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Talking (or Not Talking) about the Past: The Influence of Parent–Child Conversation about Negative Experiences on Children’s Memories

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Summary: We review research investigating the influence of conversations between parents and their children about past negative experiences on children’s memory and management of their emotional experiences. To do so, we are guided by social cultural developmental theory and a developmental psychopathology framework. In the first section, we first discuss the ‘best case’ scenario, in which parents and child have a close relationship within which the child’s negative emotions can be discussed and understood, and the child’s ability to remember her experiences in a detailed and coherent narrative form is optimised. In the second section, we turn to the most problematic scenario of child maltreatment, including child sexual abuse, and consider the implications for children’s memory when these optimizing factors are not present or are limited. Finally, we discuss exemplar intermediary scenarios. We propose that early problems acquiring critical skills for remembering emotional experiences in the context of parent–child relationships can have negative consequences for children’s memory but also for their psychological functioning more broadly, which can extend across development. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

“On where the lights and shadows fall: on not being able to remember and not being able to forget” (Sodré, In Wood & Byatt, 2009, p.41)

Some experiences from our past can be recalled and discussed as narratives or stories that are rich in descriptive detail and brought to mind readily as we negotiate life’s circumstances. But, other personal memories, perhaps most, remain in the shadows of awareness. Many are not readily accessible or particularly coherent, ‘flitter(ing) just out of reach like lost threads of broken webs’ (A.S. Byatt, 2009, p.xii), and many cannot be recalled at all. As we now know from the abundant research investigating this central question in psychology, the fates of personal memories depend on myriad factors relating, ultimately, to the experience and the experiencer.

In this review, our focus is the child as experiencer of negative experiences and the role of adult–child conversation in how such experiences are recalled. We ask, specifically, under what circumstances does conversation between adults and children help children to report a detailed and coherent personal narrative of negative events in their lives, or, at the other end of a potential continuum, to provide a skeletal and impoverished account? This is an important question. To foreshadow our review, it is well established that the style and content of parent–child conversations about past experiences have significant consequences for children’s ability to understand, manage, and remember specific negative (and positive) experiences and, more generally, for their pathways to psychological wellbeing or psychopathology (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Wareham & Salmon, 2006). For theoretical and practical reasons, it is of critical importance that we delineate the circumstances under which particular kinds of discussions occur, are compromised, or are absent.

To consider the role of adult–child conversation in the establishment and maintenance of personal memories, we draw,

first, on social–cultural developmental theory (Nelson & Fivush, 2004), which proposes that young children develop the skills that are essential to create and share autobiographical memories in the context of personal interactions, and in particular, conversations between parent and child about the past. These essential skills include a coherent account of life events that describes a consistent identity over time (Fivush & Merrill, 2014). Of course, autobiographical memory also comprises images and a great deal of other sensory information (Fivush, 2011). Language and narrative are neither sufficient nor necessary for these imagistic forms of memory. Language and narrative are necessary, however, for sharing memories with others and for the identity functions of autobiographical memory.

Two tenets of a developmental psychopathology perspective also guide our review. First, the child’s pathway to any psychological outcome is shaped by multiple transactions within and between individuals, all of which occur within the broader cultural and societal context. Moreover, these transactions can have cascading effects over time, which can be positive or negative depending on whether the child has—or has not—acquired foundational skills (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). Similarly, we propose that complex interactions of societal, familial, dyadic, and individual factors determine whether discussion of negative experiences between parent and child is encouraged or enabled, hindered or prevented (Fivush, 2010). Language and parent–child conversation provide the critical context for children to learn ways of remembering, understanding, narrating, and processing their emotional experiences. These often-implicit permissions or prohibitions therefore have considerable but varied implications for children’s ability to learn narrative skills in general, to recount a specific experience, and for their understanding and management of their emotional responses. Early problems in this important domain may, in interaction with other risk factors, lead to negative cascades across development, in which impoverished parent–child conversations and poor memory for emotional experiences (less detailed, coherent, and less emotionally skilled) at an

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earlier life period increase the risk of poorer memory—and poorer psychological wellbeing—at the next (Salmon & O’Kearney, 2014).

Second, an understanding of the factors that promote normal or typical development is essential to explanations of atypical development and vice versa (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). By far the greatest amount of research investigating the influence of parent–child discussions of the past on children’s developing memory skill has been conducted with relatively high-functioning parent (particularly mother)—child dyads; very little has focused on families where the patterns of interaction do not support the child’s optimal development. It is timely to extend social–cultural developmental theory by considering the extent to which these same processes are found in atypical samples.

