Does It Matter if Preschool Children and Mothers Discuss Positive vs. Negative Events During Reminiscing? Links with Mother-reported Attachment, Family Emotional Climate, and Socioemotional Development

Deborah Laible, Lehigh University

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the differential relations between mother–child reminiscing about a positive emotional event vs. a negative emotional event and attachment security, family climate, and young children's socioemotional development. Fifty preschool children (M age = 50.69 months, SD = 4.64) and their mothers completed two reminiscing conversations at the laboratory, which were coded for emotion-laden discourse, affect, and elaboration, and children completed measures of emotional understanding and representations of relationships. At their homes, mothers completed the attachment Q-sort and the self-report family inventory. Both attachment security and family climate were related to the quality of mother–child affect and maternal elaboration during both positive and negative reminiscing conversations. Attachment security and family climate, however, were principally related to discussion of emotion during the negative event discussions. In addition, it was mother–child reminiscing about the negative emotional event that was associated with high levels of children's socioemotional development.

Keywords: attachment; reminiscing; emotional understanding; family climate

Introduction

Children learn about emotion through their exposure to emotion, through parents’ reactions to their children’s own emotions, through parent’s modeling of appropriate emotion regulation, and through the conversations that they share with caregivers about emotion (Denham & Auerbach, 1995; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). As early as 18 months, young children and their mothers engage in discourse about emotions (Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla, & Youngblade, 1991). These early conversations not only socialize children in how to use the language of emotion but also influence children’s construction of socioemotional understanding (Denham &
Auerbach, 1995; Denham, Cook, & Zoller, 1992). In particular, there is mounting evidence that the more frequently children are exposed to emotion-related discourse by parents, the more sophisticated children’s level of emotional and relational understanding is (see, e.g., Capatides & Bloom, 1993; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Laible, 2004). This is not surprising because through conversations about emotion, parents can help clarify the aspects of relational experience that are often confusing for young children, including both emotions and intentions (Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003).

Conversations about emotion in the context of reminiscing might be especially influential in promoting children’s emotional and relational understanding (Laible, 2004; Laible & Panfile, 2009). By discussing children’s emotions after they have occurred, especially negative ones, parents directly coach children on ways to cope with negative emotions and help to clarify emotion causes (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). Although parents do discuss emotions with children as the emotions occur, these conversations may be less likely to promote understanding for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the context of strong emotion, children’s cognitive resources are often occupied with managing emotion (Laible & Thompson, 2007). As a result, children might not attend to or process parental messages about emotion in such cases (Laible & Panfile, 2009). Secondly, when faced with children’s emotions, particularly negative ones, caregivers might be less concerned with promoting and socializing children’s understanding of emotion and be more concerned with directly managing their children’s emotions (Laible & Thompson, 2007). As a result, the quality of emotion talk that happens when the child experiences strong negative emotion may not be as rich as the type of emotion talk that happens in the context of reminiscing.

Thus, discussions about the child’s negative emotions after the child’s emotions have dissipated may prove to be more fruitful for promoting the child’s understanding of emotional experiences (Laible, 2004). Reminiscing might be especially influential in shaping children’s emotional scripts because of the links that reminiscing is assumed to share with children’s developing autobiographical memory (i.e., memory of personal experiences) (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Nelson, 1996). Researchers have argued and found evidence for the idea that these early reminiscing conversations with parents help to shape children’s memories of their past experiences (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Nelson, 1996). Therefore, by discussing children’s past emotional experiences, parents are also helping to shape the role that emotion plays in children’s developing autobiographical memories (and therefore their self-concept), including whether children define themselves in terms of emotion (e.g., ‘I am a mostly happy person’), and whether they understand the role that their emotions play in influencing others (e.g., ‘when I am upset, mom and dad are also upset’) (Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn, & Cassidy, 2003).

Recent research has supported the idea that high-quality mother–child reminiscing about children’s past emotional and moral behavior relates to children’s socioemotional and sociomoral development (Laible, 2004, 2006; Laible & Thompson, 2000). Prior research has shown that both the quality of mother–child discourse during reminiscing, as well as the emotional tone (i.e., affective quality) of that discourse, influence children’s emotional and relational understanding. In particular, mothers who are highly elaborative (i.e., who add much detail to the event discussed and who ask a lot of open-ended questions), discuss emotion frequently with their children, and express high levels of positive affect during reminiscing have children who have advanced levels of emotional understanding, who show high levels of behavioral internalization, and who have prosocial representations of relationships (Laible, 2004;
Laible & Song, 2006; Laible & Thompson, 2000). Although these studies have added preliminary support to the idea that mother–child reminiscing might be an important avenue through which children gain emotional, moral, and relational understanding, several important questions remain unanswered, and these are the focus of the current study.

