Elaborating on Elaborations: Role of Maternal Reminiscing Style in Cognitive and Socioemotional Development

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Initial research on maternal reminiscing style established clear and consistent individual differences that vary along a dimension of maternal elaboration and that are related to children’s developing autobiographical skills. More recent research has linked maternal elaborative reminiscing to strategic memory development, language and literacy skills, developing attachment relationships, and understanding of self, other, and mind. In this review, this research is placed in theoretical context by arguing for the critical role of reminiscing in developmental process and outcome.

A fundamental assumption in developmental psychology is that parent–child interactions more generally, and parent–child conversations more specifically, are instrumental in developmental process and outcome. This idea is rooted in multiple theoretical formulations, but most especially in sociocultural theory as articulated by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky argued that all developmental skills begin first on the interpersonal plane, in interactions between parents (or other more competent members of society) and novice children. Children’s lives are organized such that the activities in which children are encouraged to engage are those that the culture deems important, and it is through participation in culturally mediated, socially structured activities that children learn the skills necessary to become competent members of their culture. With time, as children engage in adult-guided activities, they internalize the skills initially displayed by others and add them to their own intrapersonal repertoire. Thus, sociocultural theory identifies social interaction, and especially language interaction, as a mechanism, or more appropriately a process, of development. Furthermore, sociocultural approaches emphasize individual differences, such that variations in the quantity and quality of specified forms of social interaction are expected to result in differences in developmental outcome.

**Sociocultural Perspectives on Reminiscing**

In our research, we have adapted Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory to examine and understand the emergence and development of children’s autobiographical memory skills (see for full theoretical details, Fivush, 1991; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2002a). Telling and sharing one’s personal past is a culturally mediated activity that is more or less valued by particular cultures, and particular members within a culture. In Western culture, having and telling one’s autobiography is highly valued (McAdams, 2001; Pillemer, 1998), and is incorporated into the everyday activities in which children and adults are expected to engage. By participating in parent-guided reminiscing, children are learning the forms and functions of talking about the personal past.

Our initial research established individual differences in the ways in which mothers engaged their
preschool children in talk about the past and, from these data, the concept of maternal reminiscing style emerged. Mothers who are more elaborative in reminiscing with their preschool children about personally experienced events have children who develop more sophisticated autobiographical memory skills. Following our initial work in this area, the importance of maternal elaborative reminiscing style for children’s developing skills for remembering has been replicated in multiple studies of autobiographical memory, both in our own labs and in those of others (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2002a, for reviews).

More recently, the construct of maternal elaborative reminiscing style has been examined within social and emotional contexts, in which the focus is on children’s developing attachment relationships, and understanding of mind, self, and emotion. However, in many of these studies the linkages between reminiscing and social and emotional development are not made explicit, thus detaching the concept of maternal elaborative style from its initial theoretical base in autobiographical memory. Given the wide incorporation of maternal reminiscing style across a broad array of developmental studies and domains, the purpose of this essay is to provide a historical and theoretical context for the construct of maternal reminiscing style. More specifically, as more developmental researchers studying different aspects of development, including memory, language, attachment, theory of mind, emotion, and self, are beginning to use mother–child talk about the past as a methodology, we believe it is critical to provide a clear understanding of maternal reminiscing style, and to explicate why talk about the past is particularly influential in developmental outcome.

Several issues must be noted at the outset. First, within the research on memory and narrative, maternal reminiscing style as we define it here is only one way in which mother–child talk about the past has been conceptualized. Our focus is on the use of an elaborative style, in which mothers provide a great deal of rich embellished information and encourage their children to participate in the construction of a narrative about the past through open-ended questions and evaluations. There has been substantial research focused on other aspects of mother–child talk about the past, including the ways in which mothers use specific linguistic and narrative devices such as orientations, temporal and causal language, linguistic referential markers, and quoted speech (e.g., Ely, Gleason, Narasimhan, & McCabe, 1995; Fivush, 1991; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Minami & McCabe, 1995; Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999; Peterson & McCabe, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2004; Peterson & Roberts, 2003). This research has been instrumental in both displaying the complexity of narrative development and demonstrating socialization of narrative skills. However, in this review we focus on the use of elaborations as a specific narrative style because it has been shown to be critical in the development of children’s abilities to narrate their personal experiences and, more important, because maternal elaborative style has been incorporated into the larger developmental literature.

Second, from our perspective, and consistent with the Vygotskian notion of development as a dialectical process, maternal reminiscing style is conceptualized as both a “cause” and an “effect.” Maternal reminiscing style is part of an ongoing developmental process, in which mothers and children mutually influence and accommodate to each other. Thus, our view of development is focused on the process of interaction. The developmental mechanism of change from this perspective is language interaction (Nelson, 1996); as children participate in linguistically scaffolded interactions, in which specific skills and content are co-constructed, children internalize these interactions, such that what begins as socially mediated becomes part of the individual’s repertoire.

Third, because sociocultural theory focuses on the types of social interactions in which children are expected and encouraged to engage, understanding how social activities are organized by underlying values and belief systems is critical. Whereas some aspects of development may be universal (e.g., all normally developing human beings are able to recall specific episodes from their past), the extent to which reminiscing is an activity that is valued and practiced will influence the quantity and quality of developmental outcome (e.g., the form and content of a life story). To date, the majority of research on maternal reminiscing style has focused on White middle-class Western mothers with their preschool children. That we find individual differences in reminiscing style in such a relatively homogeneous group is interesting in and of itself. However, we acknowledge the need for research with more diverse SES and cultural populations, as well as the inclusion of other caregivers (fathers, siblings, grandparents) and with older children. We include this research in our review when available, and return to the need for more research along these lines at the end of the paper.
Maternal Reminiscing Style in Historical Context

Early Memory Research

Early research on memory development stemmed from either a Piagetian (Piaget & Inhelder, 1973) or an information-processing perspective (Kail & Birnsan, 1982). Although differing in many underlying assumptions, both approaches share a focus on how age-related changes in performance are driven by forces that are internal to the child (e.g., schema development, processing capacity). Both approaches emphasize the development of deliberate memory, and the ways in which children implement various strategies (e.g., rehearsal, organization) in an effort to learn and recall information. Moreover, both approaches characterized early memory as somewhat disorganized and fragmented.

This conceptualization of early memory was challenged in 1979, when Nelson and Gruendel published a seminal article on children’s generalized event representations. They argued that, although preschool children performed poorly when asked to remember lists of words or pictures in tasks requiring deliberate strategic interventions, preschoolers’ memory was quite good for familiar and recurring events. In fact, Nelson and her colleagues demonstrated that preschool-aged children form temporally organized, generalized event representations, or scripts, for events such as going grocery shopping or baking cookies, as well as detailed memories of specific distinctive experiences (see Nelson, 1986, for an overview). This work dramatically changed the picture of preschoolers’ memory from one of “deficiencies” to one of surprising competencies.

Mother–Child Narratives About the Past

In order to examine the emergence of early memory competency, several theorists turned to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. In particular, Ratner (1980, 1984) and Rogoff (1990) argued that maternal talk was instrumental in children’s developing ability to encode and retrieve information. Rogoff (1990) demonstrated that mothers who helped their children organize material to be recalled in traditional list learning memory tasks had children who subsequently recalled more on their own. Similarly, Ratner (1980, 1984) found that mothers who asked their children more memory questions in the course of everyday conversations had children who displayed better memory skills on a variety of recall and recognition tasks.