In the spirit of both social–cultural developmental and developmental psychopathology perspectives, therefore, we first review the research establishing the maternal reminiscing factors associated with children’s optimal memory development. We present a best-case scenario in which parent and child experience a close relationship, they are discussing a positive event or skilfully managing a negative experience, and neither parent nor child wishes to intentionally misdirect the other person’s memory. It is against this background that we then consider the potential implications of less than optimal contexts. First, we will discuss how long-term memory may differ when parent and child are discussing stressful or traumatic events, with a focus on child sexual abuse in particular and, acknowledging the overlap among all abuse subtypes, child maltreatment more generally (Pears, Kim & Fisher, 2008). Thereafter, we focus on more commonly occurring intermediary scenarios (that is, between the best and worst case scenarios). We acknowledge, however, that given the dearth of research directly investigating this issue, much of our thinking is speculative.

Finally, we note that there are large literatures on the extent to which children’s memory reports are vulnerable to misinformation provided by adults. This has been amply reviewed elsewhere and is not our focus (see Ceci, Kulkofsky, Klemfuss, Sweeney, & Bruck 2007) for review). Although we do not review the suggestibility literature *per se*, we acknowledge that memory is fluid and dynamic (Fivush & Edwards, 2004); every time we discuss a memory with another person, our perspective on the event may be altered, even if neither conversational partner is intentionally misleading the other. Indeed, these changes can strengthen the memory, as we will argue in the succeeding texts. Another literature that is beyond the scope of the current paper is on cultural differences in parent–child reminiscing. Parental reminiscing that focuses on the child’s personal experiences and perspectives is celebrated in Western middle-class cultures (Wang, 2013). In other cultures, this form of reminiscing is not as elaborate, or is even considered inappropriate (Wang, 2001; Wang & Fivush, 2005). Our review will instead focus on individual differences among parents in their reminiscing and implications for children’s memory. Most of this research has been conducted with Western parents and their children.

PARENT–CHILD REMINISCING AND CHILDREN’S MEMORY OF DISCUSSED EVENTS

The best case scenario

How does parent–child reminiscing affect children’s long-term memory for events? Typically, developing children begin to refer to past events in conversation in the second year of life, soon after they begin to talk (Reese, 1999; Sachs, 1983). Individual parents respond to these early verbal references to the past (*Monkey gone*) in consistent ways over time: Some parents praise children’s past event references and elaborate on them with cue-laden questions and statements (*That’s right! We saw a monkey at the zoo yesterday. And what did the monkey do that was so funny?*). These parents with a highly elaborative style can extend these early references into a complete conversation about a past event, albeit a lopsided one, with parents contributing much more than children. Other parents do not provide as much praise or elaboration. In past event conversations that they have initiated with the child, they will ask the same question with variation repeatedly over the course of a conversation (*What did we see at the zoo? Tell me, what did we see?*). Not surprisingly, children of parents with a highly elaborative style provide more information about the past event in the same conversation with the parent; over time, these children also provide more elaborate memory information with their mothers and with researchers questioning them about the same event or about different events (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden, Ornstein, Rudek, & Cameron, 2008; Hudson, 1990; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006 for a review). And, although parents are more elaborative with children who have more advanced language skills, the long-term link between maternal elaboration and children’s memory remains even when children’s language is covaried (e.g. Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush et al., 2006). Little research has investigated parent–child reminiscing beyond the preschool years. Findings so far suggest that mothers and fathers continue to exhibit individual differences in their elaborative reminiscing styles (Fivush, Marin, McWilliams, & Bohanek, 2009; Fivush, 2014), yet their styles are sensitive to children’s narrative and memory capabilities. For example, Habermas, Negele and Brenneisen Mayer (2010) reported that during co-narration of their adolescent’s life story, mothers adapt their style to their child’s level of competence by supporting those elements of the child’s skills that were about to develop.

In experimental research, when we coached some mothers to reminisce more elaboratively with their toddlers, by age 3–1/2 years the children of mothers who received coaching provided more accurate and complete memories about events to a researcher compared with children of mothers who did not receive coaching (Reese & Newcombe, 2007). This effect was stronger for children who as toddlers had higher levels of self-awareness. Children who have experienced elaborative reminiscing early in the preschool period are also more likely to report their memories later to others in the form of detailed and coherent narratives (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Reese & Newcombe, 2007). Research on the individual memories that survive the early

childhood period pinpoint the narrative coherence of the memory—in particular the development of a theme or main point of the narrative—soon after its occurrence as the most critical predictor of its fate (Morris, Baker-Ward & Bauer, 2010). By the later preschool years, the children of parents who are highly elaborative have internalised an elaborative style of talking about the past that extends beyond the specific event (Reese et al., 1993), such that memories are more likely to be structured in a coherent narrative form.

It is likely that parents who are highly elaborative in their reminiscing are also parents who talk elaboratively about events as they are occurring (Hedrick, San Souci, Haden, & Ornstein, 2009). In a series of studies using constructed events in the laboratory or home, such as a pretend camping trip or zoo visit, researchers have isolated the precise effects that elaborative talk has on children's verbal and nonverbal memory for specific objects and features of the event. In these experimental studies, adults' elaborative talk, both about ongoing events and afterwards, strengthens preschool children's verbal and nonverbal memory for those objects and features that are elaborated upon (Boland, Haden, & Ornstein, 2003; Hedrick, Haden, & Ornstein, 2009; McGuigan & Salmon, 2004; 2006). Hedrick, San Souci et al. (2009) clarified that these effects are not driven solely by the adult: children later remember more about a specific feature of an event if both mother and child jointly discussed that feature during the event.