The first question that needs to be examined is whether mother–child reminiscing conversations about positive and negative events are equally influential in promoting socioemotional development. Young children struggle in particular with understanding and regulating negative emotions (see Laible & Thompson, 1998), and as a result, it seems likely that mother–child reminiscing surrounding negative emotional events might be particularly important for fostering children’s understanding of these problematic emotions. In addition, research has also supported the idea that mother–child discourse about negative emotions is richer than mother–child talk about positive emotions and includes more frequent discussion of the causes of emotions, more talk about others’ mental states, and more sophisticated linguistic skills (Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, & Bentivegna, 1992; Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002). As a result, there are good reasons to believe that mother–child reminiscing about children’s past negative emotional experiences might be more influential in promoting children’s socioemotional understanding than mother–child reminiscing about positive events.

In addition, although researchers have begun to examine some of the factors that predict the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children (including attachment and temperament) (see Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible, 2004; Newcombe & Reese, 2004), researchers have not examined whether these factors vary depending on the valence of the emotional event discussed (positive vs. negative). Despite this, however, there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the context of reminiscing matters with respect to the links it has with attachment or other measures of relationship quality (see Laible & Panfile, 2009). As a result, this study examined two factors that might relate differentially to the quality of reminiscing in positive vs. negative reminiscing conversations: attachment security and family climate. These two factors were chosen because of their theoretical links to reminiscing about emotional experiences (see Laible & Panfile, 2009).

**Attachment**

A number of attachment researchers have argued that one defining feature of a secure attachment relationship is the open communication about negative emotion between the caregiver and the child (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1990; Etzion-Carasso & Oppenheim, 2000). This open sharing of emotion is presumed to begin in infancy when mothers respond appropriately to the babies’ signals of distress. As a result, secure infants gain trust in the mothers’ responsiveness to their distress signals, and they feel free to express negative emotion (Cassidy, 1994). In contrast, insecurely attached infants learn to either mask their signals of emotional distress or exaggerate them in order to cope with having a caregiver who is not consistently responsive (Malatesta, Culver, Tesman, & Shepard, 1989). Beyond infancy, this open sharing of negative emotion between secure children and caregivers is presumed to continue and to involve not just the open sharing of non-verbal displays of negative emotion, but also verbal communication about negative emotion (Laible & Panfile, 2009).

Research has supported the idea that communication is more open in secure than insecure dyads (see Etzion-Carasso & Oppenheim, 2000; Laible, 2004; Main, 1995).
Relevant to the current study, researchers have also found links between attachment and the quality of mother–child reminiscing between young children and their mothers (see Laible, 2004; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Newcombe & Reese, 2004). For example, research has found that reminiscing is of higher quality in secure than insecure dyads, involving more elaboration, evaluation, and discussion of emotion (see Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible, 2004; Newcombe & Reese, 2004). Although these findings are intriguing, it seems important to examine whether the topic of the reminiscing conversation matters with regard to the links attachment shares with reminiscing. Theoretically, the links between attachment and open communication should be strongest when the mother and the child are discussing the child’s past negative emotional experiences.

**Family Climate**

In addition to attachment, it seems likely that the emotional climate within the family (including the amount of warmth, conflict, and cohesiveness) also influences the nature of emotional communication between mothers and children, but there is very little research examining this potential link. The limited research that has been done on emotional climate and the quality of mother–child communication during the preschool years is conflicting. For example, whereas Denham, Zoller, and Couchoud (1994) found that maternal expressions of anger in the laboratory were associated with less discussion of emotion between mothers and children, Raikes and Thompson (2006) found that maternal depression (and thus, presumably displays of negative affect in the family), were unrelated to the quality of emotional communication between mothers and children. Part of the reason for the conflicting findings may have to do with the fact that researchers have tended not to separate out the topics of conversations when examining the links between family climate and the discussion of emotion.

Similar to attachment security, conversations between mothers and children surrounding negative emotional events might be of higher quality in warm, cohesive families than in families marked by more conflict and less warmth. In the context of a warm family environment, where displays of positive affect are frequent, children might be more willing to openly discuss difficult issues (such as negative affect) because such displays of warmth inspire in the child a willingness to co-operate with the parent even in difficult situations (Laible & Thompson, 2007). Furthermore, in families where displays of conflict and negative affect are more constructive, children might also learn more appropriate emotion regulation skills through modeling (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). As a result, in-depth discussions of negatively charged emotional events in such families are possible because children do not become overly upset during such conversations.

**Current Study and Hypotheses**

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine how attachment security and family climate related to the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children and to examine how differences in the quality of mother–child reminiscing were related to children’s emotional and relational understanding. Based on the previous discussion, we predicted that attachment security and family climate would be primarily related to the dyad’s open discussion of the child’s past negative emotional experience (Laible, 2004; Laible & Panfile, 2009). In addition, we expected the
discourse in the negative event conversations to be of higher quality and more closely related to children’s socioemotional development than reminiscing about the child’s past positive emotional experiences. Finally, we expected that attachment security and family climate will relate to more positive affect by both mothers and children in the context of reminiscing and that this positive affect will relate to higher levels of socioemotional development in children.