It was against this backdrop that we began our research on mother–child talk about the past. Extending Vygotskian theory, we argued that children were learning the forms and functions of talking about the past within adult-guided reminiscing. Certainly, the developing ability to recall the past is complex, and relies on multiple developmental processes (for reviews, see Cowan, 1997; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Our focus, however, was on the developing ability to recall coherent narratives about the personal past, a skill that is arguably culturally and socially mediated. Narratives move beyond simply reporting on what happened, to include information that places the event in spatial and temporal context, and that evaluates the event in terms of what it means for the self (Bruner, 1990; Fivush & Haden, 1997; Pillemer, 1998). Autobiographical recall, in addition to involving the simple reporting of details about a past event, places the event in a coherent framework that explains how and why events happened as they did, and what these events mean for the self both as a continuous being in time and in relation to others (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004; Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Haden, 2005; Fivush & Nelson, in press; Pillemer, 1998). As such, autobiographical narratives are linguistically structured cultural constructs of what is appropriate to recall about one’s self, and how to report it. We were interested in examining how these skills were displayed in parent-guided conversations about past events and, in turn, internalized by children as they begin to construct their own autobiographical narratives.

More specifically, we examined possible individual differences in how parents might scaffold autobiographical reminiscing with their preschool children. If children are learning autobiographical memory skills through participating in parent-guided reminiscing, then differences in the ways in which parents engage in this activity should be reflected in developmental outcome. By establishing relations between specific aspects of maternal language during reminiscing and resulting aspects of child performance, we would be able to show the specific ways in which children are internalizing skills initially displayed in joint interactions. Thus by examining mother–child reminiscing in detail, the developmental process of internalization of autobiographical memory skills could be mapped.

Individual Differences in Reminiscing Style

In our initial research we focused on a homogeneous group of mothers (Euro-American, well-educated, middle-class) because we wanted to investigate whether individual differences could be observed in a group that did not vary by other
factors known to influence verbal interactions. Indeed, we discovered individual differences that ranged along a dimension of elaboration (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988). (We initially labeled mothers as elaborative versus repetitive, but subsequently changed this to high versus low elaborative style to better reflect the finding that virtually all mothers use elaborations but differ as to the extent to which they elaborate.) More elaborative mothers discussed the past with their preschool children in rich detail, asking many open-ended questions that invited their children to participate in the conversation. By providing more and more information with each succeeding question, these mothers were engaging their children in the construction of a story about previously experienced events. In contrast, less elaborative mothers discussed the past with their preschool children by asking few and redundant questions, essentially probing for particular pieces of information about the event without providing much in the way of details to add to the telling.

At about this same time, Hudson (1990) and McCabe and Peterson (1991) also published findings indicating comparable variation in mother–child reminiscing. Similarly, Engel (1986) described mothers who displayed a “reminiscing” style, characterized by maternal comments that seemed to reflect an interest in simply sharing past events with their children, in contrast to mothers who displayed a “practical remembering” style exemplified by the use of questions about the past to direct behavior in the present. Although somewhat different in method and analysis, these studies established remarkably similar descriptions of the variations in maternal reminiscing style.

A high elaborative style is defined by the use of many questions and statements that add new information to the ongoing narrative. Both open-ended wh-questions (e.g., “What did we do at the zoo?” and “Who was there with us?”) and close-ended yes/no questions (e.g., “Did we see giraffes at the zoo?” and “Was Daddy with us?”) can be elaborative if they include additional information and/or focus on a new aspect of the event. Highly elaborative mothers also provide a great deal of evaluative feedback to their children. By confirming and praising their children, highly elaborative mothers both encourage their children’s participation and convey that this involvement is valued.

Our next question was whether these individual differences in maternal reminiscing style were related to child outcome. We conducted a longitudinal study spanning the preschool years (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993) that, first, replicated the initial findings of individual differences that varied along the dimension of elaboration, and, second, documented that mothers were extremely consistent in their reminiscing style over time. Critically, highly elaborative mothers would continue to provide additional information about the past event even when their young children were unable to recall any information. These mothers also engaged in a great deal of evaluation of their children’s responses, providing feedback and affirmation of their children’s participation.

Most important, we demonstrated that highly elaborative mothers facilitate the development of autobiographical reminiscing in their preschool children. Mothers who were highly elaborative early in development had children who participated more fully and in more detail in conversations about past events later in development. Moreover, the direction of effect was more from mother to child over time than from child to mother. Mothers who displayed a highly elaborative style early during their children’s preschool years had children who developed more elaborated personal narratives 1 and 2 years later. Although children did influence their mothers to a limited extent, children’s own earlier skills were not related to their later skills.

The finding that mothers who engage in highly elaborative reminiscing have children who develop better autobiographical memory skills has now been widely replicated both in the United States and cross-culturally, as well as for different types of past events (e.g., Bauer & Burch, 2004; Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Flannagan, Baker-Ward, & Graham, 1995; Haden, 1998; Harley & Reese, 1999; Hudson, 1990; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi, & Han, 2000; Low & Durkin, 2001; Peterson et al., 1999; Welch-Ross, 1997, 2001). There is no doubt that maternal reminiscing style is a stable characteristic, across time and across siblings within the same family (Haden, 1998), and that maternal reminiscing style is a critical factor in children’s developing autobiographical memory (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2002a).

Although these findings are robust, one problem in the literature is that elaboration has been conceptualized in more or less detail across studies. In our initial conceptualization (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988), we distinguished elaborative open-ended questions (wh-questions), elaborative close-ended questions (yes/no question), and elaborative statements. Each can be argued to serve somewhat different functions in mother–child reminiscing, yet the majority of subsequent research, including much of our own, has not differentiated between these types.
of elaborations. Thus, here, we review the role of maternal elaborations broadly defined, making more specific comments about the types of elaborations when available. We return to this issue in more detail in a later section.

Our initial interest in autobiographical memory focused on mother–child reminiscing as a context within which children would learn skills for remembering that would be specific to autobiographical recall but could conceivably extend to memory as it is more generally conceptualized (e.g., Ratner, 1984). Furthermore, the focus on narrative suggests that language would be a critical predictor of mother–child reminiscing as well as an outcome as reflected in children’s developing narrative and literacy skills (e.g., Snow, 1983). However, reminiscing is not just a cognitive endeavor; in sharing the past with others, we are creating and maintaining emotional bonds through the construction of a shared history (Fivush et al., 1996). By discussing, evaluating, and interpreting our past we are engaging in self-reflection and understanding; by constructing personal narratives, we are constructing a sense of self through time, as related to others, yet each with a unique personal history (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Haden, 2005; Fivush & Nelson, in press). Thus mother–child reminiscing should also develop from and predict understanding of self, other, and emotion.

Thus, two broad questions emerged from this initial research. First, what characteristics of both mother and child might be related to the level of maternal elaborative reminiscing, and, second, what developmental outcomes might be facilitated by maternal elaborative reminiscing? Each of these questions is discussed in turn.