In sum, in the best case scenario, parents can strengthen their children's memories for a specific event by elaborating upon features of the event at the time of occurrence and afterwards. These effects are strongest when parents are sensitive to the features of the event children are most interested in discussing and engage in a joint discussion of those features, and the findings also extend to children's nonverbal recall. Children internalise this elaborative style of reminiscing by the end of the preschool years such that they now remember more themselves about a range of events and report those memories in more complete narratives. It is possible that this elaborative style is operating both at the time of encoding events as well as at retrieval (Ornstein & Haden, 2001). The narrative coherence of the memory then helps it to endure beyond the preschool years (Morris et al., 2010; Peterson, Morris, Baker-Ward, & Flynn, 2014).

Parents who are sensitive to children's perspective on an event are likely to be sensitive in general in their interactions with their children. Parental sensitivity in the first year of life is strongly linked to children developing a secure attachment to that parent (e.g. Ainsworth et al., 1978). Around 2/3 of the dyads in typically developing samples are securely attached to a parent (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2009). A child who is securely attached to a parent has built up trust in the parent through his or her everyday interactions (and conversations) to the point that he or she is able to use the parent as a secure base to retreat to in times of need, and from which the child is able to explore their environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 2008). Crucially, children who are securely attached are likely to have had a parent who responds sensitively to their needs. Attachment security is a critical construct when

considering the role that parent–child reminiscing plays in children's memory. Mothers of securely attached children have more elaborative and emotional conversations about past events and are more responsive to their children's contributions, compared with mothers of insecurely attached children (Bost et al., 2006; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Reese & Farrant, 2003). Young children who are securely attached to their mothers are more likely to internalise the mothers' style of talking about events over the preschool years, especially when it comes to the emotional content of events (Newcombe & Reese, 2004). Memories with more emotional content are more likely to survive in the long-term (Peterson et al., 2014). Talk about emotions during reminiscing also enhances children's knowledge emotions (van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, & Allen, 2009), which is linked to their ability to regulate emotions (Denham et al., 2003). When children can understand and label their own and others' emotional experiences, they are in a better position to manage those emotions more effectively. Reminiscing appears to be one route for children's emotion talk and understanding (Fivush, 2001).

Another critical feature of parents' reminiscing style is the degree to which they support the child's point of view in the conversation—whether they are autonomy supportive rather than controlling in the direction of the conversation. This dimension is independent from the degree to which parents are elaborative in the conversation, and again is likely to be related to parental sensitivity. A parent can have a highly elaborative style and be simultaneously controlling by providing a great deal of information about a particular aspect of the event, but not necessarily the aspect the child wants to discuss. A parent can also have a highly elaborative and autonomy supportive style by following the child's lead in the conversation and elaborating on those aspects the child wants to discuss. For children's memory, the combination of highly elaborative and autonomy supportive reminiscing is best, perhaps because children of these parents are more engaged in the conversations (Cleveland & Morris, 2014; Cleveland & Reese, 2005; Cleveland, Reese, & Grolnick, 2007).

These emotional undercurrents are particularly important when parents and children are discussing negative past events. When talking about negative past events with their children, parents typically have a goal of helping children to understand negative emotions or to correct previous misbehaviour (e.g. Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009). The research on parent–child discussion of past negative events ranges from talk about fairly mundane negative events (e.g. a child's misbehaviour or minor injury) to more extreme negative events (e.g. parental separation or a natural disaster). Parent–child conversations about past negative emotions are different from those about positive past events: they are longer on average, and they contain more negative emotional content and more temporal and causal references (Ackil, van Abbema, & Bauer, 2003; Bauer et al. 2005; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003) (although see Fivush et al. 2009) for a different pattern with pre-adolescents). Parents appear to work harder to create a coherent account of negative events for their young children such that the narrative is temporally ordered, causal linkages are made explicit, and the emotional significance of the event is clear.

But does elaborative reminiscing about negative events help children's memory for those events? Recall that in the experimental studies discussed earlier, children's verbal and nonverbal memory for events was more complete when adults used more elaborative language in their discussions during and after the event. This finding suggests that reminiscing is influencing memory in a deeper way than simply at the level of children's reporting about events. Similar to these findings, in the natural disaster studies, children later included more information with their mothers about specific aspects of the event, such as their perception of sounds, when mothers had mentioned those aspects earlier in their conversations (Bauer et al., 2005). Children who experienced an emergency room (ER) visit provided more complete and accurate accounts two years later to an experimenter when their mothers reminisced elaboratively with them soon after the event (Peterson, Sales, Rees, & Fivush, 2007). Other studies find even stronger relations between parents' elaborative reminiscing and children's memory provisions over time in negative event conversations than in positive event conversations (Sales et al., 2003; Bauer, Burch, Van Abbema & Ackil, 2007). However, we acknowledge that all of these works with stressful and negative events has been correlational and primarily for children's memory contributions with the same conversational partner over time. Moreover, the accuracy checks were conducted against mothers' reports of the experiences.