Method

Participants

Fifty preschool children (54 percent female, $M$ age = 50.69 months, $SD = 4.64$ months) and their mothers participated in the study and were recruited with the help of several local preschools, day care centers, and preschool associations in a large Southern city. The majority of participants were White (84 percent); the remaining 16 percent were African-American (10 percent) or Hispanic (6 percent). Mothers in the study were generally well educated (88 percent had a college or advanced degree) and came from predominantly intact families (84 percent of mothers were married).

Procedure

Mothers and children were invited into a laboratory playroom, and following the explanation of study procedures, mothers and children engaged in a 15-minute period of free play, designed to allow both the mother and the child to become comfortable in the lab. Following the free play, mothers and children engaged in the reminiscing task, and then children completed the measures of emotional understanding and representations of relationships. Within two weeks of the laboratory visit, mothers completed a packet of questionnaires that included the self-report family inventory (SFI). At that time, the attachment Q-set (AQS) was also completed by mothers at their homes under the supervision of a trained research assistant.

Laboratory Measures

Reminiscing Task. The two conversations about the child’s past emotional experiences were elicited following a procedure identical to the one used by Laible and Song (2006). Following the free play, the researcher notified the mother that she was interested in shared conversations about the child’s past emotional experiences. Mothers were asked to think about two recent past emotional events that involved both herself and her child: one in which the child experienced a negative emotion and one in which the child experienced a positive emotion. Mothers were allowed to select which of the two events that they wanted to discuss first with their child: positive vs. negative. The vast majority of mothers discussed positive events first (86 percent). The length of the conversations was determined by the mother. The positive emotional event conversations were longer and lasted on average of 49.06 conversational turns ($SD = 23.11$) than the negative emotional events that lasted an average of 42.44 conversational turns ($SD = 21.67$).

Coding of Mother–Child Discourse During Reminiscing Tasks. Verbatim transcripts were made for each reminiscing conversation. From the transcripts, all references to
emotions were identified and coded (following a coding schema adapted from Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995; see also Laible, 2004). References to emotions included words referring to ‘protypical’ emotional states (e.g., happy, angry), as well as words indicative of emotional states (e.g., crying, laughing). In addition to identifying references to emotions, three other aspects of emotion references were coded. Anytime a particular emotion was discussed in three or more consecutive conversational terms, a code of in-depth emotion discussion of emotion was coded. In addition, references to causes of emotion (i.e., identification of the sources of particular emotions) were coded. Finally, emotion validations (i.e., confirming the partner’s emotion-related statements, e.g., ‘yes, you were sad’) were also noted. Codes were not mutually exclusive. Two coders independently coded 15 common transcripts. Intra-class correlations between the two raters on the number of emotions, in-depth emotion discussion, causes of emotions, and emotion validations per transcript were acceptable ($\alpha > .74$).

In addition, the two mother–child reminiscing tasks were coded for the quality of maternal elaboration. Elaborative ratings were assigned based on criteria used in previous empirical research (see Laible, 2004). Transcripts were rated on a five-point scale based on the amount of background description provided and the quality of the open-ended questions that the mother asked of her child during both the positive and the negative reminiscing conversations. The intra-class correlations between the two raters on 15 transcripts for elaborative ratings were acceptable ($\alpha = .95$ for positive event conversations and $\alpha = .87$ for negative event conversations).

**Coding of Mother–Child Affect During Reminiscing Tasks.** The affective exchange during each reminiscing task was coded using a scheme adapted from Gini, Oppenheim, and Sagi (2003) (see also Laible & Song, 2006). The coding was designed to tap the mother’s emotional engagement, the child’s emotional involvement, and the quality of the dyadic discourse. The following elements were coded on a five-point scale: (1) maternal warmth referred to the amount of genuine warmth and interest expressed by the mother to the child; (2) maternal rejection/hostility was the degree to which mothers expressed anger or hostility toward the child; (3) child warmth referred to the amount of warmth and co-operation expressed by the child to the mother during the task; (4) child anger/hostility was the degree to which the child expressed anger or hostility at the mother during the task; (5) dyadic inter-subjectivity reflected the sense of shared meaning and togetherness that dyads had in the reminiscing task; and (6) mutuality of communication reflected the degree to which the dialogue between mothers and children was fluent, smooth, and emotionally open.

A second coder recoded 15 of the videotapes to establish reliability. Reliability between the two coders on each of the dimensions was adequate. A different set of coders completed the affect coding than those who completed the discourse coding. Intra-class correlations between the two raters were all higher than .85 for the negative reminiscing conversations and .87 for the positive reminiscing conversations.

