Family Ties: Communicating Identity Through Jointly Told Family Stories

Jody Koenig Kellas

Family stories work to construct family identity. Little research, however, has examined storytelling in families. This study examined storytelling content and process to assess the extent to which families jointly integrated or fragmented a shared sense of identity and how these discursive practices relate to family qualities. Results of a study involving 58 family triads indicate relationships between story theme (e.g., accomplishment vs. stress), person referencing practices (e.g., we-ness vs. separateness), and interactional storytelling behaviors (e.g., engagement, turn-taking). Moreover, story framing, perspective-taking, statements about selves-in-the-family, and identifying as a “storytelling family” emerged consistently as positive predictors of family satisfaction and functioning. The results offer a portrait of how families communicate identity and functioning in joint storytelling interactions and further position storytelling as a communication phenomenon worthy of consideration.

Keywords: Family Storytelling; Identity; Narrative; Family Functioning; Family Communication

As key sites for making sense of our individual and relational lives (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Bruner, 1990), stories can work to convey coherent and socially acceptable identities (Linde, 1993), socialize individuals into the rules and norms of societal and relational culture (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995;
Stone, 1988), and help people come to terms with difficult experiences (Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987). Within the larger set of stories people may tell, family stories work as reflections of family culture (Norrick, 1997; Stone, 1988), teach individuals about their identity in the family (e.g., birth stories, Reese, 1996), and, often, encapsulate a larger moral or message about who the family is and what its values are (Sherman, 1990). In short, family stories affect and reflect family culture by communicating who a family is—its norms, its values, its identity. As Stone (1988) notes, “[t]he family is our first culture, and like all cultures it wants to make known its norms and mores. It does so through daily life, but it also does so through family stories which underscore, in a way invariably clear to its members, the essentials, like the unspoken or unadmitted policy on marriage or illness” (p. 7).

Despite the established significance of stories in the family, notably less research has focused on storytelling in families, specifically how meaning and identity are negotiated communicatively as stories are told amongst family members. Yet, as Langellier and Peterson (1993) assert, “Family storytelling calls attention to the performative nature of family culture as a strategic process that constitutes family” (p. 56, emphasis in original). If communication constitutes the meaning and reality of our relationships (e.g., Baxter, 2004; Duck, 1994), observing the combined influence of content and process in storytelling among family members provides one way to understand how communication functions in the constitution of family identity and family functioning, both of which are key elements of overall family culture.

Jointly told family stories should be particularly informative for understanding the communicative—and jointly enacted—construction of identity, as family stories often engender the possibility (or necessity) of joint telling. Shared joint storytelling is the process by which family members construct stories in interaction “collaboratively by assigning plot, character, and setting in a way that helps them make sense of and give meaning to the event(s) and [to their relationships]” (Koenig, 2002, p. 12). As family members work together on the telling of family stories, they often add details, disagree, correct discrepancies, or affirm perspectives. Because families construct and negotiate their identities through family stories, observing joint family storytelling can provide further insight into how family and individual identities are enacted in interaction. Moreover, these observations should also provide evidence about family relational qualities since family interaction is often reflective of family climate.

Toward these ends, the current study examines the themes that characterize joint storytelling episodes among family members and the ways in which families integrate or fragment their identity discursively during joint storytelling process. More specifically, I first review literature that supports ways for conceptualizing the communication of family identity during the joint telling of family stories. I then present an empirical investigation of joint family storytelling across 58 family triads. The analyses attend specifically to (1) the content of themes that emerge in the telling of family stories, (2) the discursive practices that families employ to integrate or fragment shared identity during joint storytelling process, and (3) the ways in which content and process in joint family storytelling intersect with and inform one another as well as influence perceptions of family functioning. The overall goal is to argue and
demonstrate that, in order to paint a detailed portrait of family identity and understand how communication constitutes relationships, we must examine the complex intersections of family communication content and process in actual family interaction, as well as examine how these intersections impact the quality of family culture. To do so, I begin with a discussion of the role of identity in family stories.

**Identity Themes in Family Stories**

The large body of research on narrative across disciplines positions identity construction as one of the central functions of stories. Specifically, research emphasizes self-construction as narrative in nature (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1997), supporting Fisher’s (1987) assertion that humans are storytelling animals and highlighting the primary purpose of stories as the creation and evaluation of self. Stories can work to organize our experiences into coherent packages that, when socially enacted, serve to negotiate and stabilize our individual and relational identities (Linde, 1993). Identity also emerges as a function central to family stories. The content of family stories often reflects a family’s values, culture, and its collective meanings: “Family stories are one of the cornerstones of family culture. . . . By their presence, they say what issues—from the most public and predictable to the most private and idiosyncratic—really concern a given family” (Stone, 2004, p. 17, emphasis in original).

The themes or lessons that members learn from the content of their family stories affect and reflect rules for behavior inside and outside the family, such as how to deal with obstacles and persevere during times of hardship (Reiss, 1981), enact and deal with family strengths and weakness (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999), see humor in situations, and communicate cultural identities such as race, ethnicity (Bylund, 2003), and religion (Stone, 2004). Family stories of stressful situations, for instance, may reflect a family’s habitual response to stress in general. For example, Reiss and colleagues (Reiss, 1981; Reiss & Oliveri, 1980) postulate that, over time, families construct a shared system of beliefs for understanding their environments and that these “shared construals” (e.g., stories) affect the ways that families differently make sense of and cope with stress. Whereas some families acknowledge stress, but move on and grow from the experience, others internalize the stress by attaching symbolic meaning to the experience and weaving it into the family’s fabric of meaning (Reiss, 1981).