In an experimental investigation of this issue, (van Bergen et al. 2009) coached mothers of preschoolers to reminisce in more elaborative and emotional ways about naturally occurring events. Immediately after the intervention and 6 months later, children of mothers coached in elaborative reminiscing produced more memory information in conversations with their mothers compared with children in a control group. At the 6-month post-test, however, this effect had not yet generalised to their memory with an experimenter about a range of past events. As noted previously, children in the elaborative reminiscing group also increased in their emotion talk and emotion knowledge (their ability to provide labels and causes for emotions) after the intervention relative to children in the control group. We know that emotion knowledge helps children to regulate their emotions (Denham et al., 2003), a link that will become critical when we present the less-than-ideal scenarios in the succeeding texts.

The burgeoning literature on parent-child reminiscing about negative, stressful, and traumatic events indicates that attachment security is once again an important component. When reminiscing about negative events, children who are securely attached to their parents experience reminiscing with a higher emotional quality—higher levels of positive affect and greater validation of their emotions (Laible, 2011)—compared with children who are not securely attached. These findings are particularly striking in the context of research on a medically necessary yet very stressful experience for children: a voiding cystourethrogram fluoroscopy (VCUG) procedure. In this series of studies, mothers' own attachment orientation was measured rather than children's attachment security to mothers. Mothers rated their romantic relationships with respect to dimensions of security, anxiety-ambivalence, and avoidance. Children of

mothers with a secure orientation later had more accurate memories of the VCUG procedure and were less stressed during and after the procedure compared with children of mothers with an avoidant orientation (e.g. Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberger, & Kuhn, 1997) (see Goodman, Ogle, McWilliams, Narr, & Paz-Alonso (2014) and Weede Alexander, Quas, & Goodman (2002) for reviews). Goodman et al. (2014) argued that mothers with an avoidant orientation are less likely to prepare their children before the procedure and talk through it afterward. Children subsequently are more distressed during and after the procedure, and their memory also suffers as a result of the lack of pre-procedure and post-procedure discussion.

Conclusions

The overall conclusions to make from these observational, longitudinal, and experimental research paradigms are that in a Western middle-class context, in which personal memories are prized, parent-child reminiscing generally serves to strengthen children's memory for events, whether those events are positive or negative. These effects are particularly strong for verbal renditions of the memory, such that children who have experienced elaborative reminiscing report their memories in more coherent narratives later to others. However, the experimental research shows that these effects extend to the completeness of the nonverbal representations of the memories as well, so it is not simply the case that children of elaborative parents tell better *stories* about events. Parents have fairly stable and consistent reminiscing styles over time (Reese et al., 1993), and parents with a more highly elaborative reminiscing style transfer that style over time to their children. Parents become more elaborative as their children's language and memory become more advanced, but the effects of an elaborative reminiscing style on children's memory hold even after controlling for children's language skill (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Reese & Newcombe, 2007). Children are also more likely to internalise the parent's reminiscing style when elaborations are presented in an autonomy supportive manner about topics the child is interested in discussing. Finally, children who are securely attached to the parent are more likely to take on that parent's reminiscing style, especially when it comes to the emotional aspects of events. Securely attached children, and children of parents with a secure attachment orientation, are able to have more open and validating discussions with their parents about negative past events, and in turn, their memories of negative events are more accurate.

These effects of elaborative and sensitive reminiscing for children's memory also extend to emotional aspects of children's memory. Children's increased tendency to talk about the emotions associated with the event is in turn linked to their knowledge of emotions and ultimately to their ability to regulate their own emotions. Self-regulation of emotions is critical for children's ability to cope with stressful events.

In the context of these findings showing how children develop the ability to remember and report their experiences in a coherent, detailed narrative form, in the following section, we consider how societal, familial, and individual

factors, collectively or individually, might converge to compromise these kinds of parent–child conversations and children’s memory development.

The most problematic scenario

Child maltreatment, and in particular, child sexual abuse, provides the clearest example of the effective silencing of conversations between parent and child about negative experiences (e.g. Fivush, 2010), as prohibitions at the societal, familial, dyadic, and individual levels converge. In saying this, we acknowledge that sexual abuse encompasses a wide range of experiences from a single incident of unwanted touching by a non-family member to maltreatment escalating over years and including recurrent episodes of sexual intercourse by a biological father (Trickett, Noll, & Putnam, 2011). It is the latter end of this continuum that is our focus in this section. As it is ‘relatively commonplace’ for maltreated children to experience multiple types of abuse, however (Pears et al., 2008, p.959), we discuss the specific experiences of the sexually abused child within the context of the dynamics and sequelae of child maltreatment more generally.

