degree of sophistication in students' reflections on ethnicity (Azmitia et al., 2008; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Students' majors were classified into the five divisions at the university: social science, humanities, science, engineering, and arts. These divisions were then clustered into three categories based on the likelihood

that the course material would address ethnicity-related issues, with social science/humanities the most likely science/engineering the least likely, and arts somewhere in between (Syed, 2010a). The vast majority of students were majoring or considering a major in the social sciences or humanities (79%), with 12% in science/engineering and 9% in the arts. Comparing the sample with the university as a whole (60% social sciences/humanities, 27% science/engineering, and 13% arts) indicated that students from social science/humanities majors were overrepresented in the sample. Year in college and major did not covary, and students' ethnicity was not systematically related to year in college or major.

Procedure

Students were recruited to participate in this study in two ways. Some participants signed up for the study through the psychology department's research pool, which listed the study as College Experiences Study. The description of the study indicated that they would be asked questions about their academic experiences and ethnicity, and stressed that students from all ethnic backgrounds could participate. In order to recruit a more diverse group of students with respect to major and year in school, the study was also advertised via flyers on campus, online postings, and e-mails sent out to various campus-based listservs. Participants recruited through the research pool received course credit, whereas the participants recruited through the other advertising methods were paid US\$10 and entered into a drawing to receive an iPod or movie tickets.

After scheduling a convenient time, participants came to a psychology lab on campus to participate in the study. After completing the consent form they were given a brief description of the survey. A research assistant then sat them down at a computer to show them how to navigate the survey, which was hosted online through <http://www.surveymonkey.com>. The survey was completed individually, with no other participants in the room. A research assistant was occasionally in the same room as the participant, but always sat on the other side of the room and did not face the computer. The survey questions presented in this article were embedded in a larger study on students' academic experiences and ethnic identity that included many open-ended questions pertaining to participants' academic major, views on their ethnicity, as well as quantitative measures on ethnic identity, ego identity, and well-being. The narrative portion of the survey analyzed in the present study was in the middle of the survey. This placement was chosen so that the participants would be sufficiently "warmed up" to the survey but not so fatigued

that they would provide thin responses. The entire survey took approximately 50-60 minutes to complete (range: 20-90 minutes), and was completely computer guided, with the research assistant nearby only to answer any questions that arose.

Measures

Narrative episodes. The narrative component of the study was adapted from previous work on ethnicity-related narratives (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010) that was itself adapted from the Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire (Singer & Moffitt, 1991-1992). Rather than being asked for a self-defining memory, participants were asked to “describe a memory about a particular time, either positive or negative, when you felt your race/ethnicity played a role with your academic major or in your classroom experiences.” In addition to describing the memory in as much detail as they could recall, the respondents were asked the following open-ended questions: (a) When did the event occur? (b) How did you react to this event? (c) What did you do to handle, resolve, or otherwise make sense of this event? (d) How did you feel when this event occurred? and (e) Did this event affect what you think about or how you view your own ethnicity or ethnicity in general? Also included were two quantitative items pertaining to the emotional valence of the memory: “In general, how would you characterize your feelings about this event at the time that it occurred?” and “In general, how would you characterize your feelings about this event right now?” Responses to these two questions were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *very negative* to 5 = *very positive*, with 3 = *neither negative nor positive*. This narrative will henceforth be referred to as the *event narrative*.

The event narratives were reliably coded ($\kappa = .92$, $\Delta = .88$) as having one of six main themes as reported in Syed (2010b): learning about culture, sharing culture, experience of prejudice, difficult dialogues, awareness of diversity, and support and connection. Learning about culture stories included memories in which tellers learned something about ethnicity, race, or culture¹. This learning could be about either their culture or others' culture. Sharing culture stories concerned the active sharing of some aspect of the teller's culture. It could be through a class project or presentation, performance, contributing to class discussion, or some other form or cultural sharing in an academic setting. Experience of prejudice included any experiences of prejudice, racism, discrimination, or oppression, such as verbal comments (e.g., derogatory statements), feelings of isolation, or unfair