Ultimately, then, stories may be essential in establishing standards for family relationships (Stone, 1988). In support of this, Vangelisti et al. (1999) explored people’s portraits of their families by investigating the themes that characterized individuals’ real and ideal family stories. Their findings revealed that themes associated with “real” stories correlated with family satisfaction. Themes linked positively with satisfaction included care, togetherness, humor, reconstruction, and adaptability, whereas stories containing themes of hostility, chaos, disregard, divergent values, and personality attributes were negatively associated with satisfaction. Overall, research demonstrates that a family’s identity is constituted, at least in
part, by the stories in its repertoire; therefore, the collection of stories a family has and the themes that emerge in telling those stories are potentially important indicators of its approach to family, society, and self.

Although the research just reviewed examines how family stories reflect a sense of family culture and provides insight into the nature of story content, less research focuses on the process of how these stories are told in families. Stories carry powerful legacies for families, and storytelling is the context in which these themes are transmitted and negotiated (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Storytelling contributes to relational construction (Baxter, 2004; Bochner et al., 1997; Mandelbaum, 1987), and family identity is constructed commonly in the collaborative telling of family stories (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Norrick, 1997). Within the context of joint family storytelling in particular, family values, themes, and lessons may get repeated, tested, constructed, and revised. Moreover, researchers theorize that jointly told stories not only report about relational happenings; they also construct and celebrate relationships (Duck, 1994).

Beyond creating and celebrating family identities, however, family stories, by their very nature, are also open to legitimation and critique and may marginalize the family or certain members (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Stone, 1988). Thus, family storytelling may constitute family identity, but families undoubtedly differ in the desire with which they accomplish the coordination of a joint, or shared, family identity through telling their stories. Previous communication research focuses primarily on the functions (e.g., Bylund, 2003) or thematic content of family stories (e.g., Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Vangelisti et al., 1999). The discursive practices in family storytelling, however, can provide insight into the complex communicative patterns by which families weave together (or purposefully unravel) a sense of shared family identity, and therefore, research is needed in this arena.

**Communicating Identity in Storytelling Process**

The discursive practices in jointly told stories have been argued to function as “tie signs” (Goffman, 1971) that potentially communicate relational status (Mandelbaum, 1987) and closeness (Tracy, 2002). In her research, for example, Tracy argues for a reciprocal relationship between identity and discursive practices, or “talk activities that people do” (p. 21). Discursive practices can be small building blocks, such as person referencing practices, or complex discourse practices, such as the structure, content, and style of stories (Tracy, 2002). Whatever their size or level of complexity, such communicative practices (e.g., storytelling) can be powerfully constitutive of relationships. The following sections review different ways in which families might integrate or fragment their identities discursively while jointly telling family stories.

**Discursive Practices and Family Identification**

As noted, if family stories can encapsulate family identity, the way a family talks about itself while telling its stories can be said to represent an informative verbal
tie sign. One way family identity may be enacted discursively during joint storytelling involves the extent to which people identify verbally as a family versus as individuals in the content of their stories. Specifically, we may be able to distinguish the level of family identification by assessing the degree to which the family presents itself as a unit (through the use of “we” terms) versus as individuals (through the use of “I” or “other” terms). Tracy (2002) refers to this set of discursive practices as “person-referencing practices” and argues that “by the forms people select to address others and refer to self, they present their view of existing relational identities” (p. 51).

Likewise, Burr (1990) identifies “I-statements” as those which locate feelings and thoughts inside an individual, and “we-statements” as those which locate problems, patterns, feelings, and thoughts in the relationship. Unlike I-statements, we-statements communicate joint involvement, mutuality, and connectedness, and decrease emotional distance (Burr, 1990). Similarly, Buehlman, Gottman, and their colleagues (Buehlman & Gottman, 1996; Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000) examine such discursive practices in couples’ oral marriage histories by looking at the degree of husband and wife we-ness (presenting as a couple) versus separateness (emphasizing difference and individuality) during the interview and how this predicts the health of the marriage. This body of research indicates that we-ness and separateness may be seen as ways that families negotiate individual and relational identity conversationally within the context of storytelling interactions.

Beyond person referencing, families talk even more explicitly about their identities. For instance, in telling stories that represent their family, family members may offer both family-related statements (e.g., “we’re cheap”) and statements about individuals’ identities in the family (e.g., “You’re the planner, and Cindy and I are the participants”). Whereas we-ness assesses the degree to which people identify as a relational unit, identity statements demonstrate the frequency and content of the statements families use to talk about the qualitative aspects of who they are. Presumably, when families who value a shared identity tell stories about themselves, they likely include statements that reinforce who they are as a group. Family members who resist a shared identity, particularly one presumed by a “family” story, may be less likely to do so. Although identity statements have received little attention in the literature in this way, some scholars have examined how identity emerges in family talk, such as how mothers and fathers (Stueve & Pleck, 2001) and small children (Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1990) talk about themselves in relation to the family. Offering this additional conceptualization to research on family identification is particularly useful in communication scholarship because it focuses on how people talk about their identity as families. As families tell stories together about the family, the verbalization of family identification, such as person referencing practices and identity statements, offer evidence about the way they see themselves.
Discursive Practices and Interactional Storytelling Behaviors

Tracy (2002) argues for the need to explore multiple levels of discursive practices to fully understand how everyday talk constitutes identity. In addition to the family identification expressed in person referencing and identity statements, identity is also likely reflected in more complex discursive practices (Tracy, 2002), including how family members negotiate—both verbally and nonverbally—the interactional exigencies associated with collaboratively telling family stories. Specifically, it is likely that a family communicates, at least in part, who they are through the process of the telling, such as the level of family involvement, turn-taking practices, and the affect enacted during the telling of the story. These features provide information about interactional storytelling behaviors, or the degree to which family members coordinate on jointly telling stories together.