In addition, to reduce the number of variables, all six codes were submitted to a principal components factor analyses for each discourse task. One parallel factor emerged for each of the two reminiscing conversations. The factor for the positive reminiscing conversation was labeled ‘affective quality’ ($\lambda = 5.21$, 65.16 percent of the variance), and consisted of maternal and child warmth, dyadic inter-subjectivity and mutuality of communication (all of which loaded positively with loadings >.77), and child and mother anger/hostility (both of which loaded negatively with loadings <-.70). For the negative reminiscing task, a similar factor labeled ‘affective quality’
also emerged ($\lambda = 5.24, 65.47$ percent of the variance). On this factor, maternal and child warmth, dyadic inter-subjectivity, and mutuality of communication all loaded positively (with loadings $>.79$), and maternal and child anger/hostility loaded negatively (with loadings $<-0.70$).

**Emotional Understanding.** In order to assess their level of affective perspective taking, children took part in a two-part affective perspective taking task developed by Denham (1986). In the first part of the task, children’s abilities to distinguish four facial expressions of emotion were assessed both receptively and expressively (including happy, sad, angry, and scared). Following this, each child saw puppets enact 20 vignettes that were accompanied by both visual and vocal cues of emotion by the experimenter (e.g., a frown and whiny voice when displaying a sad emotion). At the end of each of the 20 vignettes, each child was asked, ‘how did the puppet feel?’ and was then asked to attach the proper felt face to the puppet to indicate the puppet’s emotion. Each child received two points for each correct answer or one point for identifying the correct positive–negative valence. The scores on each of the 20 vignettes were summed, and following Denham (1986), this score was summed with that of the previous task (i.e., identifying the emotions on the felt faces), to serve as an index of emotional understanding (for a total of 56 points). Scores on the affective perspective taking task ranged from 15 to 56 ($M = 47.76; SD = 7.40$). Denham’s (1986) task has been widely used as a measure of emotional understanding with children of this age and has shown strong correlations with other assessments of emotional understanding (see Laible & Thompson, 1998).

**Representations of Relationships.** Children also completed a shortened version of the MacArthur story-stem battery (MSSB) (see Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997). The shortened measure included six stories that had previously been used with children of this age (see Laible, 2004). The MSSB assesses children’s ability to resolve relationship-oriented conflicts and is believed to capture children’s representations of relationships (Laible & Song, 2006). For the task, the researcher tells the child that together they will make up some stories using the dolls, and the researcher will start the story and the child will finish the story. Following the explanation, a birthday party warm-up story was presented to the child, and the child was encouraged to tell a story with the dolls. The stems were presented in a lively manner, and each story ended with the prompt ‘can you show me what happens next?’ Non-directive and clarifying prompts, for example, ‘what else happens?’ were used to assist the child’s storytelling. The experimenter moved on only after the child had addressed the main conflict presented in each story or had suggested that he or she was done with the story.

Both children’s responses to each story stem and any actions they presented with the dolls (e.g., two dolls fighting) were summarized in transcripts. Another coding team (who was blind to the child’s attachment, family climate, and other scores) coded themes following Oppenheim et al. (1997). Two independent coders coded 15 common transcripts to establish reliability of coding. Cohen’s kappa for the measure was .70. The following content themes were coded:

1. **Personal injury:** a character was physically injured and/or hurt, and the focus was on the injury and not the aggression;
2. **Aggression:** a character engaged in hostile or aggressive actions;
3. **Affection:** a character displayed affection (e.g., hugging, kissing, praising, etc.);

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2010 Social Development, 20, 2, 2011
4. **Affiliation**: together, characters participated in a positive endeavor;

5. **Empathy/helping**: a character or the child demonstrated an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of another, helped another, or demonstrated prosocial behavior;

6. **Reparation/guilt**: a character displayed feelings of guilt or made amends to another character;

7. **Atypical negative responses**: the child displays bizarre, incoherent, or unusual responses with a clear negative tone.

A child’s story completion could receive more than one code if multiple themes were presented in a single story. Content themes in each category were summed across all six stories to provide an overall frequency of each theme per transcript. In order to reduce the number of content themes, two composite content themes were formed by summing themes based on conceptual similarity (following Laible & Song, 2006; Oppenheim et al., 1997): (1) a prosocial composite \( (M = 2.70; SD = 1.41) \) that included empathy/helping, reparation/guilt, affiliation, affection; and (2) an aggressive composite \( (M = 1.90; SD = 2.00) \) that included aggression, personal injury, and atypical negative responses.

Children’s story completions were also coded on a nine-point scale for coherence (again following Oppenheim et al., 1997). The odd-numbered anchor points for the scale were as follows: 1 (fragmented, shifted story line); 3 (child understood conflict but did not offer resolution and part of the story was incoherent); 5 (child understood the conflict and handled it by using simplification of the story); 7 (child understood the story and offered resolution, but the story was short with no embellishment); and 9 (child understood conflict and offered embellished resolution; there were no incoherent segments) (Oppenheim et al., 1997). A composite score of narrative coherence was formed by averaging the scores across each of the six narratives \( (M = 5.21; SD = 1.31) \). The average intra-class correlation between the two raters on 15 transcripts was .96.