The criminal nature of sexual offending, together with societal attitudes towards its victims, provides the broad social context that impedes or silences conversations between a child and her non-offending parent about what is occurring or has occurred. Sexual abuse of children has long been a crime, unlike physical maltreatment (Myers, 2009). Yet, despite improvements in the awareness of child sexual abuse in Western societies, there is still considerable ambivalence towards children who have experienced sexual abuse. One contributing factor is misguided beliefs about children’s sexuality (e.g. girls are sexual beings and may be culpable for abusive experiences) (Weathered, 2015). Particularly, striking are findings that more than half of the participants in studies of adult survivors indicated that they told no-one about their sexual abuse during childhood; that is, it was not discussed at all (London, Bruck, Wright, & Ceci, 2008; Pipe, Orbach, Lamb, & Cederborg, 2007).

At the levels of the family and the mother–child dyad, significant impediments to discussions of the child’s experiences arise from the impoverished, stressful, and chaotic home environments, in which multiple types of child maltreatment disproportionately occur, with high levels of parental psychopathology, conflict, and violence (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). Within such difficult family contexts, parents are unlikely to engage in conversation with their children and to tailor their interactions to the child’s developmental level (Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004), to talk sensitively about the present and past, or to provide comfort and understanding when she or he is distressed (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). This is particularly problematic because the children may be young and especially dependent on parental scaffolding for their developing memory and emotion understanding and interpretational skills. Children under age 3 years have the highest rates of maltreatment, and the median age for experiencing child sexual abuse is around 7.5 years (with a mean duration of about two years) (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Trickett et al., 2011). We know from the studies with

typically developing children that age 3.5 years is the youngest age at which they are able to give a relatively coherent narrative about a positive event to someone who was not present (e.g. Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995). Research also suggests that it is not until around age 12 years that typically developing children bring interpretive content, reflecting their own unique perspective, into their personal narratives (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

It is not surprising that children who experience all types of maltreatment are at considerably heightened risk of developing insecure attachment relationships with their caregiver (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). They are more likely than nonmaltreated children to have delays in language development and achieve a lower level of language skill, associated with less exposure to language (Beeghly, 2006; Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004; Trickett et al., 2011). Maltreated children also have difficulty understanding others’ emotions and thoughts and regulating their own emotional and behavioural responses. Instead, they are especially attentive to negative information in their environments as a response to their perception of threat and manifest high levels of emotional reactivity and immature and avoidant coping strategies (Ayoub et al., 2006; Repetti et al., 2002; Shipman et al., 2007).

The relatively few observational studies of the interactional styles of families with high levels of negative affect have focused on how parent–child dyads manage emotion during their conversations rather than also on their reminiscing style. These findings confirm that parents in more conflictual families are less likely to engage in conversations about feelings with their children (Dunn & Brown, 1994); are less successful at helping their children move out of negative affect during discussions of past conflict (Lougheed, Hollenstein, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Granic, 2015); provide less discussion of causes, consequences, and coping strategies; and are more invalidating of the child’s response when such discussions do occur (which are sometimes initiated by the child) (McDonald, Jouriles, Rosenfield, & Leahy, 2012; Shipman et al., 2007; Shipman & Zeman, 1999). Mothers’ elaborative reminiscing about emotional experiences mediates the concurrent link between maltreatment and children’s language, emotion knowledge, and physiological regulation (Valentino et al., in press). Maltreating mothers engage in less elaborative reminiscing with their children, and elaborative reminiscing is in turn linked to children’s language and emotion knowledge skills, as well as to patterns of cortisol responding over the day. Moreover, maltreating parents can be taught to reminisce in more elaborative and sensitive ways, with resulting benefits for their children’s memory and emotion references about emotional experiences (Valentino, Comas, Nuttall, & Thomas, 2013).

In summary, in the stressful and chaotic home environments experienced by many maltreated children, parents are less likely to reminisce with their children in an elaborative and sensitive manner that provides them with the skills for understanding and remembering their emotional experiences in a coherent narrative form and to understand, label, and ultimately, manage their emotional experience. Yet the evidence is promising that maltreating parents can be taught to reminisce in more elaborative and sensitive ways with

their children, with resulting benefits for children's memory and emotional development.

Child sexual abuse imposes additional unique barriers to parent-child reminiscing conversations. Children who experience child sexual abuse are at elevated risk of having a mother who has also experienced sexual abuse (almost 50%) (Trickett et al., 2011). The demands of parenting and/or their child's disclosure of sexual abuse may bring to the fore mothers' own sexual abuse memories and fears. This process is likely to be exacerbated if she experiences the pervasive psychopathology that can result from chronic and severe child sexual abuse, which includes dysregulated emotions, re-experiencing the abuse in memory, guilt, and disconnection from others (Bryant, 2010; Wright, Fopma-Loy, & Oberle, 2012). Thus, a mother who experienced sexual abuse as a child might look to her child as her emotional caregiver rather than scaffolding the child's developing skills; she may be very angry towards her child, she may withdraw from any mention of her child's abuse or other negative experiences, or she may compulsively question the child about aspects of what occurred or her safety (Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001; Wright et al., 2012). Each of these patterns is likely to compromise the child's autobiographical memory and emotional development. In contrast, where mothers demonstrate greater resolution of their own sexual abuse experience, reflected in their reports of being able to tell others and to regulate their abuse-related thoughts, their children provide more coherent (fluent and clear) narratives when discussing shared emotionally laden experiences (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Getzler-Yosef, 2008).