Berger and Luckman (1966) offer theoretical support for examining the communication of identity at this level of process. They acknowledge that family interactions, though not rigid, are patterned parts of everyday life. Moreover, we can understand these patterned interactions, in part, through the degree of availability versus anonymity visible in a given interaction, particularly since availability increases the more we view people as part of our inner circles. Thus, we can understand aspects of family identity by examining the varying degrees to which families are available (or anonymous) to one another in face-to-face interaction since the degree of availability may be based on the degree to which they share a sense of family identity (i.e., see each other as in-group members).

A small body of research has begun to examine these theoretical assumptions empirically. For example, researchers in psychology have assessed the ways in which couples tell stories about the history of their marriage for the amount of collaboration, conflict, laughter, continuation, and/or non-responses in the joint telling (Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993), as well as the degree of affect and volatility expressed by each partner during the interview (Buehlman & Gottman, 1996; Buehlman et al., 1992). Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) examined coordination in husbands’ and wives’ telling of family stories and contended that “the interaction patterns are repetitive and serve to provide a sense of family coherence and identity. Family life not only resides in the minds of individuals, but comes to life in the observed coordinated practices of the group” (p. 53).

In an effort to investigate a holistic set of behaviors associated with patterned interactions in families, Koenig Kellas and Trees (in press) examined triadic family interactions qualitatively to assess the interactional storytelling behaviors most relevant to the contingencies of joint family storytelling. They found that families differed in their degree of storytelling engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. Engagement refers to family members’ verbal and nonverbal responsiveness, liveliness, and the level of warmth present in the story. Turn-taking behavior describes the manner in which the family is dynamic or polite in their turn-taking and how they distribute turns of talk during the telling. Perspective-taking includes behaviors relevant to how much family members confirm and incorporate
others’ perspectives and experiences into the telling. Finally, coherence refers to how family members negotiate a story’s organization and integrate it into a whole (see also Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005). Their work identified three different ways in which families make sense of their experiences, and thus, also suggested potential differences in the ways families discursively negotiated their identities as families. The current study seeks to build on these conceptualizations as well as the ways in which “talk does identity-work” (Tracy, 2002, p. 7) by examining interactive storytelling processes as one of the important, but under-examined, ways in which families enact family identity.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In order to better understand how family storytelling constitutes family identity, it is necessary to examine how elements of storytelling content and storytelling process may combine to characterize how family members integrate or fragment a sense of shared identity as they collaboratively negotiate the telling of a family story. The themes that characterize family stories are foundational for understanding the constitutive nature of family storytelling. If our family stories shape us (Stone, 1988), a key to understanding a family’s identity is the stories that it chooses to describe itself. Although research has examined the themes of family identity stories extensively, it has not yet done so through a communicative lens (i.e., by looking at the themes that emerge as family members jointly negotiate the meaning of a story). Therefore, to lay a foundation for understanding the interplay between content and process, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: What themes characterize jointly told family stories?

Family stories also likely reflect lessons for the ways in which members are expected to interact with one another. For example, Sherman (1990) found that the emotional themes uncovered in family-of-origin stories and in parents’ current family stories paralleled the emotional behaviors they enacted with their children. In addition, Fiese and Marjinsky (1999) found a positive relationship between favorable beliefs about one’s family of origin and current displays of positive affect with one’s family during dinnertime stories. Thus, family story themes likely correspond with patterned family interactions (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Reiss, 1981).

Such correspondence can work in a number of ways. In regards to the interactional contingencies identified by Koenig Kellas and Trees (in press), higher levels of engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence helped to differentiate families who came to shared, integrated conclusions about their stories from families whose members came to individual conclusions or no conclusions at all. Although not tested in their study, it may also be that a family whose stories teach lessons surrounding the theme of “children are seen and not heard,” for example, will likely differ in turn-taking, engagement, perspective-taking, and coherence from a family whose stories revolve around themes like creativity and closeness. To account for this correspondence, it is hypothesized that:
H1: The themes expressed during the joint telling of a family identity story will predict differences in a family’s interactional level of (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence.

In addition to topic and theme, families may also communicate their identities in storytelling through the discursive practices by which families identify as families versus individuals. The extant research provides evidence for connections between the degree to which one person identifies as a relational member (versus as an individual) and the interaction behavior that characterizes collaborative conversations. Specifically, higher levels of we-ness seem to correspond with couples’ efforts to communicate positively with one another and work together in telling their stories (Buehlman et al., 1992; Oppenheim, Wamboldt, Gavin, Renouf, & Emde, 1996). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2: There will be a positive relationship between the degree of we-ness a family expresses during the joint telling of a family identity story and a family’s interactional storytelling levels of (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence.

