Gendered Reminiscence Practices and Self-Definition in Late Adolescence[1]

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The purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in the emotional construction of life-threatening events (LTEs) that were chosen as self-defining by late adolescents. European American college students (41 women, 25 men) whose average age was 19 were selected from a larger sample ($n = 139$) because they reported at least 1 LTE among 3 self-defining memories. Memory narratives were elicited with a questionnaire (Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992) and coded for emotional position. As expected, tough, action-packed positions were more prevalent in men's narratives, and compassionate positions were more prevalent in women's narratives. Unexpectedly, narratives that emphasized one's own vulnerability (fear or sadness) were equally prevalent for men and women, and women's emotional discourse was more conditional upon type of event, i.e., deaths vs. assaults. Findings provide the most explicit evidence to date that some gendered reminiscence practices found in prior studies of children are reflected in late adolescents' self-defining reminiscences. Implications are also discussed for a more situated understanding of gendered reminiscence pratices and for theories of identity development.

KEY WORDS: gender; autobiographical memory; identity; trauma.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, personal reminiscence increasingly has been viewed as a cultural practice that channels emotional development and the development of a sense of self (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Miller, 1994; Snow, 1990). Studies of children's reminiscences have identified robust differences in how boys and girls are taught to elaborate emotional events, differences that have been found to be incorporated in their own emotion talk in middle and late childhood. To date, however, most gendered reminiscence research has focused on emotional rem-

iniscence without explicitly linking such reminiscence to self-definition. This trend is understandable in studies of children, for whom a concept of self is only beginning to emerge, but connections between gendered reminiscence and self-definition have also been neglected in studies of late adolescents, for whom a concept of self is much more developed. This study was designed to examine whether gendered findings with regard to emotional reminiscence that have been obtained in studies of children extend to the self-defining memories of late adolescents. This study may be the most explicit inquiry to date as to whether gendered reminiscence practices are integral to self-definition in late adolescence.

Gendered Reminiscence Practices in Childhood

The most robust gender differences in children's emotional expression have been found in the context of narratives about past experiences that involve negative emotions (Fivush et al., 2000). Mothers have

been found to discuss happy experiences equally with pre-school-aged daughters and sons, but experiences of sadness are more often discussed with daughters than with sons (Fivush, 1989, 1991; Fivush et al., 2000; Kuebli & Fivush, 1992). When talking about frightening events, girls use more emotion words than boys do (Fivush et al., 2000), and boys are more likely than girls to deny ever having been scared (Hudson, Gebelt, & Haviland, 1992). By middle childhood, girls, compared to boys, report having felt sad more often and in more social contexts (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Stapley & Haviland, 1989). Boys, more so than girls, expect negative consequences for expressing sadness (Fuchs & Thelen, 1988).

Girls' greater sensitivity to their own feelings of fear and sadness also extends to the feelings of others. Preschool girls, more so than boys, have been found to display empathy for others' feelings (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Barrett, 1991) and to engage in nurturant interactions (Leaper, 1991). In reminiscences about memorable events, 4–9-year-old girls, more so than boys, emphasized communal themes and referenced family members (Ely, Melzi, Hadge, & McCabe, 1998).

The robustness of such findings led Fivush et al. (2000) to conclude that gendered reminiscence practices extend to self-definition; that is, girls, more so than boys, may come to view experiences of fear and sadness as a more integral part of themselves and their relations with others. The possibility that gendered reminiscence practices can channel a child's sense of self has been pursued in necessarily indirect ways because a concept of "self" requires a cognitive sophistication that does not emerge until late childhood or adolescence (Damon & Hart, 1988). By mid- to late adolescence, however, the question, "Tell me a memory that is self-defining, that helps you to understand who you are as a person," becomes meaningful.

Gender and Self-Defining Memories in Adolescence

Although the period from adolescence to early adulthood has long been characterized as the era in which identity becomes a primary concern (Erikson, 1963), the role of personal reminiscence in this process has only recently been emphasized. Building on the work of Erikson, McAdams (1985) characterized identity as becoming a primary concern when adolescents begin to notice incongruities between themselves in the present and past and to imagine different possibilities for the future. Efforts to unify the past, present, and anticipated future presumably underlie the process by which adolescents ponder their life experience and select particular events as especially meaningful for understanding who they are and could be.