Individual Characteristics Related to Maternal Reminiscing Style

Socioeconomic Status, Culture, and Gender

A great deal of research has demonstrated that mother–child interactions are influenced by race, class, culture, and gender (e.g., Heath, 1982; Hoff, 2003), and thus these factors might influence mother–child reminiscing as well. Class differences have been understudied, and socioeconomic status and family income have not been assessed directly (but see Melzi, 2000). However, maternal education, which is highly correlated with socioeconomic status, has not been found to be associated with maternal elaborate reminiscing (Farrant, 2000; Newcombe & Reese, 2004). Miller and colleagues (Burger & Miller, 1999; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998) have presented evidence to suggest that working-class White mothers are more directive when reminiscing with their children, and actually initiate more episodes of past event talk, than middle-class White mothers, who accommodate more to their children during personal storytelling. This research, however, does not compare directly the level of elaboration in working-class and middle-class mothers.

In contrast, a growing body of research points to cultural differences in autobiographical reminiscing. The findings are clear: mothers from Western middle-class cultures are on the whole more elaborative during past event conversations than mothers from non-Western cultures, such as middle-class Maori (Hayne & MacDonald, 2003; MacDonald, Uesiliana, & Hayne, 2000), Korean (Mullen & Yi, 1995), Indian (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003), and Chinese (Wang, 2001) families (see Fivush & Haden, 2003, for a review). From the cultures studied so far, the interpretation has been that Western mothers are more elaborate because they hold a more independent notion of self and therefore view reminiscing as important for the child’s developing autobiography or independent knowledge of self. Evidence in support of this interpretation is apparent in Wang (2001), in which Euro-American mothers focused on children’s personal opinions during reminiscing whereas Chinese mothers focused on reminiscing as a way to teach moral values. Miller and colleagues (Burger & Miller, 1999; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997) also argued that Euro-American mothers, regardless of social class, share a goal of autonomous reminiscing for their children, and they enact this goal by asking many questions about past events. Thus, Western mothers are overall more elaborate during reminiscing than mothers from non-Western cultures (but see Melzi, 2000, for an exception), despite some social class differences in the type of elaboration.

Gender also plays a role in parent–child reminiscing. Although not all research has found gender differences, when they do emerge in Western cultures, both mothers and fathers are more elaborative with daughters than with sons (Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn, & Cassidy, 2003; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996). Gender differences in reminiscing may be expressed differently in non-Western cultures. For instance, Melzi and Fernandez (2004) found that Peruvian middle-class mothers were more elaborate about past emotions with their sons than with their daughters. It should also be emphasized that, at young ages, there are no discernible
gender differences in children's ability or willingness to participate in reminiscing.

If a more elaborated reminiscing style is related to children's developing autobiographical memory skills, then these cultural and gender differences would suggest that adults, and especially females, from Western cultures develop more elaborated and detailed autobiographical memories than adults, especially males, from Eastern cultures, and, indeed, the research indicates that this is the case (see Fivush & Haden, 2003; Pillem, 1998, for reviews).

Maternal and Child Language

Because mother–child reminiscing is clearly a language-based task, both maternal and child language skills may be related to reminiscing style. However, across several studies (Hoff-Ginsburg, 1991; Lucariello, Kyratzis, & Engel, 1986; Lucariello & Nelson, 1987), it was found that mothers who talk a great deal during free play or caretaking routines do not necessarily talk a great deal when reading books together or reminiscing, indicating maternal elaborative reminiscing style is not a simple measure of "talkativeness." Moreover, a highly elaborative style when reminiscing is not related to a more conversation eliciting style during free play (Haden & Fivush, 1996) or an elaborative style of book reading (Laible, 2004a). In sum, mothers take different conversational approaches when reminiscing than when playing, reading, or caregiving with their children.

With respect to children's language skills, children who have more advanced verbal abilities may be better able to participate in mother-guided reminiscing, leading to higher levels of maternal elaboration. Indeed, several studies have found mothers to be more elaborative with young preschoolers who have higher language skills (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Newcombe & Reese, 2004; Welch-Ross, 1997). However, this link has not been found in studies conducted with older preschool children (Reese & Brown, 2000; Reese et al., 1993). Thus once children attain a certain threshold, child language skills may no longer be as important a factor in maternal reminiscing style.

It is also important to note that most mothers become more elaborative as their children grow older and become more able participants in these interactions (McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese et al., 1993). Critically, mothers maintain their relative standing, such that mothers who are more elaborative when their children are young remain more elaborative than other mothers even as their children grow older and more linguistically sophisticated (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden, Ornstein, Rudek, & Branstein, 2006; Reese et al., 1993).

Socioemotional Factors

Reminiscing about the past is a social activity that arguably serves the function of creating and maintaining emotional bonds (Fivush et al., 1996). Thus it seems likely that social and emotional characteristics of mothers and children would be related to reminiscing style. This has been assessed in terms of temperament, self-awareness, and the attachment status of mother and child.

Temperament. No research to date has examined relations between maternal reminiscing and maternal personality traits per se, but maternal temperament is not correlated significantly with mothers' elaborations (Farrant, 2000). However, several studies have found links between maternal elaborative reminiscing and children's temperament (usually as rated by mothers). Mothers are more elaborative with children rated as more interested and persistent (Bauer & Burch, 2004), more sociable (Lewis, 1999), and higher in effortful control (Laible, 2004b). Bird, Reese, and Tripp (in press) found that parents who experienced a better fit with their children on a negative affect temperament dimension were more elaborative about negative emotions in past event discussions with their children. Similarly, Laible (2004a) noted that mothers were more elaborative in reminiscing when they viewed their children as higher in negative reactivity. Lewis (1999) also found that mothers were more elaborative with more active children. Therefore, the highest levels of elaborative reminiscing may occur when mothers view their children as intensely emotional, sociable, moderately active, and focused. These temperament differences may coalesce into individual differences in children's interest in participating in reminiscing. From a very young age, children who are more attentive during reminiscing have mothers who ask more elaborative questions (Farrant & Reese, 2000).

Self-awareness. Most theorists agree that autobiographical memory and self are intimately linked (Conway et al., 2004), but exactly how remains controversial. Current self-concept influences what is remembered about the personal past, but what is remembered about the personal past also helps shape current self-concept. No research has yet examined mothers' self-concept in relation to the ways in which they talk about past events with their children, but children's developing self-awareness may influence maternal reminiscing style. Early self-awareness is assessed using the mark task (Lewis &
Brooks-Gunn, 1979), in which a mark is surreptitiously placed on the child’s nose or forehead. Children who, upon looking in a mirror, direct their hand to the mark on their own body are said to have achieved self-recognition.

Children who have more advanced self-awareness as assessed by the mark task have mothers who display a more elaborated reminiscing style later in development (Reese, 2002a). The reason for this link, however, is unclear, and may not have to do with children’s self-awareness per se. The mark test appears to tap into a variety of factors, including children’s temperament (Lewis & Ramsay, 1997), which has already been shown to be related to maternal elaborative reminiscing. Moreover, these early effects of child self-awareness on maternal elaboration drop out by the middle of the preschool years (Reese, 2002a).