For the sexually abused child, barriers to discussing her negative experiences while the abuse is ongoing or after discovery/disclosure can include intense feelings of shame, self blame, distrust of others, the fear of negative consequences arising from loyalty to the perpetrator, and/or his threats (legal involvement, physical harm to the child themselves, or those close to them) (Feiring, Simon, Cleland, & Barrett, 2013; Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). Moreover, following disclosure or discovery, the child or young person is vulnerable to a range of symptoms of psychopathology that extend across many years (Fergusson, McLeod, & Horwood, 2013). The chronic nature of intrafamilial abuse as children undergo rapid developmental change renders it almost inevitable that they will experience complex and extensive trauma-related symptomatology characterised by arousal and avoidance (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Trickett et al., 2011). These features, too, may motivate the child to remain silent, as she attempts to avoid the strong emotions elicited by her memories (Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

Finally, the child's private and secretive interactions with the perpetrator may add confusion to her understanding—and possible memory—of her experience (Pipe et al., 2007). Sexual offenders typically engage in a process of 'grooming', in which they befriend the child to gain trust, acquiescence to abusive activity, and secrecy (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006). Over time, therefore, conversation between the offender and child, as the experiences unfold or later, may range from goals of relationship forming and flattery to include threats and intimidation and may aim to convince the child that what is occurring is

normal or pleasurable (Black, Wollis, Woodworth, & Hancock, 2015; O Ciardha & Ward, 2012).

In summary, the interactional patterns specific to child sexual abuse are also likely to preclude the kinds of constructive and sensitive reminiscing conversations about the child's abusive experiences that are central to children's developing autobiographical memory and emotion understanding skill. These include the potential disruptions to parenting that may occur because of the increased likelihood of the mother's own child sexual abuse history, and the child's self-silencing as societal attitudes towards child sexual abuse interacts with the perpetrator's grooming behaviours and the child's shame, guilt, and psychological symptomatology.

Potential implications for children's memory

In this most problematic case scenario, there are a range of deliberate and more inadvertent factors at the societal, familial, and individual levels that silence or constrain sensitive and elaborative parent-child reminiscing, particularly about negative events, and the child's autobiographical remembering and emotion management skills. The lack of these foundational skills may contribute to particular styles of remembering, which may, of course, co-occur in the individual child.

Forgetting

Children's experiences may gradually be forgotten. Indeed, findings suggest that as for non-stressful experiences, forgetting and inconsistency in recall of traumatic experiences, both abusive and non-abusive, are normative (Greenhoot & Sun, 2014).

Interpretation of these findings of forgetting and inconsistency in the long-term recall of individuals who have experienced highly aversive experiences can be complicated by difficulty differentiating forgetting from non-reporting. For example, although traumatised youth in war settings can show apparently inconsistent memory in nominating different experiences as their most distressing on different interview occasions, but this appears to reflect a reordering of their hierarchy of lifetime distressing experiences in light of their current concerns rather than forgetting (Panter-Brick, Grimon, Kalin, & Eggerman, 2014). Similarly, about half of research participants with documented histories of childhood maltreatment do not self-report their experience (physical and sexual abuse) when interviewed as adults (Smith, Ireland, Thornberry, & Elwyn, 2008); approximately 20% do not report documented sexual abuse even when there has been a criminal prosecution of the offender (Goodman et al., 2003), and some adult women who experienced child sexual abuse show inconsistencies in their recall of their experiences within the same interview (Fivush & Edwards, 2004). These patterns are consistent with the underreporting and omission of the particularly sensitive aspects of their experience demonstrated by sexually abused children when interviewed by authorities (Leander, Granhag, & Christianson, 2005). In other words, experiences of maltreatment—or other adverse experiences—may be forgotten over time, but current motivations to suppress reporting

or alterations in life experiences may also play an important role in what is recalled and reported.

For some of the children in our most problematic scenario, forgetting may be over and above that experienced by their typically developing peers. One contributing factor may be the lack of narrative coherence of the child's early memories and limited subsequent revisiting (or reinstatement) of the memory in conversation; as we discussed earlier, narrative coherence helps memories to persist over time (Morris et al., 2010). A second overlapping factor may be that in the context of an avoidant attachment relationship and lack of validation of her feelings and discussion of their causes, the child has developed avoidant coping strategies in which she attempts to ignore or suppress her negative memories (Goodman, Quas, & Ogle, 2010; Marche & Salmon, 2013). In support of this possibility is the research by Goodman and colleagues, discussed in our first section, demonstrating the influence of the parents' avoidant attachment status on children's distress during and poorer memory of the VCUG.