Table 1. Narrative Macro- and Microthemes

Macrotheme	Microtheme
Learning about culture	Learning about own culture Learning about others' culture Learning about White privilege
Sharing culture	Contributing to discussion Miscellaneous sharing
Experience of prejudice	Racist or stereotypic remarks Behavioral discrimination Social exclusion/teasing Identity denial Institutional racism Blamed for societal racism
Difficult dialogues	Nature of privilege/who can speak Constrained discussion Too much emphasis on ethnicity Disagreements on racial politics
Awareness of diversity	Feelings of diversity Lack of diversity Group-based underrepresentation
Support and connection	Feeling supported Feelings of belongingness and connection

treatment based on race or ethnicity. Difficult dialogues stories represent clashing views on race, ethnicity, and/or culture. These stories typically involved some level of disagreement about ethnicity-related issues via discourse, exchange of ideas, or multiple perspectives on an issue. Awareness of diversity stories included any experiences about race- or ethnic-based disparities or the relative representation of particular groups. Lastly, support and connection stories included memories about feelings of support, connection, or belongingness to the student's major or the university in general. Each of these six macrothemes was further analyzed for microthemes, which are listed in Table 1.

Following the event narrative, participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to whether they had ever told the story to anyone else, as adapted from Thorne and McLean (2003). They were asked how many people they had shared the event with and then prompted to share a specific memory of the telling episode including who they told, when the telling occurred, and specific details of the telling, including why it was told and

how the listener(s) reacted. This narrative will be referred to as the *telling narrative*.

Based on past research, the telling narratives were coded for their apparent function, or purpose, that the telling seemed to serve (McLean, 2005). The narratives were coded for the functions identified by McLean (2005), but were also explored for the possibility of previously unidentified functions, although none were found. The 10 possible functions were to share experiences/life with others, validation, generativity (e.g., educate others), entertainment, intimacy, self-explanation, emotion regulation, meaning seeking, mutual reminiscence, and was asked. The narratives were coded by the author with 20% of narratives being coded by a trained reliability coder. Reliability was assessed using both Cohen's Kappa and Delta (Martín Andrés & Femia Marzo, 2004). Telling functions were considered mutually exclusive, as the early in-depth analyses indicated that the co-occurrence of functions within a single narrative was rare. Reliability was excellent ($\kappa = .97, \Delta = .90$). Detailed analysis of the event narratives have been conducted elsewhere (Syed, 2010b). The focus of the present study is on the telling narratives. However, both the main theme and reported emotionality of the event narratives were included in the present analysis to contextualize the telling narrative.

Results

The Results section is organized in two main sections: First is an analysis of the stories that were reported as being told to others (60% of stories), followed by a comparison of stories told with stories that had never been told (40%). The analyses presented in the first section reported below pertain only to the 60% of the stories that were reported as being told.

Stories Told: Analysis of the Narratives Told to Others

Descriptives of stories told. Of the 10 possible telling functions 3 accounted for the majority of functions found in the telling-narrative data (68% of stories told): share experiences (40%), validation (14%), and emotion regulation (14%). The remaining functions were invoked infrequently: meaning seeking (7%), self-explanation (6%), entertainment (6%), mutual reminiscence (6%), generativity (3%), was asked (1%), and intimacy (1%).

In terms of who the listener was in the telling narrative, the majority of stories told were to friends (40%), followed by parents (21%), roommates (11%), both friends and family (8%), partners (7%) classmates (6%), other family (4%), professors/teaching assistants (2%), and other (1%). The number

Table 2. Variations in Audience for Telling Narratives by Theme and Year in School

	Audience		
	Friends	Parents	Roommates
Theme			
Learning about culture	-1.2	2.6	-1.6
Sharing culture	-1.4	1.7	-0.2
Experience of prejudice	2.3	-3.2	0.8
Difficult dialogues	-0.1	-0.8	1.2
Awareness of diversity	-0.6	1.1	-0.5
Year in school			
First or second	-2.9	2.1	1.4
Third or later	2.9	-2.1	-1.4

Note: Values are adjusted standardized residuals, which can be interpreted like z scores. Positive values represent a frequently occurring association, negative values represent an infrequently occurring association, and values close to zero indicate no association.

of different people to whom the teller reported telling the story varied quite a bit. Of those who told their stories, 68% were told to between 1–9 people, with a median of 3 people and mode of 2. The remaining 32% of stories were reported to more than 10 people, with an upper limit of 50.