Attachment status. Attachment is a foundational construct in developmental psychology that assesses the emotional bond between mother and child (Bowlby, 1969). Children who are the recipients of sensitive and responsive caregiving develop coherent and consistent internal working models of the world as a safe place, in which others are loving and trusted, and these children are securely attached. In contrast, children who are recipients of insensitive and/or nonresponsive caregiving will develop less coherent and consistent internal working models in which the world is viewed as unsafe, and others as uncaring and untrustworthy. These children are insecurely attached.

Several theorists have argued that children’s attachment status will influence the type of communication style mothers engage in with their children (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999; Thompson, 2000). In particular, dyads with securely attached children are hypothesized to be able to engage in open, fluent and emotionally expressive communication to a greater extent than dyads with insecurely attached children. Similarly, maternal attachment status should be related to mothers’ ability to engage in more elaborated and coherent reminiscing (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002).

Few studies have assessed maternal attachment status and reminiscing. Using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), Reese (2005) found that mothers who used more metacognitive monitoring (e.g., “I used to be quite angry about his death, but lately I’ve been thinking that he wouldn’t want me to feel that way.”) were more elaborate in shared past event conversations with their children. Metacognitive monitoring is an indicator of a secure orientation toward one’s early attachment experiences (Main et al., 2002). In contrast, using a questionnaire measure of adult romantic attachment, Fivush and Sales (2006) found that more insecurely attached mothers engaged in more elaborated reminiscing about a highly traumatic event than did more securely attached mothers.

On the other hand, several studies have assessed children’s attachment status, and find that mothers are more elaborate when reminiscing with children who are securely attached (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible, 2004a; Reese & Farrant, 2003). Specifically, mothers are more elaborative about the emotional and evaluative aspects of past events with securely attached children (Farrar, Fasig, & Welch-Ross, 1997; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Newcombe & Reese, 2004), particularly for negative emotions (Laible, 2004a). Mothers of securely attached children are also more adept at adjusting to children’s growth in memory abilities over time by increasing their levels of elaboration accordingly (Reese & Farrant, 2003). Intriguingly, Newcombe and Reese (2004) found essentially no maternal accommodation to children’s increased responding when children were insecurely attached. Maternal responsiveness may be a function of maternal sensitivity to children’s social, linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development. Mothers who are more sensitive may respond with a more or less elaborative style, depending on children’s characteristics.

Summary

In summary, there is a paucity of research concerning maternal characteristics that may be associated with reminiscing style, and in these limited studies few or conflicting relations have been found. More research has focused on relations between child characteristics and maternal reminiscing style, and have found, in general, that mothers are more elaborative with girls, with children who have better linguistic skills, who have a more persistent and sociable temperament, and who are more securely attached. However, it must be noted that several studies examining child gender and child temperament find no such relations, or the differences varied as a function of culture (Melzi & Fernandez, 2004). The extent to which differences in children’s age or different assessment strategies account for these inconsistencies is not clear.

Critically, even when child characteristics are related to maternal reminiscing style, it remains the case that maternal reminiscing style uniquely predicts children’s autobiographical memory, even after children’s language, temperament, self-awareness, and attachment status have been taken into account.
(Farrant & Reese, 2000; Reese, 2002a, 2002b). These patterns indicate that maternal reminiscing style is not a simple response to child characteristics. Moreover, maternal reminiscing style does not simply predict children’s ability or willingness to verbally report events; more highly elaborative mothers seem to help their children to construct more elaborated representations of events. Notably, McGuigan and Salmon (2004) found that adults’ elaborative reminiscing benefited children’s nonverbal memory as well as their verbal memory, suggesting that elaborative reminiscing is producing changes at the level of representation, and not just a richer reporting style (see also Tessler & Nelson, 1994). Furthermore, studies that train mothers to be more elaborative during reminiscing demonstrate benefits for children’s memory narratives regardless of children’s initial language levels or other characteristics (Peterson et al., 1999). Thus it seems clear that maternal reminiscing style is formative in children’s developing autobiographical memory skills. But is maternal reminiscing style also instrumental in the acquisition of other cognitive and socioemotional skills?

Maternal Reminiscing Style and Developmental Outcomes

Strategic Memory

Strategic memory refers to the use of specific mnemonic techniques, such as rehearsal and organization, to intentionally prepare for a future assessment of memory. Memory for events and deliberate memory are routinely treated in fairly distinct literatures (see, e.g., Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Schneider & Bjorklund, 1998), although both can be analyzed in terms of the conditions that affect the encoding, storage, and retrieval of information. It is also possible to view event memory as an amalgam of incidental and deliberate memory, with information encoded without the intent to remember, but deliberate behaviors clearly in operation at the level of the telling of the narrative (Ornstein, Haden, & Elischberger, 2006). Moreover, both event memory and deliberate memory require the activation of processes that are under the control of the child, as in directed memory searches, carefully constructed narrative reports, or strategies such as rehearsal, and to a considerable extent, mother–child reminiscing may affect children’s acquisition of these skills.

In support of this view, Haden, Ornstein, Eckerman, and Didow (2001) found that 30-month-old children who reported many elaborative details when interviewed about events that they had experienced with their mothers subsequently demonstrated high levels of recall of objects in a deliberate memory task as much as a year later, when they were 42 months of age. The children’s performance on the object memory task at 42 months was also related to their mothers’ mental term use during reminiscing when their children were 30 months old. Children who at 30 months were exposed to more talk about mental processes, including the processes involved in remembering, during conversations about past events were later shown at 42 months to be better at a deliberate task that required that they deploy a range of mnemonic strategies to insure subsequent object recall (Rudek & Haden, 2005). Rudek (2004) further assessed mother–child reminiscing and children’s deliberate memory at 42, 54, and 60 months of age, and found that maternal elaborativeness during reminiscing was concurrently and longitudinally associated with children’s strategic behaviors and recall of sets of to-be-remembered objects. In particular, maternal elaborations were strongly linked to children’s naming of objects during the study period in the object memory task, which, in turn, was highly related to the children’s object recall. Thus a small number of recent studies support the notion that maternal elaborative reminiscing is related to, and may set the stage for, children’s developing competencies in deliberate planning to remember.

Language and Literacy

One way in which reminiscing differs from other adult–child conversations is in the degree to which talk is decontextualized from immediate experience. During a conversation about the past, the adult is inviting the child to discuss an internal representation (a memory) as opposed to an object, an ongoing event, or even an external representation such as a picture. Snow (1983) proposed that adult–child decontextualized talk is critical for children’s advanced language and literacy skills. Indeed, Reese and colleagues (Reese, 1995; Sparks, Reese, & Kalia, 2005; Srivastava, Reese, & Newcombe, 2004) have observed that maternal elaborative reminiscing is related to children’s later print concepts across several diverse samples. Moreover, this link has been confirmed in experimentally controlled training studies. Reese, Stewart, and Newcombe (2003) demonstrated the benefits of training mothers to use an elaborative reminiscing style on boys’ language skills and on low-SES children’s print skills, and Peterson et al. (1999) found benefits of maternal elaborative reminiscing for low-income children’s language and
narrative skills. A highly elaborative maternal reminiscing style appears to benefit children’s complex language and literacy skills, as well as their memory abilities. Such results are consistent with the view that because of the “cognitive distancing” (Sigel, 1993) from the immediate environment that is involved in reminiscing, and therefore the relatively high cognitive and linguistic demands placed on the child in this task, conversations about shared past events between parents and children can foster the sorts of narrative skills emphasized in formal schooling.