**Maternal Report Measures**

**Attachment.** Children’s level of attachment security was assessed by having mothers complete the AQS 3.0 (Waters & Deane, 1985) at their homes with the guidance of a trained researcher. The AQS is a widely used measure of attachment security for children of this age (see Teti & McGourty, 1996; Thompson, 1997), and the AQS has shown good construct validity in diverse populations, such as with African-American mothers (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Kroonenberg, 2004). In addition, maternal sorts have shown predictive validity with constructs related to attachment (see Laible & Thompson, 2000; Thompson et al., 2003). One study does suggest that mothers can provide data more consistent with observer sorts if they are blind to the construct being assessed, supervised while performing the sorts, and sent the Q-sort items in advance (Teti & McGourty, 1996). These procedures were followed for this study. Security scores ranged from .04 to .77 \( (M = .47, SD = .17) \).

**Family Emotional Climate.** To assess the emotional quality of the child’s home environment, mothers completed the SFI (Beavers, Hampson, & Hulgus, 1990). The SFI is a 36-item scale designed to assess the dynamics of family interaction. Previous research suggests that the SFI has good concurrent and construct validity in diverse populations (see Beavers et al., 1990). Three subscales of the SFI were included in this
study: conflict, cohesion, and emotional expressiveness. The conflict scale included 12 items that reflected blaming, fighting openly, and acceptance of inter-personal conflict ($\alpha = .87$, sample item: ‘We argue a lot and never solve problems’). Cohesion included five items that related to family togetherness ($\alpha = .60$, sample item: ‘Our family members would rather do things with other people than together’), and emotional expressiveness consisted of six items dealing with expressions of warmth, caring, and closeness ($\alpha = .83$, sample item: ‘Our family members touch and hug each other’). Although in the original scale lower scores meant higher functioning, for this study, the scales were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated better functioning.

Because expressions of warmth, cohesiveness, and lack of destructive conflict seem to be both empirically and theoretically related to the broader emotional climate in the home (see Beavers et al., 1990), the three scales were submitted to a principle components factor analyses, and a single factor emerged and was retained for further analyses. This factor was labeled ‘warm and cohesive family environment’ ($\lambda = 1.95$, 65.27 percent of the variance), because expressiveness, low conflict, and cohesion all loaded positively (with loadings >.68).

**Results**

Descriptive data on the reminiscing conversations appear in Table 1. $T$ tests revealed that for the most part, the discourse between mothers and children in the negative event conversations was richer than in the positive event conversations. Although the amount of elaboration and total emotion talk was not significantly different between the two conversations, mothers were more likely to discuss emotion causes and have in-depth conversations about emotion with their children in the negative event conversations than in the positive event conversations. In addition, mothers were more likely to confirm children’s negative emotions during the negative event conversations than in the positive event conversations. Surprisingly, children’s discussion of emotion causes, however, was more frequent in the positive event conversations.

Bivariate correlations between the maternal discourse elements from the negative and positive event conversations and attachment security, family climate, age, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive event conversations</th>
<th>Negative event conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration by mothers</td>
<td>2.90 (1.08)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total references to emotion by mothers</td>
<td>7.24 (4.64)</td>
<td>8.70 (6.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of emotion causes by mothers</td>
<td>.96 (1.12)</td>
<td>.08 (2.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion validations by mothers</td>
<td>.36 (.88)</td>
<td>1.00 (.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth discussions of emotion</td>
<td>.36 (.63)</td>
<td>.94 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total emotion references by children</td>
<td>2.02 (2.45)</td>
<td>2.40 (1.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of emotion causes by children</td>
<td>.40 (.63)</td>
<td>.08 (.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion validations by children</td>
<td>.70 (1.16)</td>
<td>.72 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Standard deviations in parentheses.

$^a$ The difference between the two means is significant at a $p < .01$ level.
gender appear in Table 2. None of the child discourse variables related to age, gender, attachment, or family climate, and as a result, they are not included in the tables. Maternal education and ethnicity were unrelated to any of the discourse variables and thus, are also not in the tables. Age and gender had only a couple of relationships with the discourse variables. Mothers discussed emotion causes more frequently with older children in the reminiscing conversations that surrounded a past negative event. Gender was related to the affective quality of both narratives. The affective quality of the narrative was higher in both reminiscing conversations between mothers and daughters than mothers and sons.

Attachment and family climate had a number of significant relationships with the quality of reminiscing. Both attachment security and a warm family climate were associated with high levels of maternal elaboration and affective quality across both the positive and the negative reminiscing conversations. With regard to the discussion of emotion, however, attachment and family climate were related principally to emotional-laden discourse by mothers in the negative event conversation. Mothers with securely attached children discussed the causes of emotion more and confirmed their children’s emotional experiences more than mothers of insecurely attached children in the negative event reminiscing conversations. In addition, a warm family climate was also associated with more talk about emotion and more discussion of emotion causes by mothers during the negative reminiscing event conversations (Table 3).