Variations in telling functions. The telling functions were then examined for variations by narrative theme, ethnicity, year in school, and major. Due to sample size constraints imposed by the infrequency of many of the telling functions, the following analyses examine only the three most prevalent functions: share experiences, validation, and emotion regulation. Comparing these three functions to the main themes of the event narratives indicated significant variation, $\chi^2(8)$, 14.99, $p = .05$, $v = .30$. The telling of learning about culture stories was most often for the purposes of sharing experiences, difficult dialogues stories were slightly more often told for validation, and experience of prejudice stories were told for emotion regulation. There were no differences in telling function by ethnicity, year in school, or major.

Lastly, variations in to whom the story was told were examined by telling function, theme, ethnicity, year in school, and major. For these analyses only the three most frequently occurring audiences were considered (friends, parents, and roommates). There were significant differences in to whom the story was told by narrative theme, $\chi^2(8)$, 17.36, $p = .03$, $v = .32$ (Table 2). Experience of prejudice stories were more likely to be told to friends, whereas learning about culture and sharing culture stories were more likely to be told

to parents. There were also significant differences by year in school, $\chi^2(2)$, 8.46, $p = .02$, $v = .31$ (Table 2). Older students were more likely to tell friends and younger students more likely to tell parents. There were no significant differences by telling function, ethnicity, or major.

Taken together, the results of the telling-narrative analyses suggest specific patterns based on the type of story, to whom it is told, and for what reason. The following narrative sequences illustrate two of these patterns. The first sequence is of an experience of prejudice told to peers for the purpose of emotion regulation. It was told by a second-year, self-identified Asian female:

It was in an education class. Most of the students were Latinos and Mexican. We were talking about high school experiences and someone came up with a story about how they were stuck in Koreatown and talking about how Asian people were. She just saw the Asians as if they are all bad. I could not believe what she was saying. (Event narrative)

I felt so bad that I needed to talk to someone about it. My friends were shocked at what I was saying. (Telling narrative)

The next sequence illustrates the finding that learning about culture stories were told to parents to share their life experiences. It was told by a third-year, self-identified Mexican and Filipino female:

While in [my] Immigration and Social Justice class we watched videos such as *El Norte*. The film was about a brother and a sister who travel from Guatemala to the United States for a better life. Both had visions of the United States as a beautiful country, where even the poor are rich and there are many opportunities. It reminded me of my parents who are both immigrants. They informed me that they came here to make a better life for themselves as well as their families. They constantly describe to us the hardships they must go through in their native countries. I realized that my race is very hardworking because they risk their lives to travel here. (Event narrative)

I regularly talk to my mother on a weekly basis about my classes and what not. I told her about the movie. She said that she heard about it and has been meaning to watch the movie. I told her that I really wanted to work with immigrants and try to help them assimilate into the American culture yet not to completely neglect their native culture.

She was supportive and said that would be a really good and helpful career. (Telling narrative)

Untold Stories: Comparisons Between Disclosed and Undisclosed Narratives

The preceding analyses were based on the stories that were actually told, which was only 60% of the stories, meaning that 40% of the events narrated by participants were reported as never being told to another person. While the preceding analyses examined why a story was told, the following analyses compare told and untold stories to explore variations in whether the story was told, with a focus on the role of emotionality for whether the story was told.

Variations in untold stories. There were significant ethnic differences in whether the story was told, $\chi^2(3) 7.96, p = .05, \nu = .20$. Latino students were more likely to tell their stories whereas mixed-ethnic students were least likely to tell their stories. There were no variations in telling by year in school or major.