Family identity statements offer another way to conceptualize relational identification in storytelling content. Based on the same reasoning used to support H2, it is likely that families who make more family identity statements will be more willing to discursively integrate a sense of shared family identity by collaborating on telling a family story. Thus, it is proposed that:

H3: There will be a positive relationship between the number of family identity statements a family expresses during the joint telling of a family identity story and a family’s interactional storytelling levels of (a) engagement, (b) turn-taking, (c) perspective-taking, and (d) coherence.

Links Between Family Storytelling and Relational Qualities

Because previous research has positioned narrative as central to sense-making, healing, socialization, and identity building, the identity enacted through the content and process of storytelling could be related to overall levels of family functioning and satisfaction. Indeed, Vangelisti et al. (1999) found that people have both real and ideal stories for their families and that these stories related to family satisfaction. The ease with which families coordinate on a theme may influence and/or reflect feelings of satisfaction within the family. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H4a: The themes expressed during the joint telling of a family identity story will predict differences in family satisfaction.

In addition to family satisfaction, research indicates that family communication also varies according to other important relational dimensions. The Circumplex Model (Olson, 2000) offers a typology of families that goes beyond satisfaction and assesses family functioning, or balance, according to levels of cohesion and adaptability. Cohesion refers to the degree of emotional bonding between family
members, or the manner in which families balance separateness and togetherness. Adaptability, or flexibility, refers to change associated with family rules, roles, and leadership (Olson, 2000). Communication is considered a facilitator of movement on the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility.

According to Olson (2000), the central tenet of the Circumplex Model is that “balanced couple and family systems tend to be more functional compared to unbalanced systems” (p. 144). Moreover, balanced systems tend to engage in more positive communication than unbalanced systems. Although the model has been critiqued and revised over the years (for a review, see Schrodt, 2005), the most recent version argues that higher (although not extreme) levels of cohesion and adaptability signify more balanced systems, and thus higher levels of overall family functioning.

Joint storytelling offers a communicative context that likely reflects various levels of family functioning. The ways in which families communicate their identity during the process of jointly telling stories may reflect their beliefs about family closeness (cohesion) and their roles, rules, and leadership (adaptability). Family stories likely reveal the degree of closeness and adaptability acceptable in the family unit, particularly if the stories reflect family members’ availability to one another (Berger & Luckman, 1966), as well as acceptable levels of adaptability, such as the rules for communicating with the outside world (Stone, 1988). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H4b: The themes expressed during the joint telling of family identity story will predict differences in (a) family cohesion, (b) family adaptability, and (c) overall family functioning.

Finally, it is argued that the discursive practices a family uses to negotiate identity jointly during storytelling episodes relate to family functioning and satisfaction. Higher levels of cohesion, for example, are likely reflected in higher degrees of we-ness, more family identity statements, and greater levels of storytelling involvement and warmth. On the other hand, families high in adaptability might reflect a greater balance between individual and family identification and storytelling collaboration, as more flexible families tend to rely less on rigid roles, rules, and conformity (Olson, 2000). Previous research supports this claim by linking couple we-ness with marital adjustment (Buehman et al., 1992; Carrere et al., 2000; Sutherland, 1987; Veroff et al., 1993), spousal cohesion with “blended” accounts and spousal autonomy with “differentiated” accounts (Sillars, Burggraf, Yost, & Zietlow, 1992), and I-statements with emotional distance and defensiveness (Burr, 1990).

Although storytelling and satisfaction have been linked in couples, the connections between relational qualities and family storytelling have gone virtually untested, despite the extensive support for the importance of stories in families. Langellier and Peterson (2004) argue that all families have stories; however, families may differ in the extent to which they embrace stories and storytelling as part of who they are. Identifying as a storytelling family, however, seems to have implications for perceptions of family well-being. For example, Sherman (1990) explained that “an absence of family stories about the parent when he or she was a child seemed to portend difficulties for that parent’s establishing a comfortable relationship with his
or her own child” (p. 257), and the absence of family stories may negatively impact our ability to successfully individuate. If stories and storytelling are central to the formation of a healthy individual and family identity, the degree to which a family tells stories, or identifies itself as a storytelling family, should relate to family well-being. In order to gain an understanding of how a family’s storytelling identification and the discursive ways in which families integrate and fragment family identity together predict aspects of family satisfaction and functioning, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How, if at all, do the discursive practices by which families communicate identity (we-ness, family identity statements, interactional storytelling behaviors), as well as the degree to which families identify as storytelling families, predict family relational qualities, including (a) family cohesion, (b) family adaptability, (c) family functioning, and (d) family satisfaction?

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 60 family triads. Students in courses at a large university in the Northwest participated with two other family members: either a sibling and a parent or two parents. Students received extra credit, and each other family member was paid $10 for his or her participation. Two of the families were removed from the analysis due to problems with the video recording. Of the remaining 58 families, 27 were composed of two parents and one child, and 31 families were composed of two children and one parent.¹

Procedures

Prior to coming to the research lab, each participant privately completed either a child or parent version of a family relationship questionnaire, which included demographic questions and several measures, including family functioning and family satisfaction. Upon arriving for the study, families were seated in a horseshoe configuration intended to facilitate joint storytelling and were asked to select two stories that they would tell as a family. For the first story—and the one relevant to this study—families were asked to think of a story that they felt best describes what the family is like and that the family tells frequently: a story that people who know them have heard them tell.²

After giving the family the story instructions, the researcher left the room to give the family time to decide on the story topic. Once they had decided, the researcher returned to the lab, and the family members were encouraged to tell the story in their own words and were reminded that there was no right or wrong way to tell the story. In order to encourage the most natural telling of the story, the researcher was responsive to the story nonverbally to encourage talk but did not ask questions
during the storytelling (a similar procedure was used successfully in Markham Shaw, 1997). The storytelling conversations were video recorded.