Regression models were built to predict emotional understanding and representations of relationships from the reminiscing variables from each conversation (see Tables 3 and 4). Surprisingly, none of the potential control variables (age, gender, mother education, ethnicity, attachment, and family climate), shared bivariate relations.

Table 2. Correlations Between Age, Gender, Attachment, and Reminiscing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative event conversation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Attachment security</th>
<th>Warm family climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective quality</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal elaboration</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth dyadic discussion of emotion</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.23†</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total maternal discussion of emotion</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal discussion of emotion causes</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal emotion validations</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Positive event conversation | | |
|-----------------------------| | |
| Affective quality           | .18  | .28*   | .41**               | .50**               |
| Maternal elaboration        | −.02 | .05    | .30*                | .31*                |
| In-depth dyadic discussion of emotion | .16  | .02    | .07                 | .09                 |
| Total maternal discussion of emotion | .19  | −.06   | .21                 | .17                 |
| Maternal discussion of emotion causes | .17  | −.03   | .01                 | .04                 |
| Maternal emotion validations | −.01 | −.08   | .04                 | .11                 |

† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01.
with any of the child outcomes, and thus, to preserve the subjects to variables ratio, they were not included in regression models. In addition, children’s discourse variables were unrelated to child outcomes (with the exception of children’s total emotion discussion during the negative reminiscing conversation that was weakly related to emotional understanding \( r = .29, p < .05 \)), and thus, the regression models were built with only maternal and dyadic predictors. Total maternal emotion talk was also unrelated to children’s socioemotional outcomes and thus, was also not included in the models. These variables were entered simultaneously into regression models because they were all presumed to be of equal theoretical importance. Finally, neither model predicting aggressive representations of relationships was significant, so this model was excluded from the tables.

None of the models using elements from the positive event conversations was significant. In contrast, the regression models predicting emotional understanding and prosocial and coherent representations of relationships from the negative event conversations were significant. In the model predicting emotional understanding, only maternal elaboration made a significant contribution to the model. Mothers who elaborated when discussing the child’s past negative emotional experiences had children who scored higher on emotional understanding.

In the model predicting representations of relationships, mother’s emotion validations made a significant contribution to the model. The more frequently mothers confirmed children’s negative emotional experiences, the more likely children were to represent prosocial themes when resolving relationship conflicts in the MacArthur story-stem battery. Finally, in the regression model predicting coherent representations of relationships, both the affective quality of the narrative and maternal elaboration made significant independent contributions to the model. Mother–child dyads who expressed high levels of warmth, low levels of hostility, and high levels of intersubjectivity and mutuality in the negative event conversations were composed of children who had coherent resolutions to relationship conflicts in the MSSB. Finally, mothers who elaborated frequently when discussing their children’s past negative emotions had children who were more likely to express coherent representations of relationships in the MSSB.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional understanding</th>
<th>Negative reminiscing conversation</th>
<th>Positive reminiscing conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictor</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective quality</td>
<td>(-.23)</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth discussion of emotion</td>
<td>(.26^\dagger)</td>
<td>(-.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal elaboration</td>
<td>(.53^{**})</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal discussion of emotion causes</td>
<td>(-.10)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal emotion validations</td>
<td>(-.06)</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negative reminiscing conversation \( R^2 = .28^{**} \); positive reminiscing conversation \( R^2 = .06 \).

\( ^\dagger p < .10, ^* p < .05, ^{**} p < .01 \).
This study was designed to examine the links between mother–child reminiscing about the child’s past emotional experiences, attachment security, family climate, and socio-emotional development. Consistent with previous research and theory (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible & Song, 2006; Thompson et al., 2003), the amount of maternal elaboration and the quality of mother–child affect during mother–child reminiscing was related to the child’s attachment security. Securely attached children had mothers who were more likely to elaborate with them when discussing their past positive and negative emotional experiences than mothers of insecure children. Other researchers have argued that one of the primary functions of reminiscing is to create social bonds between people (Reese, 2002), and as a result, it is probably not surprising that the quality of the attachment relationship also seems to relate to the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children. Mothers of secure children, who are presumed to have