The next analysis examined whether telling was associated with the theme of the story. Comparisons of whether told and untold stories varied by main theme of the event narrative revealed a significant difference, $\chi^2(4), 9.41, p = .05, \nu = .21$. Awareness of diversity stories were the least likely to be told, whereas experience of prejudice, difficult dialogues, and sharing culture stories were slightly more likely to be told. For example, the following awareness of diversity narrative from a first-year, self-identified Asian American female was reported as untold:

I remember a week ago in lecture, my teacher asked all Black people to raise their hands and there was a few. Then came the American Indians and there was one and then my teacher said Asians and once again there was only a few. There was more Asians in that class than all other ethnic minorities but compared to the Whites that were in that class, we were nothing. She asked us for this because it related to our lecture at that time. I was very shocked because I grew up in a mainly Asian society and both my high school and my middle and elementary school was mainly Asian. I felt outnumbered and a little bit intimidated for a second. I realized that outside [big city], much of the population is White and though there are parts of our country that are more diverse than others, it is still mainly White. (Event narrative)

Looking within each macrotheme at variations in telling at the microtheme level did not indicate that this finding was driven by particular microthemes. Stories were equally likely to be told as untold for learning about culture, sharing culture, awareness of diversity, and experience of prejudice, although all “blamed for racism” stories were told (all told by White students; see Syed, 2010b). For difficult dialogues, however, there were differences. All of the “too much focus on ethnicity” stories were told (all but one of these was told by White students), as can be seen by this sequence from a third-year, self-identified American/White male, which was told to friends for the purpose of validation:

Every time I applied for scholarships I get to the box where you have to mark race/ethnicity and have to go based off of skin color and am forced to put White/Caucasian and I know I am losing points in any scholarships that do take me and I know that I’m left out of a bunch. I gripe about race being an issue at all for these things. I understand that people are trying to give “disadvantaged people” a helping hand and are making judgments based on race. (Event narrative)

They asked something and then I said stuff. Got around to scholarships and then I griped for a bit and moved along to something else. Everybody understands how the system works even if we don’t like it. (Telling narrative)

In contrast, the “nature of privilege” stories were more likely to be untold. For example, the following “nature of privilege” story from a fourth-year, self-identified White female went untold:

While discussing an issue of race, one student (a woman of color) questioned another student (a White male) on his use of the term “slavery” as being descriptive of the experience of American students (i.e. the only path to success is through the school system and then obtaining a high-paying job, we have no other choices). The exchange turned confrontational and argumentative. I did not feel like I had anything useful to contribute. I think part of the reason I stayed silent (apart from being very shy), is that, as a White person, I don’t feel as though I can contribute to an argument about “racist” terms or use thereof, especially not with people I do not know well. (Event narrative)

Telling and emotion. This last series of analyses examines whether the emotionality of the event was related to whether or not it was told. This question was addressed in several ways, including whether the associations between telling and emotion were moderated by theme, ethnicity, year in school, and major.

Due to the possibility that emotionality would vary by narrative themes as well as whether the story was told, we first ran a repeated-measures ANOVA with emotion as a within-subjects factor and theme and telling as between-subjects factors. This analysis yielded a significant main effect for emotion, $F(1, 188) = 19.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$, which indicated that on average participants felt more positively about the event at present than they did when it occurred. There was also a significant and large main effect for theme, $F(4, 188) = 22.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$. Post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD test indicated that the five themes represented a spectrum of emotions, ranging from most positive to most negative: sharing culture ($M = 4.25$), learning about culture ($M = 3.52$), awareness of diversity ($M = 3.03$), difficult dialogues ($M = 2.48$), and experience of prejudice ($M = 2.27$). Although the main effect for telling was not significant, there was a significant theme by telling interaction, $F(4, 188) = 2.58, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .05$. The level of emotion was virtually the same whether the story was told or not for all narrative themes except experience of prejudice. For experience of prejudice stories, the untold stories were rated as significantly less negative than the stories that had been told. This difference is exemplified by two contrasting narratives. The first one was reported as untold and rated as "neither negative nor positive" in emotion by teller, who was a third-year, self-identified Vietnamese male:

I declared as an economics major and told some of the friends I had made in my residence hall. One of them said, that's very typical for an Asian, completely tongue in cheek. However, I wondered why he would have to make a comment like that even if it was just a joke. I laughed at him for being a hippie. I thought it was humorous and playful so I didn't think much of it. (Event narrative)

In contrast, the following narrative was told by a third-year female who self-identified as mixed ethnic, primarily Filipino and German. She rated the story as a "very negative" experience and reportedly told it to her boyfriend for emotion regulation:

I took a class on theory in women's studies. The class was intricately entwined with other societal prejudices; ethnicity and sexual orientation.