Because of the theoretical linkage between identity and reminiscence in adolescence, researchers who study adolescents' memory narratives tend to examine themes of identity achievement and intimacy rather than vulnerability (e.g., McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; McLean & Thorne, 2001; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986). This trend may reflect theoretical assumptions that learning to manage vulnerability is a childhood task and that adolescents move on to tackle the more age-relevant tasks of identity and intimacy (Erikson, 1963). Although feelings of fear and sadness, and vulnerability more generally, do not occupy a central spot in theories of adolescent development, events that threaten one's basic sense of safety tend to be highly memorable for both children and adolescents (Pillemer, 1998). Pre-school-aged children, for example, have been found to produce longer narratives to probes about car wrecks and hospitals than to probes about pets and vacations (Ely et al., 1998). In a college student study that used a variety of word prompts, Robinson (1976) found that physically traumatic events such as accidents and injuries were most frequently recalled, followed by romantic episodes.

Although life-threatening events (LTEs) such as accidents and injuries tend to be highly memorable, we do not know whether such events are regarded as self-defining by adolescents, nor have gender differences in emotional construal of such events been explicitly examined. The only study that seems to have examined such questions found that women college students rated their self-defining memories as sadder than did men, who rated their self-defining memories as happier; 10 other emotion words, including fear, did not show significant gender differences (Singer et al., 2001). Because Singer et al. (2001) did not report the kinds of events that were selected, such as injuries or romantic episodes, the finding that women more often rated their memories as "sad" is somewhat difficult to interpret: Was it because of differences in the selection of events, with men selecting happier events, or in the construal of events, or both? Similar ambiguities characterize other findings with regard to gender differences in adolescents' emotional construal of past events. For example, in a study of depressive rumination, Nolen-Hoeksema (1986; reported in Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987) found that young women

were more prone to ruminate (i.e., ponder, talk to others, cry) when in a depressed mood than were young men, who tended to avoid rumination. However, the kinds of depressing events that were selected, and the degree to which the events were regarded as self-defining, were not assessed.

This Study

The purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in late adolescents' emotional construal of self-defining events that are likely to engage feelings of fear or sadness. Feelings of fear tend to be activated by a physical or psychological threat to the self, and feelings of sadness by loss and separation from those that one cares about (Izard, 1977). In pondering the kinds of life events that seem most likely to engage feelings of fear or sadness, we settled upon events that severely threaten the physical well-being of self or valued others. Such events include severe accidents and physical assaults, which are likely to elicit fear, and deaths of valued others, which are likely to elicit sadness.

The first phase of the study examined the prevalence of such LTEs in late adolescents' self-defining memories. Although prior studies of autobiographical memories in adolescence suggest that LTEs are highly memorable, theories of adolescence do not emphasize the self-salience of such events, and the degree to which such events are regarded as self-defining is unknown. This study thus pioneered exploration of the degree to which LTEs are regarded as self-defining by late adolescents.

The second phase of the study was designed to examine the prevalence of gender differences in emotional discourse about LTEs that are regarded as self-defining. Research on children's responses to adverse events suggests that there are three primary emotional positions, or stances, that are often taken vis-à-vis such events: Toughness, Vulnerability, and Compassion. The *Tough* position highlights action in response to adversity with minimal references to emotion. Such a position has been called "John Wayne" discourse (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1996), because John Wayne, the Hollywood actor, emphasized action rather than emotion and portrayed fearlessness in the face of events that might make others cower and shake. A second emotional stance, the *Vulnerable* position, emphasizes one's own emotional vulnerability. Unlike Toughness, the Vulnerable position focuses on one's own feelings of pain, fear, sadness, or helplessness. A third position with regard to traumatic experiences is to show concern for others. The *Compassionate* position expresses care, concern, or sympathy for others who are also impacted by the event, rather than exclusively focusing on one's own feelings of vulnerability. On the basis of research reviewed earlier and primarily conducted with children, men were expected to emphasize Tough positions, and women were expected to emphasize Vulnerable and Compassionate positions in recounting LTEs.