Differential forgetting

It is possible that in the context of our most problematic scenario, some aspects of the child's experience (those repeatedly discussed or thought about) will be recalled at the expense of others (those avoided or ignored). This is the phenomenon of 'retrieval-induced forgetting', which occurs when the act of retrieving some information from memory causes related, but unretrieved, information to be forgotten. Retrieval-induced forgetting is well established in adults, including in relation to autobiographical memories, and has also been demonstrated in children (Barnier, Hung, & Conway, 2004; Conroy & Salmon, 2005, 2006; Murayama, Miyatsu, Buchli, & Storm, 2014). Research suggests that forgetting is more likely when the child does not have a clear understanding of the connections or linkages between aspects of the experience (Conroy & Salmon, 2005).

We can speculate about the kinds of parent–child conversations that might inadvertently result in forgetting of some aspects of children's negative experiences but strong memory for others. For example, in our first section, we described the style of an elaborative but controlling parent who, during reminiscing, provides a great deal of information about one aspect of an event that coincides with her own interests, but does not follow the interests of her child. In the context of child sexual abuse, the kinds of intrusive questioning that a preoccupied and anxious parent might repeatedly engage in and the child's own tendency to focus on the least sensitive and shameful aspects of her abuse may also increase the likelihood that the non-discussed or reported aspects of the experience will be forgotten. To date, however, there is no research on the long-term consequences of retrieval-induced forgetting for children's recall.

Poor narrative ability

Another potential consequence of impoverished parent–child conversation about negative emotional experiences is that the children's memory is rendered particularly vulnerable to the psychological consequences of trauma. It is conceivable, for example, that children's already fragile narrative skill is further disrupted by intense feelings at the time of

reminiscing or recollecting, so that they have particular difficulty recounting their experiences in a coherent, detailed, and emotionally regulated manner. In other words, children may produce less coherent memory narratives in general but particularly for traumatic experiences.

Although findings have been mixed, some research with non-maltreated youth has shown that trauma narratives differ from those about non-traumatic experiences (O'Kearney & Perrott, 2006; Salmon & O'Kearney, 2014). Salmond et al. (2011) compared the trauma and non-trauma narratives of youth who had experienced an accident or assault within the past month and also with those of youth with no trauma symptoms. High levels of trauma symptoms in youth were associated with less coherent and more disorganised narratives of the trauma experience only (e.g. repetitions, expressions of uncertainty, and confusions). Studies with young people who have experienced sexual abuse as children yield suggestive findings. Simon, Feiring, & Kobielski McElroy (2010) reported that 6 years after disclosure, only a minority of young people reported coherent narratives reflecting understanding of their abuse memories (defined as, for example, recounting from the point of view of themselves as children but retaining a present focus, constructing a causal understanding of their abuse). In contrast, the majority of participants (who also manifested greater trauma symptomatology) provided confusing, overly detailed, or very brief memories which, according to the researchers, suggested that they had difficulty making sense of the experience and were experiencing overwhelming emotion or avoidance.

These findings are preliminary, however. So far as we are aware, no research investigating trauma narratives in maltreated children has included a comparator non-trauma narrative. Moreover, it is likely that the picture is complex, with factors such as the nature of the trauma and the time since trauma exposure also exerting influence (Salmon & O'Kearney, 2014).

Overgeneral memory

Trauma exposure in the context of limited elaborative and explanatory conversations about negative experiences may also render the child in our most problematic scenario vulnerable to an overgeneral style of remembering. This occurs when individuals have difficulty retrieving experiences that occurred at a particular time and place but, instead, report generic descriptions (Ogle et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2007). Findings demonstrate overgeneral memory in youth who have experienced child sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment (Ogle et al., 2013; Valentino, Toth, & Cicchetti, 2009). Current theoretical perspectives and related findings point to poor emotion regulation (reflected in rumination and avoidance) as mechanisms that can maintain an overgeneral style of memory retrieval (Williams et al., 2007). The potentially important aetiological role of impoverished parent–child reminiscing in the early years, in the context of parent and child attachment insecurity and emotion dysregulation, is also gaining theoretical attention, however, and has received preliminary empirical support (Valentino, 2011; Valentino et al., 2014). A number of outstanding questions remain, however, as there is still very

limited research addressing the developmental precursors of overgeneral memory and the relative contributions of other potentially important factors such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) also require clarification (Ogle et al., 2013).

Enhanced memory

Finally, it is also possible that in the absence of parent–child conversation to facilitate children’s understanding and management of their aversive experiences and their negative emotions, children will manifest particularly strong memories of their maltreating experience. Many highly stressful or traumatic experiences can be remembered well and reported in detail years later (Marche & Salmon, 2013; Ogle et al., 2013). Indeed, Goodman and her colleagues (2010) concluded that maltreated children should demonstrate enhanced memory for their experiences because of their information processing bias towards negative or threatening information.