At the start of the course, we were asked to introduce ourselves, by name, age, and ethnic identity. I tell the group my name, age and that I am a mix (to put it simply) of both German and Filipino descent, some people were like “wow, I thought you were something else, but I’m not sure what.” Or like “oh, so you’re a mutt?” Well, no in reality, I am not a mutt nor am I “something else.” A mutt is a (generally filthy) stray dog in urban areas that’s genealogy consists of screwing anything in their species, and is unwanted, unloved and a problem waiting to be solved by the pound. And the comment “something else” always makes me feel like they were expecting something more exotic, something more, something interesting, something else. (Event narrative)

I felt bothered by the experience and I repeated the situation to him, but he didn’t understand. He didn’t get it and didn’t understand what was wrong about it. (Telling narrative)

Next I examined variations in emotion and telling by ethnicity, year in school, and major. Sample size constraints precluded the ability to test for whether these factors interacted with the main theme of the story; however, theme was included as a control variable. Furthermore, only two-way interactions were examined so as not to rely on cells with very small *ns* that could be produced in three-way interactions. Finally, ethnicity, year in school, and major were included in all analyses reported below to control for any potential overlap in the findings.

There was not a significant interaction for telling and ethnicity on emotion. For year in school, there was a significant interaction between telling and year in school, $F(1, 179) = 4.01, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$. As can be seen in Figure 1, for younger students there was no difference in emotion between told and untold stories. However, for older students, untold stories were significantly more positive than told stories. Finally, for major, there was a marginally significant interaction between telling and major, $F(2, 168) = 2.48, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .03$ (Figure 2). Students majoring in humanities/social sciences did not show any difference in emotion between told and untold stories, whereas students majoring in arts and engineering/sciences reported their untold stories as significantly more positive than their told stories.

In sum, the findings on the role of emotion in memory telling suggest that negative emotionality is associated with increased likelihood of the story being told for experience of prejudice stories, but not other types of stories. Furthermore, negative emotionality was more strongly associated with memory telling later in the college years relative to earlier, and for students

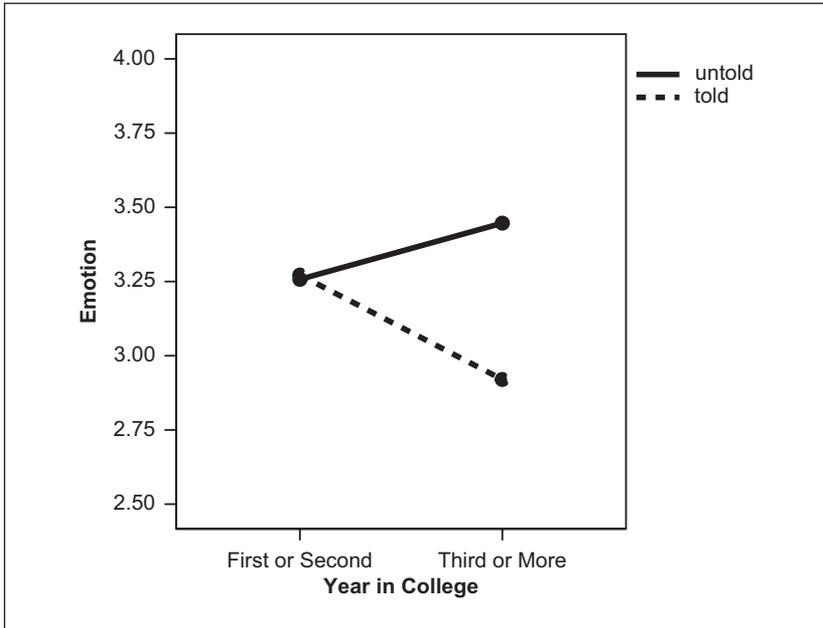


Figure 1. Interaction between telling and year in college for emotion of narrative themes