STUDY 1

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 192 students (63% women) between the ages of 18 and 23, who were enrolled at a public university ($M = 19.5$ years, $SD = 1.2$ years). Participants engaged in the research to fulfill a requirement in various psychology courses. The majority (73%) of the sample self-identified as European American, 13% as Asian, 10% as Latino/a, and 4% as other ethnic backgrounds. Because sample sizes were small for other ethnic groups, and because gender and emotion findings primarily have been reported for European American samples, European Americans were selected for this study. The final sample consisted of 139 (63% women) European American college students who averaged 19.6 years of age ($SD = 1.2$).

Self-Defining Memory Questionnaire

Participants responded to a questionnaire that asked them to describe three self-defining memories. The first page of the questionnaire described features of a self-defining memory (Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992, p. 242). A self-defining memory was defined as

1. At least 1-year-old.[4]
2. A memory of a specific event[5] in your life that you remember very clearly and that still feels important to you even as you think about it now.

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[4]Events that are at least 1-year old are more likely to remain memorable than are very recent events (Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, & Betz, 1996).

[5]Instead of using the phrase "memory of a specific event in your life," Singer and Moffitt (1991–1992) used the term *memory from your life*. Otherwise, our description of a self-defining memory was the same as that of Singer and Moffitt.

3. It is a memory that helps you to understand who you are as an individual and might be the memory you would tell someone else if you wanted that person to understand you in a more profound way.

4. It may be a memory that is positive or negative, or both, in how it makes you feel. The only important aspect is that it leads to strong feelings.

5. It is a memory that you have thought about many times. It should be familiar to you like a picture you have studied or a song (happy or sad) you have learned by heart.

To understand best what a self-defining memory is, imagine you have just met someone you like very much and are going for a long walk together. Each of you is very committed to helping the other get to know the "Real You...." In the course of conversation, you describe several memories that you feel convey powerfully how you have come to be the person you currently are. It is precisely these memories that constitute self-defining memories.

On the next three pages of the questionnaire, participants were asked to write a description of each of three self-defining memories, including a caption for the event, their age at the time of the event, where they were, whom they were with, what happened, and how they and any others present responded to the event. They were asked to include details that would help an imagined friend see and feel as they did. After providing an event narrative, they were then asked to estimate with how many different people they had shared the memory, and, if they had a specific memory of having told the event to someone else, to describe a memorable telling of the event. The analyses for this study focused on the description of the original event rather than on the telling event, for which data were sparse (for a discussion of findings with regard to telling the events, based on a portion of the present sample, see Thorne & McLean, in press).

Coding of Life Events

Each self-defining memory was sorted into one of four categories of life events. Event categories were developed inductively to arrive at a limited number of categories that were mutually exclusive, and that comprehensively covered the range of events that were chosen as self-defining. The four types of life events were LTEs, relationship events, achievement events, and leisure events (see Thorne & McLean, 2001). In-

dependent coders reliably differentiated LTEs from other kinds of events (overall $\kappa = .94$).

Life-threatening events were defined as events in which a severe threat to one's own or another's physical well-being structured the narrative. Mortality concerns were not necessarily emphasized in the narrative, but if the description of the event indicated the possibility of severe physical injury or death to oneself or others, the event qualified as life-threatening. LTEs included severe accidents, physical assaults, and deaths ($\kappa = 1.00$). The following life-threatening memory is about a death:

> I was in the seventh grade when a good friend called me up after school crying. Her 24-year-old brother had been in a car accident and was dead. Immediately, I started crying and felt sick to my stomach. This was not only my first experience with death, but it was someone that was too young to die. My mother and I attended the Scottish funeral that was held in town. Hearing bag pipes to this day makes me cry.