Understanding of Mind

During the preschool years, children develop a relatively sophisticated understanding of mind that includes notions of internal representations of beliefs, cognitive processes and states, and emotions (see Wellman, 2002, for a review). Children begin to understand that they and other people have an internal life, and that this internal life is unique to the individual’s experiences. A great deal of research has established that mother–child conversations, broadly conceived, are critical in children’s developing understanding of mind (for recent reviews, see Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Symons, 2004), but the specific role of reminiscing has not been fully considered in this literature. In most research on internal state talk, distinctions are not made between whether mothers are talking about internal states in the present or in the past. We argue that this distinction is critical. It is internal states that link our past to our present, that make our past experiences important and meaningful, and that provide continuity of self across time (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Nelson, in press), and mother–child reminiscing about internal states may help make these links explicit.

Understanding mental states. Much of the research on children’s developing understanding of their own and others’ mental states has been conducted within the “theory-of-mind” paradigm. Typically, children’s theory of mind is measured with a false belief task, in which the child learns the true location of an object but a story character or a friend has false information about the object’s location (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). The child is then asked where the character or friend will think the object is. Children pass the false belief test when they correctly answer that the character or friend will act on their false belief by looking in the incorrect location. Another measure of children’s understanding of mind is the extent to which they understand how knowledge is gained (e.g., through seeing or hearing; Pillow, 1989).

Reminiscing may be particularly critical in helping children to understand that mental states exist over time, and continue to influence current behavior. By relating the past in elaborated and detailed ways, mothers may be helping their children construct more detailed representations of past events that may, in turn, help children link previous mental states to current internal states and behaviors. Indeed, mothers who are more elaborative during reminiscing have children with a more advanced understanding of mind (Reese & Cleveland, 2006; Welch-Ross, 1997). Related to this, mothers who talk more about mental states during reminiscing have children who come to talk more about their own past mental states later in development (Rudek & Haden, 2005), suggesting that children are learning how to describe their own and others’ mental states, both past and present, in the context of mother–child reminiscing.

Understanding emotion. Within mental states more broadly defined are emotions. Emotions may be particularly critical in children’s developing understanding of self and other, as emotions provide an evaluative link between past and present. Maternal reminiscing about emotions seems to be linked to child gender. Although not all research finds gender differences, when they do emerge, it is in the direction that mothers are more elaborative when discussing past emotional experiences with girls than with boys (Fivush, 1998; Fivush et al., 2003; Reese et al., 1996; but see Melzi & Fernandez, 2004, for differing results by culture), and they are more evaluative, use more emotion words, and focus more on relationships when reminiscing with girls than with boys (see Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for a review). When past event conversations focus on specific emotions, parents are more elaborative with girls about sadness (Fivush, 1991, 1998; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000) and with boys about anger (Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush, 1998). By the end of the preschool years, girls are providing more elaborated and more emotionally rich narratives of their personal past than are boys (Buckner & Fivush, 1998), and continue to do so through adulthood (Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003).

Mothers also seem to be more elaborative when discussing highly negative events as compared to positive events (Ackil, Van Abbema, & Bauer, 2003; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003). More specifically, mothers ask more open-ended elaborative questions, requiring children to provide information, when discussing negative experiences, but more closed-ended elaborative questions, requiring children only to confirm, when discussing positive experiences.
Mothers also discuss causes more when reminiscing about negative than positive events. This may indicate that mothers are more concerned with helping their children to recall a coherent account of negative events that may help them to understand how and what happened, whereas reminiscing about positive events may reflect a focus on creating a shared history (Fivush et al., 2003; Sales et al., 2003) and fostering children’s self-esteem (Reese, Bird, & Tripp, in press). Indeed, mothers who elaborate more when discussing emotionally negative past events have children with more advanced emotional understanding and conscience development (Laible, 2004b, in press). Mothers who elaborate and explain emotions more when reminiscing about stressful events have preadolescent children who show more effective coping strategies and fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Fivush & Sales, 2006; Sales & Fivush, 2005).

There are also cultural differences in mother–child emotional elaboration during reminiscing. Euro-American mothers are more elaborate and evaluative overall when reminiscing about emotions with their preschool children than are Chinese mothers, and they focus on causes and resolutions of emotional experiences more than Chinese mothers (Fivush & Wang, 2005; Wang, 2001; Wang & Fivush, 2005). These patterns suggest that Euro-American mothers are more concerned with helping their preschool children to understand and regulate their emotions than are Chinese mothers. Indeed, by early childhood, American children are more advanced in their emotional understanding than their Chinese age-mates (Wang, 2003).

Finally, there are a growing number of studies to suggest that mothers of securely attached children are more emotionally elaborate during reminiscing than mothers of insecurely attached children. Securely attached dyads reminisce more about emotion overall, and they elaborate on past emotional experiences to a greater extent than do insecurely attached dyads (Laible, 2004b; Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997). As discussed earlier, elaborated reminiscing both maintains and extends secure attachment relationships (Fivush & Reese, 2002). Mothers who are more elaborate during emotional reminiscing facilitate the development of emotional understanding and regulation in their children (Laible, 2004a, 2004b). Most important, reminiscing plays a unique role in children’s developing understanding of emotion. Laible (2004b, in press) directly compared maternal elaborations in the context of reminiscing and storybook reading, and found that only maternal elaborate reminiscing predicted children’s later emotional understanding.

Understanding self. Through reminiscing, children begin to build a sense of the self in the past, and how past self relates to current self, creating a temporally extended self through time. A temporally extended self relies on more than knowing that one engaged in specific activities and events in the past. A temporally extended self requires a sense of self as a continuous being, with continuous thoughts and emotions that link past to present and into the future; essentially a temporally extended self relies on a notion of a temporally extended mind (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Moore & Lemmon, 2001; Nelson, 2001).

The existing evidence does indicate a link between maternal elaborate reminiscing specifically about emotions, and children’s self concept. Welch-Ross, Fasig, and Farrar (1999) found that mothers who elaborated more about emotions during reminiscing had children with more coherent self-concepts. Bird and Reese (in press) also found that mothers who explained negative emotions in a more elaborate way had children with more consistent self-concepts. Critically, Reese, Bird, and Tripp (in press) examined mothers’ elaborations on negative emotions when discussing ongoing conflicts with their children compared to reminiscing about past negative emotions. Maternal elaborations about emotions during reminiscing more strongly predicted children’s self-concept than did maternal elaborations about ongoing conflicts.

Summary

Research supports a clear relation between maternal elaborate reminiscing and children’s memory, language, and literacy development. An expanding body of research further supports relations between maternal reminiscing style and children’s understanding of mind. However, there are still many limitations to this research that must be addressed in future studies. Most important, because most of the research examining relations between mother–child conversations and various aspects of children’s understanding of mental states, emotions, and self has not made a distinction between talk about the present and talk about the past, it is not always clear if reminiscing plays a unique role in children’s development over and above more general conversational style. Recall, however, that mothers are not consistent in their elaborate style across different conversational contexts such as free play, storybook reading, and caregiving routines. Much of the research on the role of mother–child...
conversations on children’s understanding of mind has relied on reminiscing contexts to elicit mother–child conversations, but have not made this a central part of their methodology or arguments. The few studies that have directly compared reminiscing to other conversational contexts converge on finding that reminiscing plays a unique role (we return to why this might be so in the final section). Thus, future research needs to both directly compare different conversational contexts and embed the research within the theoretical context of maternal reminiscing style per se, in order to elucidate these relations.