majoring in arts, science, and engineering rather than social sciences and humanities.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine college students' storytelling of ethnicity-related events in the academic domain. Situated within the McLean et al. (2007) process model of self-development through storytelling, the findings revealed important developmental and contextual variations in who students turn to for talking about their ethnicity-related experiences—and for what reason—and offer some support for the notion that negative emotionality is a driving force for what types of stories tend to be told (Pasupathi et al., 2009). The findings are discussed in detail below in terms of the varied contexts within which ethnically diverse college students craft their identities.

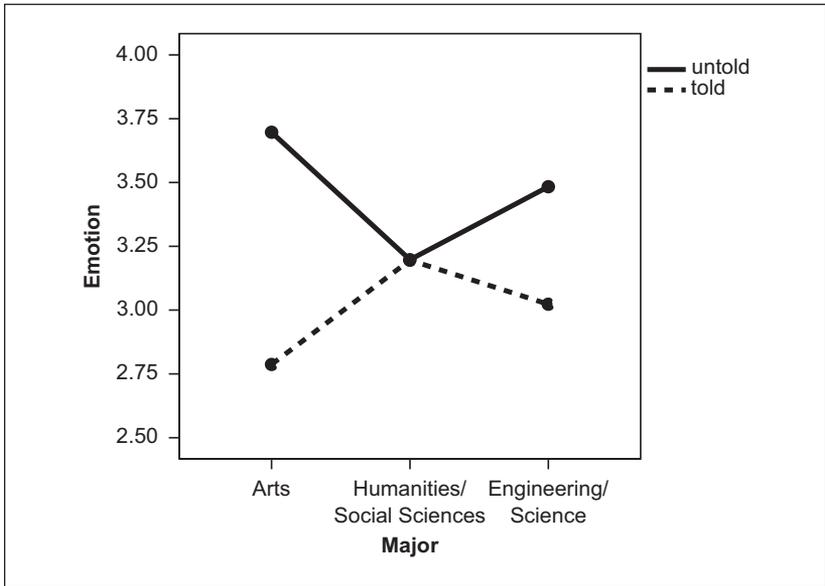


Figure 2. Interaction between telling and college major for emotion of narrative themes

Channeling Stories: Developmental and Contextual Shifts in Storytelling

Taking together the findings on telling function, theme, and audience provides a picture of how some ethnicity-related academic experiences are social managed (see Thorne & McLean, 2003). Learning about culture stories were most often told to students’ parents for the function of sharing their life experiences. It appears that students may discuss these stories with their parents as a way to connect with them. Since parents and children generally share their cultural background, there exists common ground that sets the stage for such stories to be told. In contrast, friends and peers were the preferred audience for experience of prejudice stories, which were most often told for purposes of emotion regulation. This preference may have to do with the close proximity of other college students, but could also be because they do not want their parents to worry about potential threats in the college environment. Furthermore, that students relied on other college students to handle the emotional trials of discrimination is likely

indicative of the growing intimacy with friends relative to family that occurs in late adolescence (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Indeed, consistent with past research on storytelling (McLean, 2005), when looking across all story types older students seemed to prefer peers as their audience while younger students more often told their memories to parents.

A large portion of the stories narrated in the study—more than one third—had never been told to others. This is a significantly larger proportion of untold stories than what has been found with self-defining memories, which was about 10% (e.g., McLean, 2005). However, it is important to note that the prompt often used for self-defining memories privileges memories that have been shared in the past. There was not a strong association between story theme and whether the story was told, although awareness of diversity stories were slightly less likely to be told than the others. This could be because these stories were the most emotionally neutral of all story themes, and therefore did not need to be told to cope with a negative event or share a positive one.