Relationship events were defined as events in which a particular interpersonal relationship was emphasized, usually with a parent or peer. Themes in such events usually emphasized moving toward, away from, or against another person, for example, intimacy, separation, or interpersonal conflict ($\kappa = .94$). The following relationship memory is about a divorce:

> We had just moved to San Diego and my father, away in Germany, had just been re-stationed after Vietnam. My father was due to return home soon, after years of being gone. When he returned he wasn't very close to any of us. My parents argued a lot. And so my mom tells me, I asked my mom, "Why doesn't dad love me anymore?" Shortly after, my parents were divorced.

Achievement events were defined as events that emphasized effortful attempts at mastery with regard to vocational, material, social, or spiritual goals, regardless of the outcome. Such events included winning a competition; learning to drive a car; passing, failing, or struggling with an important exam; getting into college; mastering the urge to eat; and establishing a new life upon immigration ($\kappa = .85$). The following achievement memory is about a decision to quit professional dancing:

> After 14 years of dance training I decided to quit. I was a professional dancer and I hated it. I went to my instructor's condo with my boyfriend because my family would not support me in my decision. I told my instructor that I was extremely unhappy and I could not go on in this business. I was crying, consumed with feelings of guilt and relief. She was surprisingly

Table I. Percentage of Self-Defining Memories for Each Type of Event

Event type	Overall		Men		Women		$t(135)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Life-threatening	0.22	0.27	0.21	0.25	0.23	0.29	−0.48	ns
Relationship	0.40	0.34	0.36	0.32	0.43	0.36	−1.20	ns
Leisure	0.20	0.26	0.23	0.25	0.18	0.26	1.20	ns
Achievement	0.12	0.20	0.16	0.22	0.10	0.19	1.82	ns
Miscellaneous	0.06	0.16	0.05	0.13	0.07	0.18	−0.79	ns

Note. n = 52 men, 85 women; two-tailed *t* tests for gender differences.

understanding and I felt like a free person for the first time without the trappings of the complex dynamics of a dance studio (e.g. eating, dressing, acting . . .).

Leisure Events

Leisure events centered on recreational activities such as hobbies, parties, travel, or sports. Emphasis was on recreation, play, or exploration. Spiritual moments that were framed as moments in themselves, rather than as a decision to redirect one's life, fell into this category rather than into the achievement category ($\kappa = .94$). The following leisure event involves encountering an owl during a hike:

> I was on a trail below my parents' house taking an enjoyable walk alone. While passing a tree which my family and I always call "the big oak tree" I suddenly jerked my head upward—meeting eyes with this owl. My immediate reaction was one of amazement and then appreciation. Its eyes were locked with mine— an intense gaze that is hard to describe A raw, honest, soulful feeling emanated from the owl's eyes. There was nothing fake or misleading in its eyes and that was what was so refreshing but also alien. I felt lucky, and I wanted to tell someone about it.

Results

Most participants (87%) described three self-defining memories (range = 1–4). Women tended to offer more self-defining memories than did men, $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.39$, versus $M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.44$; $t(135) = -1.85$, $p < .07$, two-tailed, but conventional levels of significance were not reached. To control for slight gender differences in the overall number of memories described, data were analyzed in terms of percentage of memories per event type. For example, a person who provided three memories, one of which was about an LTE, received a score of .33 for the LTE category. Similarly, a person who provided two memories, one of which was about an LTE, received a score of .50 for the LTE category.

Table I shows the average percentage of self-defining memories per event type. In the overall sample, relationship events were the most prevalent (40%), followed by LTEs and leisure events (22 and 20%, respectively), and, lastly, achievement events (12%). Comparisons between men and women for each event yielded no significant findings. For both men and women, relationship events were the most prevalent kind of event, and LTEs and leisure events were each about half as prevalent as relationship events. Although less prevalent than relationship events, LTEs were sufficiently prevalent to render subsequent analyses useful.[6]

STUDY 2

Participants

The sample consisted of 41 women and 25 men from Study 1 who reported at least one LTE. Representation from the original sample was 48% for both men and women. Participants averaged 19.5 years of age ($SD = 1.2$), and age did not differ for men and women, $t(64) = -0.10$, ns.