Table 4. Regression Models Predicting Children’s Positive Representations of Relationships and Coherence from Discourse Elements in the Positive and Negative Event Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prosocial representations of relationships</th>
<th>Negative reminiscing conversation</th>
<th>Positive reminiscing conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictor</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective quality</td>
<td>.26†</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In depth discuss of emotion</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal elaboration</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal discussion of emotion causes</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal emotion validations</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.39†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negative reminiscing conversation $R^2 = .22*$; positive reminiscing conversation $R^2 = .15$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coherent representations of relationships</th>
<th>Negative reminiscing conversation</th>
<th>Positive reminiscing conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictor</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective quality</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth discuss of emotion</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal elaboration</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal discussion of emotion causes</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal emotion validations</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negative reminiscing conversation $R^2 = .26*$; Positive reminiscing conversation $R^2 = .13$.
† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the links between mother–child reminiscing about the child’s past emotional experiences, attachment security, family climate, and socio-emotional development. Consistent with previous research and theory (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible & Song, 2006; Thompson et al., 2003), the amount of maternal elaboration and the quality of mother–child affect during mother–child reminiscing was related to the child’s attachment security. Securely attached children had mothers who were more likely to elaborate with them when discussing their past positive and negative emotional experiences than mothers of insecure children. Other researchers have argued that one of the primary functions of reminiscing is to create social bonds between people (Reese, 2002), and as a result, it is probably not surprising that the quality of the attachment relationship also seems to relate to the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children. Mothers of secure children, who are presumed to have
a history of interactions with a responsive attachment figure in their own childhood, have coherent internal working models that facilitate elaborative communication from mother to child when discussing relational issues, such as during reminiscing (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Main, 1995).

In addition to elaboration, the affective exchange between securely attached children and their mothers was particularly rich during reminiscing, involving high levels of positive affect, mutuality, and inter-subjectivity and low levels of hostility. Previous research has supported the idea that securely attached children and their mothers share a more harmonious relationship and experience more positive affect during shared experiences than insecure dyads (see Thompson, 1999 for a review). A secure attachment relationship is presumed to produce a mutually responsive orientation, in which both the mother and the child are committed to maintaining relational harmony (Thompson, 1999).

Although attachment was not related to the overall amount of emotion talk during the negative event reminiscing conversation, it was associated with higher-quality emotion talk from mothers, including more discussion of emotion causes and more emotion validations by mothers. Attachment security was unrelated to the quality of emotion talk by mothers during the positive event conversation. Overall, these findings are consistent with the original ideas of attachment theory. A number of attachment theorists have argued for the idea that a secure attachment relationship should be characterized by the open sharing of negative emotions in the dyad (see, e.g., Cassidy, 1994; Laible & Panfile, 2009). In the context of reminiscing, the mother’s willingness to confirm the child’s experiences with negative emotion, as well as her willingness to help the child understand the causes of negative emotions, is likely one dimension of maternal sensitivity that promotes the child’s feelings of attachment security. In addition, this ability to validate and elaborate on the child’s emotion experiences, particularly in the negative event conversations, may be a reflection of the mother’s empathy.

Family climate was also consistently related to the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children in ways that were similar to attachment security. Dyads from warm and cohesive families were composed of mothers who were more elaborative during both reminiscing conversations and who were more likely to discuss emotion and emotion causes when discussing the child’s past negative emotional experiences. Warm, cohesive family climates may relate to the quality of reminiscing for two reasons. Firstly, in the context of a family where positive expressiveness is frequent and displays of conflict and negative affect are minimal, children may learn to regulate negative affect in ways that are more constructive (Garner, 1995). As a result of the fact that children are well regulated, mothers may be able to discuss emotional experiences with children, particularly negative ones, in ways that are open and elaborative without worrying about their children becoming overly aroused. Secondly, warmth is presumed to enhance children’s willingness to co-operate with parental directives (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Thus, in a family with a warm emotional climate, children are more willing to participate in reminiscing conversations with the mother, and mothers are capable of having higher-quality discussions with children.

Finally, it is important to note that family climate was also related to the quality of affect between mothers and children during both reminiscing conversations. Mothers and children from warm, cohesive family climates expressed more positive affect, were more co-operative and interested, and had higher levels of inter-subjectivity and mutuality during both reminiscing conversations. This may, in part, be because the quality...
of mother–child affect during the reminiscing conversations was a reflection of the broader family climate. In addition, these findings provide evidence that mothers are relatively accurate reporters of family emotional climate. In the context of a warm and cohesive family environment, children express frequent positive affect and co-operate during challenging parent–child interactions (such as when discussing their past negative emotions).

Age and gender were also related to the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children. Mothers were more likely to discuss the causes of emotions during the negative event reminiscing conversations with older children than younger children. This is consistent with previous research that supports the idea that mothers’ discussion of emotion does become more sophisticated as children become older (see Denham et al., 1992). Furthermore, the quality of mother–child affect during both reminiscing conversations was related to gender; mothers and daughters expressed more positive affect, mutuality, and inter-subjectivity and less hostility during these conversations than mothers and sons. Perhaps because girls are socialized to more openly express and discuss their feelings (Fivush, 1995; Kuebli et al., 1995), these types of reminiscing conversations are more commonplace and expected for girls, making them emotionally easier for both partners.