Elements of Maternal Elaborative Reminiscing

As mentioned earlier, maternal elaborative reminiscing has been examined in more or less detail across studies. Whereas it is clear that elaborative reminiscing broadly defined plays an important role in multiple aspects of developmental outcome, it is critical to understand that an elaborative reminiscing style is actually a conglomeration of many elements.

Early in development, mothers elaborate primarily through informational statements (often accompanied by a tag question) and close-ended yes/no questions, shifting to the use of mostly open-ended, why-questions by the end of the preschool years (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden et al., 2006). These moves seem to reflect maternal sensitivity to the child’s developing abilities to engage in reminiscing, with mothers “upping the ante” by asking children to contribute more as they become more capable of providing recall. The increasing use of more open-ended elaborative questions with age helps children become more active participants in reminiscing. Open-ended elaborative questions give children a platform on which to display their event knowledge in a verbal form. Thus, asking a child “What did you like about the zoo?” is more likely to produce a complex linguistic response than the closed-ended yes/no question “Did you like the zoo?” The act of putting an experience into words may help children to represent the event more richly, and may also work to facilitate children’s retrieval through language at a later date, both for this event as well as learning more general retrieval skills. In studies in which elaborative comments have been parsed according to type, the frequency of mothers’ use of open-ended elaborative questions (Farrant & Reese, 2000), and the greater use of these types of questions in comparison to elaborative statements (Haden et al., 2006), predicts children’s later memory responding.

Another critical aspect of an elaborative reminiscing style is mothers’ willingness to confirm and follow in on children’s responses. The very nature of an open-ended question, of course, is that it gives the child options of which aspects of the event to discuss. Maternal elaborations are highly correlated with confirmations and evaluations of the child’s response (Bauer & Burch, 2004; Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Reese et al., 1993; Sales & Fivush, 2005). Highly elaborative mothers both ask their child to report information and also provide a great deal of confirming and evaluative feedback on what their children contribute. Critically, a common form of maternal positive evaluation is to repeat part or all of what children say; especially for young children, repeating their contributions both reinforces their memory and weaves what they recall into the ongoing co-constructed narrative. Thus repetitions of child and repetitions of self serve very different functions in mother–child reminiscing. Repeating the child is an elaborative device for validating the child’s response, whereas repeating the self is the key element of a less elaborative style in which the mother simply tries to get her child to recall without any linguistic or memory support. Thus, highly elaborative mothers are both providing structure to the emerging narratives as well as eliciting and valuing their children’s participation in this process.

Cleveland and Reese (2005) attempted to separate the effects of elaborate open-ended questioning from the effects of following in on the child’s perspective on an event, similar to what Grolnick (2003) has described as autonomy support. Both maternal elaborations and autonomy support during reminiscing independently predicted children’s memory responding at younger ages, although maternal autonomy support became a less important factor as children grew older. Furthermore, mothers’ follow-ins and confirmations, although concurrently correlated with children’s remembering, are not as predictive of children’s long-term remembering as are mothers’ open-ended questions (Farrant & Reese, 2000), suggesting that confirmations may keep the child engaged in the current conversation but it is maternal elaborations that are instrumental in children’s developing skill set. In line with the Vygotskian perspective, with children’s increasing age and skill, elaborative mothers ask their children to contribute more information when reminiscing.

However, not all elaborative mothers increase in their use of open-ended questions over close-ended questions or elaborative statements over time. Some mothers who may be coded as highly elaborative actually ask very few questions; they essentially tell the entire narrative of what happened to the child, rather than helping the child to co-construct the
narrative together (Haden et al., 2005). From our perspective, this form of elaboration would not be particularly effective as it would neither engage the child nor help the child to learn through participation. Modeling is not enough; the child must be actively engaged in order to internalize the requisite skills. Elsewhere, we have argued for the construct of “voice” in autobiographical narratives (Fivush, 2004). When mothers impose a particular narrative and perspective on their child, even in highly elaborative ways, children will not develop an authorial voice in which to narrate their own personal past. Recent research suggests that mothers who impose their perspective during reminiscing have children who are more hostile and disengaged in the task (A. Raikes, 2005, personal communication).

We also need to consider what specific aspects of the past event are being elaborated upon. Are mothers focused on the facts of what happened, or on the internal states, emotions, dialogue, and reactions of the child and/or other people? As reviewed here, maternal elaboration on internal states may be related to children’s developing theory of mind, and maternal elaborations on emotions, in particular, may be related to both maternal and child attachment status.

In general, future research needs to take a more complex look at maternal elaborations, defining and describing the type of elaboration and what is being elaborated upon if we are to attain a more fine-grained understanding of how maternal reminiscing style is internalized by children, as well as mapping more specific relations between maternal reminiscing style and child outcomes. Moreover, we need to examine developmental differences in how mothers elaborate and how children respond to this style of reminiscing in order to gain a more complete picture of how children are learning multiple developmental skills through mother–child reminiscing across development.

**Event Talk**

Throughout this review, we have argued that to represent events in memory, children must construct narratives. Narratives provide the glue that makes events comprehensible and meaningful (Bruner, 1990; Fivush & Haden, 1997). However, we do not only talk about events after they have occurred; we talk about events in preparation for the experience, and as they are unfolding. Event talk that takes place prior to and during experiences may facilitate children’s memory, just as narrative reminiscing subsequent to the experience does. For young children, especially when an event is novel, mother–child discussion before and during the experience can be of critical importance in guiding initial encoding and the establishment of a memory representation that, in turn, can be maintained, elaborated, and even modified through subsequent reminiscing (Haden et al., 2001; Hudson, 2002).

The few studies to date that have examined mother–child talk during an event suggest that preschoolers produce longer and more detailed reports of these experiences if their mothers use elaborative **wh**-questions, and follow-in on, and positively evaluate their children’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors as the events were experienced (Boland, Haden, & Ornstein, 2003; Ornstein, Haden, & Hedrick, 2004). Moreover, “joint” linguistic interactions between parents and children during events are more strongly related to children’s later memory for the experiences than are interactions characterized as primarily involving mother-only talk, child-only talk, or no-talk (Haden et al., 2001; Tessler & Nelson, 1994).

Whereas even 3-year-old children show enhanced recall of experiences as a function of elaborative discussion with their mothers during events, the facilitative effects of preparatory talk appear to be more limited (Hudson, 2002). Indeed, consistent with the view that young children have difficulty using language alone to organize future experiences (Nelson, 1996), preparatory talk provided by parents and other adults seems to be most effective with older preschoolers when paired with visual displays such as pictures, storybooks or maps, and when the adult highlights connections between the future event and children’s prior knowledge and experiences (Hudson, 2002; McGuigan & Salmon, 2005).