Coding of Emotional Positions

Emotional positions in narratives of LTEs were first coded together by the authors. All the narratives were then independently coded by a reliability coder who was blind to the hypotheses and to the participants' gender. The categories were defined as mutually exclusive, and interrater agreement was acceptable; the overall kappa was .89. Disagreements between the authors and the reliability coder were

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[6]When the two largest ethnic minority groups in the overall sample (Latino/a and Asian descent) were examined separately, each group tended to show patterns that were similar to the European American patterns reported in Table I, although sample sizes were comparatively small (Latino/a descent: 7 men, 11 women; Asian descent: 9 men, 15 women).

settled by consensus. Four emotional positions were coded.

Toughness

Physical toughness and endurance in the face of adversity was the hallmark of this position. Such narratives were dense with descriptions of physical action, and the focus was on self-survival. Explicit references to feelings of fear, pain, or suffering on the part of self or others typically were not mentioned and, if mentioned, were not emphasized ($\kappa = .83$). Here is an example of a Tough narrative about a bicycle accident. Despite the severity of the injury, the narrative contains no explicit references to fear or suffering:

> About halfway down the 12-mile trail I was coming around a right turn going about 30 and there was a huge water bar across the trail, my front tire landed in it and stopped, and I kept going. My arm slapped the ground before I landed and that's when it broke. I knew it was broken the second it happened, before I even landed. I remember looking up at my arm and having it look like I had two elbows... Because of that day I now have two steel rods and 13 screws in my arm.

Vulnerability

Vulnerable narratives emphasized one's own feelings of fear or sadness, without reference to caring or concern for others. The dominant feeling in the narrative was of being overwhelmed by the event ($\kappa = .93$). Here is an example of a Vulnerable narrative about an assault by a dog:

> I was outside playing in the back yard. It was a sunny day and I was trying to put flower seeds in the ground that my dad had gotten for me. I heard a noise from behind me, and I turned around and saw the neighbor's dog come crawling from underneath the fence. These two German shepherds came charging at me. They both jumped and knocked me over. They were biting at me while I lay there, screaming at the top of my lungs. My mom heard the commotion and charged out of the house and chased off the dogs. To this day I have a fear of large dogs.

Compassion

Care or concern for others was the hallmark of these narratives. Concern for oneself might also be expressed, but the narrative also expressed concern for others ($\kappa = .82$). In the following narrative, the participant expresses concern for a friend and indebtedness to the friend's deceased father, in addition to expressing self-vulnerabilty.

> I was at college when I found out that my best friend Susan's father had passed away.... I froze and all I could think about was how worried I was for Susan. I couldn't imagine what I would do if one of my parents died. He had changed my life only months before he passed.... I couldn't even stand up; I was in the fetal position on the floor bawling. I was so worried about her.

Existential Awe

This emotional position was not anticipated but was apparent in some of the narratives. The hallmark of this narrative was an emphasis on one's feelings of awe or fascination in the face of death or near-death, an intellectual fascination that took precedence over feelings of fear or sadness ($\kappa = 1.00$). The following narrative about a near-death experience on a rafting trip exemplifies the Existential Awe position:

> On a river rafting trip, I got tossed out of my kayak and got pulled uder. I was stuck under water until I struggled to free myself just in time. I saw my life pass before my eyes as I was running out of air. It made me understand my own mortality better.

Results

Most of the participants (71%) reported one LTE, and some reported two (23%) or three (6%). Women ($M = 1.44$) reported slightly more LTEs than did men, $M = 1.20$, $t(64) = 1.80$, $p < .08$; however, conventional levels of significance were not reached. To control for slight gender differences in frequencies of self-defining LTEs, percentages were employed rather than frequencies, as in Study 1.

Preliminary Analyses

In preliminary analyses we examined basic features of the memories: narrative length, participants' reported age at the time of the original occurrence, and type of LTE. As can be seen in Table II, the LTEs occurred on average at age 13, for both men and women.

Women's memory narratives were significantly longer than were men's, $M = 170$ words versus 105 words, respectively, $t(64) = -3.97$, $p < .001$, which supports findings from prior reminiscence studies (e.g., Fivush & Reese, 1992; Singer et al., 2001).