Consistent with this conclusion, higher levels of PTSD symptomatology have been shown to be associated with more specific memory recall (rather than less) (Ogle et al., 2013), and memory is relatively accurate regardless of PTSD symptoms for individuals who nominate child sexual abuse as their most traumatic life event (Alexander et al., 2005). Concurrently, however, reporting sexually abusive experiences as central to one’s identity, view of the future, and as a life turning point is associated with greater depressive and PTSD symptoms (Robinaugh & McNally, 2011). In each of these situations, memory may be strengthened because the individual is frequently re-exposed to aspects of their experience (e.g. encountering negatively interpreted situations in their environment, re-experiencing intrusive memories, and overfocussing on or rehearsing their past experiences both to try and understand them and because they have assumed a central role in the individual’s view of the self and their life) (Ogle et al., 2013; Robinaugh & McNally, 2011).

Should negative memories be forgotten?

Some researchers have argued that it is psychologically advantageous to forget or even erase difficult negative experiences rather than to remember them (see Holmes, Sandberg, & Iyadurai (2010) for discussion of the ethical and empirical issues in this approach). An implication would be that parents and other adults should not engage children in discussion of their negative experiences. Here again, in the absence of research directly addressing this question, we speculate. Nonetheless, the findings reported in our two previous sections suggest that *how*, rather than whether, experiences are recalled, or not recalled, is crucial. Psychopathology has been found to be greater where, for example, memories are avoided, intrude uninvited into awareness, are central to the individual’s negative view of themselves and their future, and when their form is fragmented and overly brief or detailed. These findings suggest that being able to remove attention from (rather than avoid) distressing memories and effectively manage the associated memories is key. As particular kinds of conversations between adults and children can contribute to the child’s ability to manage

their memories and emotions, then they, too, play an important role in achieving this end.

Summary

We have discussed possible outcomes for children’s memory in this most problematic scenario, in which we propose that in combination with other risk factors, difficulties developing the foundational skills of remembering and reporting negative emotional experiences in their early years, in the context of limited or impoverished parent–child conversations about the past, place children at risk of spiralling patterns of problematic patterns of remembering and distress. Just as ‘competence begets competence’, the reverse is also the case (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010, p.492).

Intermediary scenarios

Much more common than the most problematic scenario are the many that are intermediary; this may occur where there are constraints on parent–child discussions of negative experiences at one, but not all levels (e.g. the child or parent). In this section, we discuss just a few examples of these and their potential implications for parent–child discussion and children’s memory.

For example, relatively well-functioning families may avoid discussion of specific kinds of experiences so as not to upset their child, as has been found with respect to painful and unfamiliar medical procedures. Salmon, Price, and Pereira (2002) assessed very young children’s (3 to 7 years) memory for the VCUG procedure 6 months after the child’s experience of it. The children were highly distressed during the VCUG. Seventeen of 32 parents indicated that they had not spoken at all to their child about the procedure in the intervening 6 months, and only four indicated that they had frequently discussed it. Interestingly, although the amount of information that children freely recalled was very limited, the more they had talked with their parent about the VCUG as it unfolded, the more correct information that they reported at their 6-month interview.

Parents may also avoid discussion of their child’s experience because it is deeply distressing for the parent. For example, a significant minority of parents of children diagnosed with cancer report avoiding stimuli that might elicit their own distress associated with their child’s illness (Lindahl Norberg, Pöder, & von Essen, 2011). It might be expected that these parents would have considerable difficulty talking with their child about their cancer, yet there is evidence that providing a framework for understanding a stressful and novel procedure can enhance children’s accurate memory of it and reduce their distress (Chen, Zeltzer, Craske, & Katz, 1999; Salmon, McGuigan, & Pereira, 2006).

Finally, we consider the ‘intermediary’ example of an older child or young adolescent who is exposed to unwanted sexual touching by a non-familial adult. To the extent that the child has experienced elaborative and emotion-rich reminiscing within a supportive family context, she may well have the ability to provide a coherent, detailed, and emotionally regulated narrative of her personal negative experiences, but for many of the reasons discussed previously, may tell

no-one about what has occurred. Nonetheless, the experience may be rehearsed—it may be thought about—and this, also, may serve to maintain the strength of her memory of what occurred.

CONCLUSIONS

Reminiscing conversations between parents and children about the child's negative experiences play a pivotal role in helping the child to learn what to remember, how to understand their experiences, and how to label, understand, and therefore manage emotional responses. Elaborative, sensitive, and emotion-rich reminiscing conversations that enable the child to develop a coherent narrative of her experience increase the likelihood of that experience enduring in memory over time and, ultimately, serving the child's psychological wellbeing. Although these conversations play a crucial role in children's development in the early years, their influence can extend beyond this time period. There are, therefore, numerous ways in which children are disadvantaged when these conversations are impoverished or do not occur, and their memories fall into the shadows.

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