The findings in this study provide some support for the emotionality explanation for why stories are told to others. Consistent with the notion that negative events are more likely to be shared with others (Pasupathi et al., 2009), experience of prejudice stories that were told were rated as significantly more negative than those that went untold. For all other stories, emotion was not associated with telling. However, experience of prejudice stories, which were rated as the most negative, were only told to others if they were especially negative. The more moderate forms of prejudice went untold despite the fact that untold experience of prejudice stories were still more negative than most other stories. Although students seem to have an available audience for severe forms of discrimination, forms of discrimination that are perceived as relatively less negative may be more difficult to disclose because they are more ambiguous or subtle (see Operario & Fiske, 2001). As a result, there could be a fear that the story may be rejected as an authentic discriminatory experience by the listener. Ambiguous events are often considered prime candidates for being told as a means for deriving clarity and meaning about the experiences (Thorne, 2000). However, this process may work differently for discriminatory experiences because they run counter to the culturally held notions of equality, and therefore need to be clear instances of discrimination in order to be told.

The variations in emotion and telling by year in school and major provide further insight into the context of relating ethnicity-related stories to others. For younger students emotion did not play a role in whether a story was told. However, older students more often told negative experiences to others while keeping relatively positive ones to themselves. Although based on cross-sectional

data, this finding suggests that over time college students may develop a more systematic sense of what types of stories should be told, namely negative ones. This finding could be for a number of reasons, including having more stories to tell as they move through college or because, at the beginning of college, they are trying to form intimate bonds with potential friends and therefore disclose a variety of different experiences from their lives. Alternatively, it could have to do with the students' changing support systems, shifting from parents to peers. Peers may not be "unconditional listeners" like their parents and, as a result, students must be more selective in the types of stories they tell.

This selectivity interpretation may also explain why negative emotion played less of a role in telling for students in humanities and social sciences majors compared with art, engineering, and science majors. Previous research has shown that the comparatively high discourse around ethnicity-related issues in the humanities and social sciences both contributes to students' developing ethnic identities and draws students who already view ethnicity as important to who they are (Syed, 2010a). Accordingly, these students may be better prepared to discuss ethnicity-related issues with others and may have a wider audience with whom to talk about ethnicity. Consequently, negative emotion need not be the driving force for whether the story is told. Thus, there may be social and interactional constraints that affect the role of emotion in storytelling of ethnicity-related events.

Implications for Identity Theory

The findings in the present study indicate a complicated channeling of ethnicity-related academic experiences that depend on ethnicity, type of story, telling function, emotionality, year in school, and major. One implication of the findings is for how social support networks contribute to ethnic identity development. Students tended to talk to friends about experiences of prejudice and parents about learning about their culture. This finding suggests that friends and peers may be particularly instrumental in facilitating meaning about structural issues and disadvantage in U.S. society, whereas family plays a stronger role in facilitating knowledge and connection to individuals' cultural backgrounds. Thus, situated within the language of ethnic-racial socialization research, friends may be stronger agents of racial socialization whereas families are stronger agents of cultural socialization (see Hughes et al., 2006).

The findings also have implications for how context is conceptualized for identity research with college students. "College" is often implicitly considered

a homogenous context with “college students” a homogenous group therein. The current findings, however, clearly indicate the diversity of the college context across both time and place, as storytelling processes varied by both year in school and academic major. These findings suggest that there are developmental and contextual aspects of the college student experience that should be attended to in future research. Moreover, the general point about contexts for identity development has applications for research in other contexts as well, including the workplace, community, and high school. For example, psychological research on identity has scarcely examined how high school students occupy different contexts within their schools that facilitate and constrain identity development (for an exception, see Way, Santos, Niwa, & Kim-Gervey, 2008).

All in all, the results suggest that there is a bit of dancing around in terms of storytelling processes; individuals do not considered all experiences the same. As storytelling is considered a key element of the identity-development process (McLean et al., 2007; Thorne, 2000), the social parameters of storytelling may have implications for students’ developing identities. The present study serves as an initial investigation of what these parameters are, but raises numerous additional questions. It remains to be seen just what role these experiences play for students’ identity development. For example, what are the identity implications of a recurring sense of being unable to tell other’s about one’s ethnicity-related experiences? This seems to be an important question, particularly for ethnic minorities trying to better understand the role of ethnicity for their identities and for White youth who are trying to grapple with the realities of White privilege. What is clear, however, is that as theory and research on identity development is deepened and refined, it is imperative to continue considering the social and interactional context in which identities are negotiated.