Table II. Features of Life-Threatening Event Memories: Means for Men and Women

Feature	Men		Women		$t(64)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Age of reporter	19.48	1.12	19.51	1.27	−0.10	ns
No. of traumatic event narratives	1.20	0.41	1.44	0.67	−1.80	ns
Age at which memorable event occurred	12.56	4.88	13.08	3.77	−0.49	ns
Words in event narrative	105.34	50.30	170.45	82.97	−3.97	0.001
Event type (% total LTE)						
Deaths of loved ones	0.18	0.38	0.53	0.46	−3.37	0.001
Accidents	0.56	0.49	0.28	0.39	2.48	0.05
Physical assaults	0.26	0.44	0.19	0.33	0.68	ns
Emotional positions (% total LTE)						
Toughness	0.36	0.47	0.13	0.32	2.13	0.05
Compassion	0.10	0.29	0.35	0.45	−2.80	0.01
Vulnerability	0.40	0.48	0.49	0.46	−0.74	ns
Existential awe	0.14	0.34	0.00	0.00	2.06	0.05

Note. Levene's test for equality of variances was used for t tests; two-tailed t tests.

Gender differences were also found for type of LTE. As is shown in Table II, the majority of women's LTEs centered on deaths (53% for women, 18% for men), $t(64) = -3.37$, $p < .001$. The deceased were mostly family members or friends, but also included beloved pets and strangers. The majority of men's LTEs, on the other hand, concerned accidents (56% for men vs. 28% for women), $t(64) = 2.48$, $p < .05$. Automobiles, rafts, and bicycles were usually the vehicles in such accidents, and the participant was the main person who was injured. The final category of LTE, physical assaults in which the participant was a victim, showed similar base rates for men and women (26% vs. 19%, respectively), although women more often reported physical assaults that involved rape or sexual abuse. Of 7 assaults reported by men, 1 (14%) involved sexual abuse; of 13 assaults reported by women, 5 (38%) involved sexual abuse.

Emotional Positions

As can be seen in Table II, two of the hypothesized three emotional positions showed anticipated gender differences. Tough narratives were more

prevalent for men (36%) than for women (13%), $t(64) = 2.13$, $p < .05$, and Compassionate narratives were more prevalent for women (35%) than for men (10%), $t(64) = -2.80$, $p < .01$.

Unexpectedly, however, Vulnerable narratives showed a similar prevalence for men and women (40 and 49%, respectively), $t(64) = -0.74$, ns. Analyses within gender showed that Vulnerable positions were as prevalent as gendered positions: For men, the proportion of Vulnerable positions equaled the proportion of Tough positions (38%, respectively). For women, the proportion of Vulnerable positions, 49%, did not differ significantly from the proportion of Compassionate positions, 35%, paired $t(40) = -1.02$, ns.[7]

The fourth emotional position, Existential Awe, was significantly more prevalent for men than for women, $t(64) = 2.06$, $p < .05$. However, because this position showed such a low base rate (13% for men, 0% for women), it was not included in the final analysis.

Emotional Positions and Kinds of LTEs

In the final analysis we explored whether the three focal emotional positions (Toughness, Compassion, and Vulnerability) were associated with particular kinds of LTEs. Because distributions for these variables were positively skewed, Spearman correlations were employed. As can be seen in Table III,

Table III. Spearman Correlations Between Emotional Positions and Kinds of Life-Threatening Events

Emotional position	Accident		Assault		Death	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Toughness	0.32	−0.01	−0.10	0.53***	−0.28	−0.31*
Compassion	−0.06	−0.29	0.26	−0.45**	−0.18	0.55***
Vulnerability	−0.32	0.24	0.05	0.13	0.33	−0.28

Note. $n = 25$ men, 41 women.
*$p < .05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$, two-tailed.