In terms of the relative contributions of talk during and after an event, McGuigan and Salmon (2004) and Conroy (2006) have experimentally manipulated the level of elaborative talk an experimenter engaged in during and after a structured play activity. Although elaborative talk during the event facilitated subsequent recall, elaborative talk during an event was not as effective in enhancing preschoolers’ recall as was elaborative talk after the event. Children who engaged in elaborative reminiscing recalled more about the event regardless of how the event was talked about while it was ongoing. However, one limitation of these experimental studies is that children are being exposed to experimenters’ talk during a brief time interval, and our arguments about maternal reminiscing style suggest that children develop generalized strategies and styles for recalling and reporting events gradually over the preschool
years through countless mother–child narrative interactions. Related to this, parents may be better able to focus the conversation around the child’s interests, and highlight associations between events and the child’s prior knowledge and experience.

In sum, we do not yet have a full understanding of how joint conversations that occur prior to, during, and after an event differentially impact memory. Theoretically, a consideration of these different forms of “event talk” marries the traditional information processing framework for the flow of information within the memory system with an emphasis drawn from the sociocultural perspective to examine conversational interactions as mediating the process by which memory representations are established, consolidated, retrieved, and reported. It seems important to examine the possibility that talk before, during, and after events might influence different aspects of recall, such that talk before and during an event might primarily affect children’s initial understanding of the experience, whereas reminiscing might play a larger role in what children remember over the long term. Indeed, the effects of mother–child talk before, during, and after an experience may be additive, with each of these opportunities for conversation uniquely influencing aspects of remembering. It is critical to know how multiple opportunities to talk about an event before, during, and after its occurrence may quantitatively and qualitatively change what is remembered, as well as how maternal styles, both during an event and in reminiscing, become generalized strategies for children across the preschool years.

Why Reminiscing Is Critical

Our initial research on maternal reminiscing style established robust and enduring individual differences in the way in which mothers structure conversations about the past with their preschool children, and, importantly, these differences are clearly and consistently related to children’s emerging autobiographical memory skills. Children of more highly elaborative mothers come to tell more detailed, more elaborated, and more coherent narratives of their personal past than do children of less elaborative mothers. Moreover, maternal reminiscing style is context specific, and, although level of elaboration may be partly a response to specific child characteristics, maternal reminiscing style uniquely predicts children’s autobiographical memory development, aspects of strategic memory, literacy and narrative skills, developing theory of mind, and understanding of self and emotion. Clearly, maternal reminiscing style is a powerful influence on multiple aspects of children’s cognitive and socioemotional development. Possible reasons why reminiscing may be a critical developmental context have been threaded throughout this review; here we weave these threads together.

First, and most important, reminiscing is a language-based activity. Indeed, we can only share the past with others through language. Although there may be physically present cues in the current environment, in order to explicate and expand on what happened in the past, one must use language. It is through language that mother and child establish a shared reference of attention during reminiscing; language itself becomes an object around which mother and child interact. Through discussing, negotiating, and constructing a story of what happened, mother and child are creating a shared reference and a shared history. Through the linguistic practice of reminiscing, children are learning how to remember their past. Language interaction is both the medium and the mechanism of development (see Nelson, 1996, for a full theoretical discussion).

Moreover, because reminiscing often involves disagreements and negotiations about what occurred, children are learning that memories are not necessarily veridical representations of the past, but rather are subjective representations, in which each individual may or may not recall specific aspects of what occurred. This, in turn, facilitates children’s understanding of memory as a mental representation. Furthermore, mothers and children do not simply reminisce about the facts of what happened; they reminisce about the thoughts and emotions of the child, the mother, and others. In this way, children begin to evaluate and interpret the past. The past is not simply a collection of events that happened; the past is intimately linked to how one thinks and feels, and in this way, the past self becomes linked with the present self. Children begin to build a sense of self as continuous in time. Self-continuity is not based solely on remembering what one did in the past; self-continuity relies on an extended consciousness through time. Thus, mother–child reminiscing is a critical tool in children’s developing understanding of mind as representational and temporally extended (Fivush & Nelson, in press).

Furthermore, through participating in these kinds of negotiations, children are learning that their own perspective on the past may be unique; others may view the past differently, and this may facilitate children’s developing theory of mind. Understanding this unique perspective also helps build a subjective sense of self as having a specific and
individual perspective on one’s own past experiences (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Haden, 2005). Essentially, mother–child reminiscing sets the stage for the construction of an autobiography, a story about one’s self that provides an evaluative framework for how one became the person one is. Finally, reminiscing not only creates an individual history; it also creates a shared history. Through reminiscing with others about shared events, one creates an autobiography intertwined with others. We are bonded together in the present because of what we have shared in the past. Thus mother–child reminiscing is critical for creating and maintaining emotional bonds (Fivush et al., 1996).

Obviously, the extent to which individuals engage in these processes culminating in an elaborated and subjective perspective on one’s personal past will vary, and as this review demonstrates, will depend on gender, culture, individual child characteristics, and, critically, on maternal reminiscing style. The ways in which mothers and children engage in shared reminiscing will be modulated by the values and belief systems inherent in the larger sociocultural world in which reminiscing is embedded. The way in which a life is conceptualized, what events, and aspects of events, are appropriate to report and share with others (Fivush, 2004; Pillemer, 1998), and the extent to which having and telling an elaborated self-history is prized (McAdams, 2001; Pillemer, 1998) will all play a role in the ways in which mothers will structure reminiscing with their young children. In cultures that value individualism and self-determination, mother–child reminiscing focuses on more elaborated accounts of the child’s actions, desires, thoughts, and emotions. In contrast, in cultures that value community and self-in-relation, mother–child reminiscing focuses on the communal good and moral lessons (Miller et al., 1997; Wang, 2001, 2003). Similarly, beliefs and values associated with gender are expressed in mother–child reminiscing, such that mothers are more emotional, more evaluative, and more relational with daughters than with sons, at least in Western cultures (see Fivush & Buckner, 2003, for a review). And as the research reviewed throughout this essay has revealed, mothers vary along a dimension of elaboration when reminiscing as a function of multiple characteristics of mother and child, as well as the larger family and cultural context (see Fivush & Haden, 2003, for an overview).

Equally important, mother–child reminiscing is not a static skill. Although mothers are remarkably consistent over time and across siblings in the level of elaboration in comparison to other mothers (Haden, 1998; Reese et al., 1993), mothers change and adapt their reminiscing style as a function of their children’s developing age and skills. However, the extent to which mothers adapt sensitively and responsively to their children may also differ (e.g., Newcombe & Reese, 2004). This brings us back to the Vygotskian notion of development as a dialectical process. We do not argue that maternal reminiscing style causes specific child outcome in a linear fashion; rather, we argue that maternal and child characteristics influence specific aspects of maternal reminiscing style, which in turn influence specific aspects of developmental outcome, which in turn influence aspects of maternal reminiscing style, and so on in a continuing spiral of developmental process and outcome. Whereas longitudinal research has empirically demonstrated the unique predictive power of maternal reminiscing style on multiple aspects of child outcome, we would argue that a more nuanced and dialectical model of mutual influence would better capture the reality of the developmental process.