Consistent with previous research (Fivush et al., 2003), negative reminiscing conversations between mothers and children tended to involve more sophisticated discussion of emotion, supporting the idea that reminiscing conversations surrounding children’s past negative emotional experiences may provide a rich context in which children construct socioemotional understanding. In the negative event conversations, mothers were more likely to discuss the causes of emotions with children, have in-depth discussions about emotion with children, and were also more likely to confirm their emotional experiences. The one exception was that children’s discussion of emotion causes was actually more frequent during the positive reminiscing conversation than during the negative event conversations. This is somewhat surprising given that young children do tend to be more accurate in attributing causes to certain negative emotions such as distress and anger than to positive emotions (see Fabes, Eisenberg, McCormick, & Wilson, 1988). However, just because young children may be beginning to grasp the causes of negative emotion does not necessarily mean that children are discussing these causes.

In the end, it was the quality of mother–child reminiscing when discussing the child’s past negative emotional experiences that was related to emotional and relational understanding. Maternal elaboration during the discussion of the negative events, in particular, was linked both with children’s emotional understanding and coherent representations of relationships. Given that children struggle with making sense of negative emotions (Laible & Panfile, 2009), it does not seem surprising that mothers’ willingness to elaborate on their children’s past negative emotional experiences helps them to construct emotional understanding. By providing rich background detail when discussing children’s past negative emotional experiences, mothers are helping children to construct rich memories of these experiences and to scaffold children’s understanding of their past experiences in ways that are consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory. These detailed memories help to shape not only children’s current emotional understanding but also children’s internal working models about their relational experiences (Fivush, 2006; Laible & Panfile, 2009).

In addition, maternal emotion validation and the quality of affect between mothers and children in the negative event conversations related to more prosocial and coherent
representations of relationships. By confirming the child’s negative emotions when discussing the child’s past negative emotional experiences, children learn that others will be responsive to their distress. This acceptance and validation of negative emotion by mothers also likely promotes children’s feelings of security and trust in the parent, and contributes to their construction of prosocial models of relationships. Similarly, a warm emotional climate between the mother and the child, especially when discussing difficult issues, such as the child’s past negative emotional experiences, likely promotes the child’s willingness to embrace maternal messages during these conversations and enhances children’s relational understanding.

Finally, it is important to point out that children’s emotional discourse was not related to either attachment, family climate or the child’s socioemotional development. Given that mothers are the early architects of these conversations, often raising and discussing emotion, this is probably not surprising (Laible & Song, 2006). In fact, in comparison with mothers, children’s discussion of emotion and emotion causes was relatively infrequent. Thus, children’s discussion of emotion may be more predictive of their socioemotional development once they have internalized the narrative structure of these conversations and become more involved in shaping the course of these conversations, which typically does not happen until late in the preschool years (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

Of course, as with any study, this one has several important limitations. Firstly, the sample was both relatively small and homogenous, involving primarily White, middle-class children and mothers. Recent research has supported the idea that the nature and function of reminiscing does vary across cultures and ethnic groups (Fivush & Wang, 2005; Wang, 2004; Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000), and thus, generalizing the findings from this study to other cultural groups seems unwise. In addition, preliminary research on working-class White mothers suggests that these mothers are more directive in their reminiscing than middle-class mothers (Burger & Miller, 1999). More work on socioeconomic status and the nature of reminiscing is clearly needed. Finally, because this study was correlational and involved only concurrent assessments, the direction of effects is not clear. Although these findings are consistent with a causal theoretical model, given the correlational design, these findings do not indicate causality.

Finally, it is important to point out that this study used mothers to complete the AQS, and given the recent controversy surrounding the use of maternal sorts to measure attachment security (see Tarabulsy et al., 2008; van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004), these findings should also be replicated using observer sorts or other measures of attachment security. Work by van IJzendoorn et al. (2004) suggests that observer sorts have higher correlations with strange situation classifications than maternal sorts. However, it is important to point out that in the van IJzendoorn et al. (2004) meta-analysis, both maternal and observer sorts were significantly correlated with strange situation classifications. In addition, maternal reported Q sorts showed modest correlations with theoretically relevant constructs, such as sensitivity and social competence (van IJzendoorn et al., 2004). Therefore, clearly more work is needed to determine whether and under what circumstances maternal-reported Q sorts can provide valid data.

Despite the limitations, this study has important implications for future research on mother–child reminiscing. Future researchers need to understand that not all reminiscing conversations may promote children’s understanding equally. It seems that the topics of conversations may in fact matter, especially when considering the links that
reminiscing has with both attachment security (and other measures of relationship quality), and children’s socioemotional understanding. For example, young children’s socioemotional understanding may be most promoted by discussing topics (such as negative emotion), that children struggle with understanding. In addition, future researchers may want to examine how fathers’ reminiscing about emotional events impacts children’s developing understanding. Although researchers have not tended to find differences in reminiscing between fathers and mothers (see Reese & Fivush, 1993), researchers have not tended to examine how fathers’ reminiscing impacts children’s developing emotional and relational understanding. Finally, researchers need to examine whether reminiscing in the laboratory is linked with the type of reminiscing that mothers and children engage in at home under more naturalistic conditions.

References