[7]Latino/a descent participants (4 men, 7 women) and Asian descent participants (4 men, 6 women) tended to show gender patterns that were similar to those in Table II, with the exception that Asian descent men and women reported proportionately more deaths than did the other ethnic groups, and no assaults.

positions and event types showed no significant correlations for men. For women, however, four of the nine correlations were statistically significant, which indicated women's conditional use of two emotional positions: Compassionate positions characterized women's narratives about deaths ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), and Tough positions characterized women's narratives about physical assaults ($r = .53$, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Results of this study confirmed that LTEs were regarded as self-defining by late adolescents, and that men more often took tough, nonemotional positions in recounting such events, whereas women more often took compassionate positions. Because LTEs (severe accidents, assaults, and deaths of loved ones) can be assumed to evoke feelings of fear or sadness at some level, and because these events were regarded as self-defining, the findings provide explicit empirical support that two gendered reminiscence practices found in prior studies of children are also reflected in self-definitions in late adolescence: denial of fear for men (toughness) and concern for others (compassion) for women.

Although the findings with regard to Toughness and Compassion suggest that gendered reminiscence practices extend to self-definitions in adolescence, this was not the case for positions of Vulnerability, which emphasized one's own feelings of fear or sadness. Counter to expectations, we found that Vulnerability positions were equally prevalent for men and women. In fact, for men, Vulnerability was as prevalent as Toughness, and for women, Vulnerability was as prevalent as Compassion.

The high base rate of Vulnerable positions for men and women might be explained in several ways. One possibility is that Vulnerability positions were more tied to depression than to gender. Although rumination on one's own sadness has been found to be more common for late adolescent females than for males in prior research (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987), the present sample may have included as many depressed men as women. However, on the basis of post hoc analyses of participants who offered several LTEs as self-defining, the depression explanation does not seem very plausible. Of the 19 participants who reported more than one LTE, the majority ($n = 15$) took different emotional positions for each event, for example, one Vulnerable position and one Tough or Compassionate position. If depression is a chronic emotional state, participants who consistently took Vulnerable positions would seem the most likely to be depressed, but they constituted a small minority of the sample. However, in the absence of depression measures, the possibility that Vulnerability was symptomatic of depression remains viable.

A second possibility is that the cross-gender prominence of Vulnerability reflects an emotional maturation that occurs for many youth on the brink of adulthood. For example, Erikson (1968) viewed vulnerability as an outgrowth of the struggle with identity and as integral to the experience of the identity crisis. A third possibility is that the self-defining memory task tends to press for disclosure of Vulnerability. These possibilities could be explored by comparing findings across a broader array of adolescent and adult age groups and by comparing the base rate of Vulnerability positions obtained with self-defining memory probes versus more general autobiographical memory probes.

The lack of significant gender differences in Vulnerability was surprising, because a number of researchers have found that girls and women are more likely to express their own feelings of fear and sadness than are boys and men (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000). Our lack of significant gender differences in Vulnerability may have been a function of our mutually exclusive coding categories. The expression of one's own fear or sadness was defined as the sole emphasis of Vulnerability narratives, whereas self-vulnerability could also be mentioned in Compassionate narratives. We may have thereby underestimated the frequency of vulnerability in the sample, especially for women, who showed a higher frequency of Compassionate narratives than did men. We constructed the Compassionate category to allow mention of vulnerability because we found that expressions of compassion for others also tended to reference expressions of self vulnerability. The co-occurence of vulnerability and compassion within such narratives is an interesting phenomenon for future research.

Women's More Conditional Use of Emotional Positions

Although men and women reported similar proportions of LTEs in their self-defining memories, different kinds of LTEs were chosen by men and women: men disproportionately reported accidents, and women disproportionately reported deaths of significant others. Men's focus on accidents was not surprising because men are more accident-prone than are women in late adolescence (Massie, Campbell, &

Williams, 1995). However, women's focus on deaths was surprising, because there is no reason to expect that young women more often experience deaths of significant others than do young men.

Women's focus on death may reflect the communal orientation that has often been found in prior studies of girls' and women's reminiscences (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000; Woike, 1995). Death was the only kind of LTE that happened to others rather than to oneself, and women not only selected such events more often than did men, but also used the communal, Compassionate position to describe such events. The contribution of this study is that the communal orientation was found to be highly situated; it emerged in the selection of events that directly harmed others rather than oneself and in the specialized application of communal discourse to construe such events.