Limitations and Future Directions

The focus of the present study was on ethnicity-related narratives in the academic domain, rather than ethnicity-related narratives more broadly. This design decision was made based on observations of the salience of the academic context in previous narrative research (Syed & Azmitia, 2008) and in concert with McLean et al.’s (2007) suggestion that storytelling be examined within reasonably well-defined contexts. This focus, however, may constrain the generalizability of the observed findings. Conversely, with the exception of the difficult dialogues theme, most of the narrative themes in the current study are identical or very similar to those found with research not limited to

the academic context (e.g., stories about prejudice, positive feelings about their cultural background, and commentaries on diversity). This overlap suggests the potential for generalizing the current findings to broader ethnicity-related narratives. An important constraint, however, is that the current narratives were temporally located within the college years (very few were situated in high school). Thus, storytelling processes may look different for stories that reach into earlier phases of the lifespan.

It is important to be mindful that the findings in the present study were likely informed by the particular university the sample was drawn from. The university was a primarily White, upper-middle class, residential university with a liberal campus atmosphere. Students attending universities that have markedly different student bodies, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Minority-Serving Institutions may show different patterns of storytelling. Furthermore, the frequency and content of the stories that were told may look quite different outside of the United States. The concept of master narratives, which are culturally defined scripts for personal behavior that inform individuals' behaviors and attitudes (Bamberg, 1997; Thorne & McLean, 2003), may be particularly relevant to this end. Different countries have different master narratives around the role of ethnicity and culture in society (Hammack, 2008), and these norms will undoubtedly influence how people talk about ethnicity-related experiences. Lastly, this study focused on college students, which was reasonable given the focus on academic experiences. The more general ethnicity-related experiences of non-college-going, emerging adults, however, constitute an unknown chasm that needs to be filled.

Another limitation of this study is that it is unknown just how important these stories are to students' developing life stories. In future investigations into storytelling, it may be useful to incorporate a question into the narrative prompt about how personally meaningful the story is to the teller, such as including a rating scale of the perceived importance of the story (Pasupathi et al., 2009). Moving in this direction would help to clarify the role the story plays in the individuals' developing life stories.

Lastly, future research on ethnicity-related experience would do well to examine how stories are told in actual social interaction (cf. Bamberg, 1997; Korobov & Thorne, 2006). While investigating narratives of storytelling is useful to understand what types of experiences are told, to whom, and for what reason, examining storytelling *in vivo* would be important to understand just how this process unfolds socially. Rather than relying on the individuals' reconstructions of the telling, we would be able to see how such experiences are launched in the conversation, how the interlocutor responds

to such bids, and how the ethnicities of the participants contribute to the conversation dynamics (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Analyses of these sorts would truly tap into the realities of how ethnicity-related experiences are told to others.

Conclusions

This study represents an initial attempt to understand how college-going, emerging adults talk about their ethnicity-related experiences to others. In terms of how these issues play out socially, students appear to prefer audiences that serve unique functions for different types of experiences. The influence of negative emotionality on the tellability of a story seems to increase as students move through college, and may vary by students' majors due to differences in the degree to which ethnicity-related issues are represented in the curriculum and discussed in class. The findings have implications for how future research considers the function of social support in identity development and for how social contexts are conceptualized. A striking finding is that a vast number of ethnicity-related stories are going untold, signifying the continued struggles surrounding discourse about ethnicity in the United States.

Author's Note

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Note

1. Although the differences among race, ethnicity, and culture have been explicated extensively (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005), judging from their narratives, these distinctions do not seem to be understood by most college students. Accordingly, race, ethnicity, and culture are used somewhat interchangeable throughout the Results section. The term *culture* is used in the name of the themes because it is most inclusive of both racial and ethnic experiences.

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Bio

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