**Elaborating on Elaborations: Future Directions**

Throughout this essay, we have suggested areas ripe for future research. We recap these ideas here as they fit into four major themes. The first theme is how mothers’ reminiscing style varies as a function of their own characteristics. This is a huge gap in the literature. Whereas we know that mothers are consistent in reminiscing style over time and across siblings, but that mothers differ in the level of elaboration across conversational contexts, we still know very little about why some mothers are more elaborative in reminiscing than other mothers.

Given the framework provided here, critical areas for future research include how maternal reminiscing style is linked to mothers’ personality and self-concept. For example, one might imagine that mothers high on sociability would be more elaborative in reminiscing, or mothers high in negative affect might elaborate more on emotion. Certainly, we would expect depressed mothers to reminisce less overall, and to reminisce in less elaborative ways. These are just a few possible links, but clearly this area is wide open for future research. Relations to maternal attachment also need to be clarified. Theory suggests that more securely attached mothers should be more elaborative during reminiscing, especially about emotionally difficult experiences, but the two studies examining this question found conflicting results. Issues of measurement are critical here, as there are ongoing controversies over narrative versus questionnaire measures of attachment, as well as...
whether one is assessing maternal representations of childhood attachment or current romantic partners (e.g., Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

In addition, we have very little information on how maternal reminiscing style varies as a function of social class within and across cultures, and, if so, why. Cultural differences in maternal reminiscing style have been attributed to culturally defined concepts of self and other. How might this extend to arguments about class? And how might class and culture interact? A few researchers have begun to examine these questions (e.g., Melzi, 2000), although not all focus on maternal elaboration (Miller et al., 1997; Minami, 1997). Coordinating these approaches is critical to gain a more sensitive and diverse understanding of the process and functions of maternal reminiscing style.

A second theme focuses on the role of children’s characteristics in shaping maternal reminiscing style. More research has examined this question, and we know that child temperament, attachment status, and possibly language skills and gender contribute to maternal reminiscing style. However, we do not yet know whether the same child characteristics shape maternal reminiscing style in the same ways in non-Western cultures (but see Melzi & Fernandez, 2004, for some relevant data). Another critical issue here is developmental differences. Although the majority of research has been conducted on mother–preschool child dyads, little research has tried to elucidate how child characteristics may influence maternal reminiscing style in different ways at different points during this extended developmental period. For example, as mentioned earlier, child language skills and self-awareness may be more related to maternal reminiscing style early in the preschool years but not in the later preschool years. We need to map out these kinds of developmental differences in more detail, and provide a theoretical framework for understanding when and how such developmental differences appear.

In addition, future research should examine other potentially important outcomes of maternal reminiscing style. For instance, although a great deal is known about children’s developing understanding of time, and an understanding of time is obviously important in the development of autobiographical memory (Friedman, 2003, 2004), research has not yet addressed the link between mother–child reminiscing and independent assessments of children’s time concepts. Another critical area is relations between reminiscing and attachment. It may be through participating in more elaborated reminiscing that children build more coherent and elaborated working models of relationships, and in this way attachment may be as much an outcome as a predictor of maternal reminiscing style.

A third theme is that we are now in a position to conduct experimental studies of reminiscing style on various aspects of children’s development, such as their understanding of mind, self, emotion, language and literacy, and strategic memory. These domains have been targeted in correlational research as potential outcomes of an elaborative reminiscing style, but experimental work would bolster the causal argument. In training and intervention studies, as well as in further correlational work, it will be important to include other types of maternal conversation to contrast the effects of elaborative talk in general with the specific influence of elaborative talk about the past. As argued here, reminiscing seems to be a distinct conversational context, and the few studies that have compared maternal reminiscing to maternal talk in other contexts have demonstrated that maternal elaborative reminiscing uniquely predicts multiple aspects of child outcome, but, clearly, future research needs to confirm and extend these findings.

The fourth theme is the need to both deepen and broaden our understanding of maternal reminiscing style. As we recommended above, we need to take a more detailed look at different types of elaborations, and what is being elaborated upon, to more fully understand how maternal elaborative style influences child outcome. It is possible that the concept as it exists in the literature is too global, and that different types of elaborations have different effects on different child outcomes. For example, as suggested here, it may be elaborating specifically on emotional content that is related to attachment status, or that it is specifically open-ended elaborations that facilitate strategic memory development. Researchers need to think more carefully about how and why maternal elaborative reminiscing is related to the specific outcome measures they are interested in, and examine maternal elaborations in a more fine-grained fashion to begin to tease apart the developmental story.

Moreover, examining elaborations alone as a key indicator of reminiscing style may not be enough. We also need to look in more detail at the way in which mothers negotiate the past with their children when they disagree about the facts or the emotions of a past event. As argued here, these kinds of negotiations may be critical for children’s developing awareness of memory as a representational system, and for a developing understanding of self and other. These disagreements occur rarely in everyday talk about the past, at least in middle-class samples; hence they are difficult to study. Researchers will
have to devise innovative ways to increase the number of these kinds of negotiations in mother–child reminiscing, perhaps through exposing mothers and children to different versions of events, or through focusing on conflict situations.

Related to this, the research has focused on the language interaction per se. Although we argue that language is critical in the developmental process, it would be interesting to extend maternal reminiscing style to nonverbal aspects of the interaction as well. Especially when discussing emotional experiences, the nonverbal expression of emotion through tone of voice, facial expression, and body language may shed new light on the process and function of reminiscing.

Finally, we need to broaden the research base beyond mother–preschooler conversations about everyday shared past events that are so often studied. The focus on mothers reflects a deep-seated assumption within developmental psychology that mothers are the critical socialization agent for children. We do not disagree that mothers are important, but children grow up in rich, complex social worlds. Reminiscing style can be extended to grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, siblings, and peers (for research on fathers, see Buckner & Fivush, 2000; Reese et al., 1996; for research on intergenerational reminiscing, see Pratt & Fiese, 2004).

Moreover, the focus on the preschool years reflects the interest in the emergence of autobiographical memory, clearly an important developmental process (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Reminiscing continues to play a role in social interactions as children grow older. It is in adolescence that children begin to coalesce their memories into a life narrative (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001), and as children venture into a larger social world, reminiscing may play an increasingly vital part of their social interactions with family and friends. Moreover, reminiscing does not only occur in a dyadic context. How the family as a whole reminisces about their past is an intriguing question from both a developmental and a family systems approach (Kreppner, 2002). In recent work Fivush and her colleagues have explored family reminiscing style and have found that families that reminisce together in a more elaborated, collaborative fashion have preadolescent children who show higher well-being and self-understanding (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, in press), attesting to the continued importance of reminiscing in developmental outcome across childhood.

On a final note, we need to examine reminiscing style for other types of past event narratives: stories about the child and stories told to the child, about their own past as well as the past of others, the beginning of placing one’s own life experiences in the broader context of family, culture, and history (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, in press; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). In this paper, we focused on research demonstrating the power of the construct of maternal reminiscing style for understanding multiple aspects of preschool children’s cognitive and socioemotional development. These early interactions set the stage for the creation of a life narrative linked to memory, language, self, and other. Ultimately, an autobiography does not start with the self, but in social interaction. Through language, children weave memories of their own past with past generations that have set the stage for the child’s entry into the narrative.

References