**Measures**

**Storytelling content: themes**

After the taped interactions were completed, the stories were coded from the tapes for the communication of identity in the content of the stories. Because the family was telling an often-told story that they believe represents them best, the themes that emerged should characterize the way the family sees itself (i.e., its sense of identity). Consistent with Vangelisti et al.’s (1999) coding procedures, inductive coding (Bulmer, 1979) was used to develop categories relevant to the themes and values associated with the stories in this data set. Two coders each separately watched and took notes on approximately 50% of the family stories, developing categories that seemed to represent the story themes. They then worked together to combine their list of categories and produce a set of codes to be applied to all 58 family stories. The final set of categories, which is discussed in detail in the results section, included **accomplishment, fun, tradition/culture, separateness, togetherness, stress, and child mischief**. Following training, the two coders each coded half of the data. Each family storytelling interaction was assigned one dominant theme. Twenty percent of the data was checked for consistency across coders, and Cohen’s kappa was calculated at .89, indicating very good intercoder reliability.

**Storytelling process: discursive practices**

**We-ness versus separateness.** Three items relevant to families were adapted from Buehlman and Gottman’s (1996) Oral History Interview to rate we-ness versus separateness. These included the degree to which (1) “Family members emphasize ‘we’ as opposed to ‘he/she’ or ‘I’;” (2) “Family members seem to present themselves as a collective more than as individuals; Characters are presented as a family unit more than as individual and separate in the story;” and (3) “The family emphasizes similar values, beliefs, and goals in the story” (p. 19). Using Buehlman and Gottman’s decision rule criteria, each story was rated on the three items, on 5-point Likert-type scales, with higher scores reflecting a higher degree of family we-ness.

Two trained raters, who were unaware of the study hypotheses, assessed the degree to which each family communicated we-ness versus separateness. Rater training consisted of discussing each item with the principal investigator and practice rating videotaped examples of relatively high, medium, and relatively low scores on each item as assessed by the principal investigator. Once they were trained and comfortable with each item, raters watched and rated six storytelling episodes to assess initial levels of interrater reliability. Any discrepancies during this reliability check were discussed with the other rater and the principal investigator and resolved as part of the training process. Following this process, raters assessed a second set of six stories to check their reliability. This check revealed adequate consistency on all three items, and therefore raters watched and rated the remaining family stories independently for each of the three items on the we-ness versus separateness scale.
Once rating was completed, Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICCs; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) were calculated for the 52 family stories not used in the initial reliability check, revealing adequate inter-rater reliability on two of the three items (we-ness vs. separateness = .80, collectiveness = .70, values = .42). Due to the low ICC on shared values, the scores for each rater were averaged to strengthen internal consistency and produce a mean score for each family on each of the three items. The three mean scores were, in turn, averaged to provide an overall family we-ness score \((M = 3.24)\). Cronbach’s alpha for overall we-ness revealed adequate scale reliability at .75.

Identity statements. The stories were also coded for explicit statements of family identity. Using inductive analysis (Bulmer, 1979), the primary researcher watched the family stories initially and wrote down any statement that seemed to be evaluating or describing the identity of individuals in the family or the family as a whole. After watching approximately 20% of the stories, the author defined identity statements as any statements made during the telling of the story that somehow described or evaluated the enduring roles, characteristics, personality traits, likes or dislikes, and abilities of the family. The primary researcher used these criteria to identify all statements that counted as codable units.

After all 58 stories were coded for identity statements by the primary researcher, a second trained coder examined 10% of the data for unitizing reliability. Specifically, the coder observed each storytelling interaction and identified any identity statements that corresponded with the definition provided above. Each coded interaction was then assigned a ratio score including the number of matching identity statements between coders in relation to the total number of statements identified by both coders. This check reflected 77% reliability, suggesting adequate unitizing reliability. Once all codable units were identified, each identity statement was coded for statement type. Two types of family identity statements were identified. Family identity statements \((n = 111)\) included those made about the family’s identity as a whole (e.g., “We were a softball family”), whereas selves-in-family identity statements \((n = 26)\) characterized the roles that each family member separately played in the story or plays in the family, but that are important to who the family is as a whole (e.g., “[On our yearly family trips] I would get really excited to go fishing with mom and dad, and Eve, my sister, and my brother Brent, would [drag] out of bed”). A reliability check of 20% of the data demonstrated strong coding consistency with a Cohen’s kappa of .87. Given this reliability, the primary researcher coded identity statements across the remainder of the stories.