The present findings also suggest a neglected sphere (i.e., deaths) in which women are asked to rise to the communal occasion. Studies of gender and emotion in childhood have not focused on deaths per se, perhaps because deaths of loved ones may be shielded from children. However, deaths of pets are quite commonly experienced by children, and it would be useful to explore how parents talk about such events to daughters and sons. If our findings were to show parallels in studies of parent–child reminiscence, parents would more extensively elaborate past events involving death with daughters than with sons, and would particularly emphasize feelings of fondness for the dead and concern for the welfare of the survivors.

Overall, men's application of emotional positions was relatively less conditional than that of women, that is, less specialized for particular kinds of events. For men, none of the correlations between emotional positions and type of LTE reached probability levels of $p < .05$, whereas four of the nine correlations were statistically significant for women. Although this finding needs to be replicated with larger samples, the finding makes sense, given the fact that emotion talk, in middle-class White U.S. samples, is a predominantly feminine practice, and may have evolved some highly specialized rules and contexts of application. Beginning in early childhood, girls are exposed to more elaborated talk about emotions (Fivush et al., 2000). Part of that exposure may concern deaths of significant others. Women, for example, may more often be recruited to express condolescences to grieving families, whereas men may more often be excluded from rituals related to grieving; this exclusion may restrict men's opportunities for talking about death and for

expressing verbal concern for the well-being of the survivors.

The other conditional pattern shown in women's emotional positions concerned their specialized use of Tough narratives to describe experiences of being physically assaulted. Although men used Tough narratives proportionately more than did women, men's use of this position was not tied to a particular kind of event. Women's tendency to position themselves as tough and agentic in responding to physical assaults might have reflected the feminist values of their college community, which encourages rejection of victimization.[8]

LTEs and Identity Development in Adolescence

The finding that LTEs were quite prevalent in the sample extends prior findings with autobiographical memories to the more specific domain of self-defining memories. Nearly half of the men and half of the women in the present sample included at least one LTE in their three self-defining memories. LTEs did not swamp the sample of memories—relationship memories were nearly twice as prevalent—but were more prevalent than theories of normal adolescent development would suggest (Erikson, 1963).

From the perspective of theories of autobiographical memory, the salience of LTEs centers on their disruption of everyday routines. Highly disruptive events produce cognitive dissonance, and efforts to resolve the dissonance can include self-rumination as well as social sharing with others (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991; Tait & Silver, 1989). Furthermore, LTEs can produce enduring changes in one's relations with others, as when a loved one dies, and in one's own health status, as when one experiences a permanent injury in an accident.

From the perspective of theories of adolescent development, LTEs are perhaps the ultimate challenge to identity. Identity becomes a primary concern when adolescents begin to notice incongruities between themselves in the present and past and to imagine different possibilities for the future (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 1985). Confronting LTEs is perhaps the ultimate incongruity. As adolescents come to understand who they are and their place in society, they must also face the possibility of their absence. Confronting the possibility of death is an important

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[8]For a discussion of reminiscences with regard to sexual assaults, see Thorne and McLean (in press).

and neglected aspect of identity development in adolescence.

Very few of the participants in this study took a purely cognitive position with regard to the incongruity of life and death, as shown by the scarcity of the Existential Awe position. Such narratives intellectualized the prospect of death. Although fascination with the possibility of death may be a fleeting experience for many adolescents, the scarcity of this position in the overall sample of narratives, and its total absence in women's narratives, suggests that a purely cognitive position with regard to the incongruity of life and death is not an enduring feature of adolescent identity.

The more prevalent positions with regard to LTEs entailed presenting oneself as a tough survivor (Toughness), as having suffered tremendously (Vulnerability), or as caring for others despite one's own suffering (Compassion). These positions may not have told the whole story, but they conveyed how late adolescents wanted to be viewed as persons: "This is my memorable brush with death, this is what it meant to me, and this is how I coped with it." In locating these self-defining stances in the context of particular kinds of LTEs, the results of this study illuminate neglected contexts that are fertile ground for the construction of personal and gender identity.

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