Storytelling process: interactional storytelling behaviors
Storytelling episodes were also rated for a number of interactional storytelling behaviors including (1) engagement, (2) turn-taking, (3) perspective-taking, and (4) coherence (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005). Each of the four behaviors was measured by two items on 5-point Likert-type scales such that higher scores indicate higher degrees of interactional storytelling between family members. Specifically, engage-
ment was comprised of involvement (“As a whole, the family storytelling is lively, members are nonverbally and verbally interested and engaged in the story being told”) and warmth (“As a whole, the family storytelling is characterized by warmth, approach behaviors, and positivity, as contrasted with distance dissociation, and negativity”). Turn-taking was made up of dynamism (“As a whole, turn-taking in this story is fluid, dynamic, and free-flowing), and distribution of turns (“Across the story as a whole, family members’ turns are balanced”). Perspective-taking items included attentiveness to others’ perspectives (“As a whole, family members solicit, listen to, and incorporate others’ perspectives into the telling of the story”) and confirmation of perspectives (“As a whole, family members respond positively and in affirming ways both verbally and nonverbally to the contributions of other family members to the story”). Finally, coherence was comprised of organization (“As a whole, the story is very well-organized, with a clear beginning, middle, and end”) and integration (“As a whole, family members contribute to the telling of one collaboratively constructed overall story that has a high degree of jointness and ‘hangs together’”).

Four raters, unaware of the study’s hypotheses, were trained in pairs to rate levels of engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. Each pair of raters rated two sets of interactional sense-making behaviors (e.g., engagement and coherence) by watching the entire videotaped story and then assigning a score for each item, resulting in each pair rating a total of four items for each family. Rater training was extensive, replicating the rater training procedures discussed above for we-ness versus separateness (see also Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005). Once a second set of six stories were rated for reliability and the intraclass correlations indicated adequate to excellent reliability on all items, raters independently rated the remainder of the stories for their respective dimensions. ICCs calculated across the 52 families not used in the initial training reliability check revealed adequate to excellent reliability on all eight dimensions (involvement = .98; warmth = .90; dynamic turn-taking = .84; distribution of turns = .77; attentiveness to perspectives = .59; confirmation of perspectives = .62; organization = .91; integration = .89). In order to further increase the strength and internal consistency of each dimension, raters’ scores for each dimension were averaged, and the mean score for each dimension was used in the final analysis.

Finally, based on Koenig Kellas and Trees’ (2005) conceptual and methodological guidelines, alpha reliabilities were assessed to determine the legitimacy of collapsing the eight interactional sense-making items into four composites. Cronbach’s alpha revealed sufficient scale reliability and thus the mean scores for involvement and warmth were averaged to produce an overall family engagement score (α = .85); the means scores for dynamic turn-taking and distribution of turns were averaged to produce an overall family turn-taking score (α = .75); the mean scores for attentiveness to perspectives and confirmation of perspectives were averaged to produce an overall family perspective-taking score (α = .80); and the mean score for organization and integration were averaged to produce an overall family coherence score (α = .77).
Identification as a “storytelling family”. The extent to which families identified themselves as storytelling families was measured by two 7-point Likert-type items (“As a family, we tell stories;” “Our family is a storytelling family”), with scores of 1 indicating “very infrequently” or “not at all,” and 7 being “very frequently” or “very much so,” respectively. The scores on both items for each person were averaged and the individuals’ scores were summed to provide an overall family storytelling identification score. Because scores were summed across the three family members, the overall scores could range from 3 to 21 and in this sample ranged from 7 to 20.50 ($M = 15.13$, $SD = 3.28$, father $z = .90$, mother $z = .95$, child 1 $z = .85$, child 2 $z = .85$).

Family satisfaction. Satisfaction was measured by a scale adapted and used by Vangelisti (1992). The items include 10 sets of adjective pairs and asked participants to rate on 7-point semantic differential scales their feelings about the family (e.g., miserable = 1 and enjoyable = 7). An eleventh item asked participants to report their overall satisfaction with the family on a scale ranging from completely satisfied and completely dissatisfied. To obtain each family’s overall family satisfaction score, all 11 items were summed. These satisfaction scores ranged from 11 to 77, with higher numbers indicating greater satisfaction. Based on similar procedures in the couples and family literature (e.g., Olson, 2000), all three family members’ scores were averaged to provide the mean family satisfaction score. Satisfaction scores ranged from 43.67 to 75.00 ($M = 62.20$, $SD = 9.23$, fathers, $z = .91$; mothers, $z = .95$; child 1, $z = .92$; child 2, $z = .94$).

Family functioning. FACES II (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales, 2nd edition; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979) was used to measure family functioning. The most recent version of the Circumplex Model contends that “balanced types of couples and families will generally function more adequately than unbalanced types” (Olson, 2000, p. 152) and that higher scores on cohesion and flexibility represent balanced, or more functional, systems. The measure itself is a 30-item scale that assesses cohesion and flexibility by having participants indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert-type scale with statements about their families (e.g. “Family members are supportive of each other during difficult times”). According to methods outlined by Olson (1992), scores were calculated for each individual on cohesion and adaptability and averaged to obtain a family score for both dimensions. These scores were then averaged to determine the “family type” score, providing an overall assessment of family functioning (Olson, 2000). Cronbach’s alpha revealed good scale reliability across family members (father cohesion $= .90$, adaptability $= .87$; mother cohesion $= .91$, adaptability $= .86$; child 1 cohesion $= .89$, adaptability $= .87$; child 2 cohesion $= .90$, adaptability $= .87$). Reliability of the overall averaged family cohesion and adaptability scores was also very good ($z = .87$). Family scores for cohesion, adaptability, and family type ranged from 1.00 to 8.00 (cohesion $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.56$; adaptability $M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.42$; family functioning $M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.40$).
Results

Research Question 1

The first research question asked what themes characterize family stories as they emerged during joint storytelling episodes. Seven primary themes emerged. In the theme of accomplishment \((n = 7)\), families talked about working together to achieve a common goal, persevering, and/or overcoming adversity. There was often a sense that hard work leads to rewards. For example, one family told the story of how the family decided to climb a mountain in celebration of the mother’s fiftieth birthday. The story revolved around the idea of perseverance. Specifically, the mother was unusually exhausted from the hike, but she refused to give up even after realizing she had given blood the day before (thus, explaining her fatigue) because as her daughter explained, “That’s not like my mom. She’s a trooper.” The rest of the family was described as similarly tenacious. Families whose stories revolved around the theme of fun \((n = 12)\) stressed how much fun they have had together or focused on the sense of humor/silliness of members. In one family, a mother and her two daughters told a story of a typical weekly family dinner and explained:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Daughter 1:} & \quad \text{[this story] is pretty indicative because when it’s just the three of us, we act really stupid. We act like orangutans! I mean, literally, sometimes we actually act like orangutans. And so it’s really funny to us because when we have these conversations we all know what we’re talking about—} \\
\text{Daughter 2:} & \quad \text{No one else does!}
\end{align*}
\]

For the theme tradition/culture \((n = 7)\), the stories revolved around family ritual, celebration, or the family’s ethnic or religious culture. The tradition and/or culture in the story was used to characterize the uniqueness of the family. For instance, one family consisting of a mother, father, and son told the story of their trip to Eastern Europe to visit relatives and explained the extravagant dinner at which they were treated like “honored guests.” Tradition/culture surfaced in the story as a central theme in comments like one made by the father who explained that “eating is very much a cultural norm—sharing large amounts of very good foods and wines.”

Families whose stories were coded for separateness \((n = 4)\) discussed the separation or the independence or coming of age of certain members. Family members either did not spend time together or circumstance separated them. One family, for example, commented on the difficulty of finding a family story because it had been so long since they had been “doing the same thing.” They selected a story about their daughter’s first trip away from home and her first taste of independence. On the other hand, family stories coded for togetherness \((n = 8)\) stressed spending time together or family closeness as central to the story. Specifically, one family told an elaborate story
of the family’s first ski adventure/debacle that the family orchestrated and endured so that they could have a sport to do together.

Family stories coded for stress \((n=13)\) focused on chaotic, fearful, or tense situations. Although some of these families talked about the humorous nature of the story, they concentrated primarily on the stressful part of the experience. For example, in a story about doing yard work (“spreading bark”) one family described the uneven distribution of labor involved with the task. The daughter complained throughout much of the story that even though her mother ordered the bark, the daughter ended up having to do all the work. The final theme, child mischief \((n = 7)\), was characterized by stories concerning a child’s mischief and hierarchical distinctions between parents and children. In the “Infamous Mint Milano Caper,” for example, two parents and their son explained how, when he was young, the son hid under a tarp on the family’s boat in order to eat a bag of cookies (mint milanos) that his parents told him he could not have. The mother summarized the story and characterized the family’s experience as typical when she said “That’s a well-told family story. It was a classic case of us being so relieved but really angry with you too for putting us through that.”

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 suggested that the themes expressed during the joint telling would explain differences in families’ levels of interactional storytelling behaviors, including engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. One-way ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between the types of themes and the interactional storytelling behaviors, and thus, this hypothesis was not supported. The non-significant findings may be partly due to the small sample size for each theme and limited power of statistical tests (power estimates ranged from approximately .20 to .25 for all four statistical tests). Although the results must be interpreted with caution, the means suggest one notable trend. Specifically, families with the theme of tradition/culture had the highest means for three out of four composite storytelling behaviors (mean scores across themes and storytelling behaviors are listed in Table 1). Family stories of tradition/culture were highest on engagement, turn-taking, and perspective-taking consistently, but they had the lowest mean for coherence. Possible interpretations of this pattern are considered in the discussion.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted that positive relationships would exist between the degree of we-ness a family expressed during the joint telling of a family story and interactional storytelling behaviors, including engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence. The hypothesis was partially supported: The extent to which a family incorporated we-ness in their storytelling was significantly and positively correlated with the degree to which family members took into account and confirmed each
Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between the number of family identity statements expressed during the joint telling of a family story and the degree to which families jointly collaborated on the telling. The hypothesis was largely supported: Higher numbers of family identity statements related significantly to higher levels of engagement, $r(56) = .32, p < .01, r^2 = .10$, turn-taking, $r(56) = .22, p < .05, r^2 = .04$, and perspective-taking, $r(56) = .33, p < .01, r^2 = .11$.

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 predicted that family story themes would predict differences in family relational qualities, including family satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability, and family functioning. Four one-way ANOVAs revealed that different family story themes
predicted different levels of family satisfaction, $F(6, 51)=2.79, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .25$, family cohesion, $F(6, 51)=2.35, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .22$, and overall family functioning, $F(6, 51)=2.46, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .22$. There was also a trend for family adaptability, $F(6, 51)=2.20, p = .058$, $h^2 = .21$. Tukey’s HSD post-hoc tests showed significant differences on family satisfaction between families with themes of accomplishment ($M=68.88$, $SD=3.57$) and families with themes of stress ($M=54.85$, $SD=9.31$, $p < .05$). Accomplishment and stress were also the only significantly different themes on overall family functioning (accomplishment, $M=6.29$, $SD=0.70$ and stress, $M=4.19$, $SD=1.59$ $p < .05$), family cohesion (accomplishment, $M=6.43$, $SD=0.79$, stress, $M=4.08$, $SD=1.55$ $p < .05$), and family adaptability (accomplishment, $M=6.14$, $SD=0.69$ stress, $M=4.31$, $SD=1.80$, $p = .07$). Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Research Question 2

Finally, the second research question asked whether or not the discursive practices by which families communicate identity (we-ness, family identity statements, interactional storytelling behaviors), as well as the degree to which the family identifies as a storytelling family, predict family relational qualities, including family satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability, and overall family functioning. Four multiple regressions, in which all the predictor variables were entered into the equation simultaneously, were run to answer the research question. Significant main effects were found for all four dependent variables. For family satisfaction, $F(8, 48)=4.87, p < .001$, $R^2 = .45$, perspective-taking during joint storytelling ($\beta = .70, p < .001$), as well as the degree to which the family identified as a storytelling family ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) were the two strongest predictors in the model (beta weights and $p$ values for all predictor variables are listed in Table 2).

For family cohesion, $F(8, 48)=4.64, p < .001$, $R^2 = .44$, the degree to which they rated themselves as a storytelling family ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictor, with perspective-taking ($\beta = .34, p < .05$) and the frequency of selves-in-family identity statements ($\beta = .23, p = .05$) emerging as the other two moderate predictors in the model. Similarly, for family adaptability, $F(8, 48)=2.93, p < .01$, $R^2 = .33$, perspective-taking ($\beta = .46, p < .05$), identification as a storytelling family ($\beta = .39, p < .01$), and the frequency of selves-in-family identity statements ($\beta = .27, p < .05$) were the strongest predictors in the model. Finally, for overall family functioning, $F(8, 48)=4.33, p < .01$, $R^2 = .42$, the same variables emerged as the strongest predictors (storytelling family, $\beta = .46, p < .001$, perspective-taking, $\beta = .42, p < .05$, selves-in-family identity statements, $\beta = .26, p < .05$). Thus, the results of Research Question 2 reveal that of the predictor variables, perspective-taking, the degree to which a family identified as a storytelling family, and the frequency of selves-in-family identity statements were the strongest positive predictors of satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability, and family functioning.
Discussion

This study extends the family stories literature by taking one of the most cited functions of family stories—the communication of individual and family identity—and examining how it emerges in the content and process of joint told family storytelling. In order to investigate the communication of identity, families were asked to tell stories that they told frequently and that they felt best represented the family. The themes identified in these stories, including accomplishment, fun, tradition/culture, togetherness, separateness, child mischief, and stress, are illustrative of the ways in which families in this study communicated an overall sense of their family culture through storytelling content. Although the various themes that characterize family stories have been discussed widely (e.g., Stone, 1988; Vangelisti et al., 1999), how they emerge when they are jointly negotiated in tellings between members has not been examined. This is significant as it highlights communication as constitutive of family.

Although story themes did not predict joint storytelling behaviors overall, one notable (but nonsignificant) pattern emerged. Specifically, families with stories of tradition/culture were rated as most engaged, dynamic and even in their turn-taking, and attentive and confirming of each other’s perspectives, but were lower on conjoint coherence than families with all other themes. These families seemed more willing and/or able to coordinate on engagement, turns, and perspectives in the joint telling than families with other themes, which may be explained by the fact that themes of tradition and culture are something shared typically by all family members and not particular to one or two family members (like separateness, for example). Stories surrounding tradition and culture, however, also tended to be stories about events that recurred over time, such as holiday traditions, or ethnic rituals. Thus, they may have been less coherent because their meaning is emergent—continually renegotiated over time, across developmental stages of the family, and among family members. In other words, although the stories themselves may have been about a specific family holiday or ritual event, the family’s repeated experience with the ritual over time, as

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Satisfaction Beta</th>
<th>Satisfaction p</th>
<th>Cohesion Beta</th>
<th>Cohesion p</th>
<th>Adaptability Beta</th>
<th>Adaptability p</th>
<th>Functioning Beta</th>
<th>Functioning p</th>
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<tr>
<td>Family identity statements</td>
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<td>.34</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.47</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>.53</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.00</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.46</td>
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<td>.42</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We-ness</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.48</td>
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well as individuals' evolving interpretations about the meaning of tradition in the family, seemed to have added layers of complexity to the organization and integration of these tales. The results suggest that narrative coherence and narrative time, two aspects central to the literature and theory on individuals' stories (e.g., Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981) may be even more complicated in joint family storytelling, and thus merit further investigation within this context.

Most of the families in this study told stories about positive experiences, including accomplishing goals together, overcoming hardships, spending time as a family, and enjoying each others’ company. The public nature of the laboratory setting represents a possible explanation for the trend toward positive stories. It is notable, however, that the most frequently occurring theme was stress. Moreover, the most significant difference in storytelling themes lies between families with stories of stress and families with stories of accomplishment. Families who chose a story about the family's accomplishments to best describe the family were more satisfied, cohesive, adaptable, and generally functional, than families who chose stressful stories to best represent the family. The fact that families chose the topic of the story designed to best represent the family may be one of the factors central to understanding the significant differences between accomplishment and stress on functioning. It may be that families who are less satisfied, cohesive, flexible, and functional have trouble finding a positive story that best represents the family or that stressful experiences predominate the experiences of less functional and happy families.

Alternatively, differences may be explained not only by a family’s lack of non-stressful stories but may also lie in the family’s inability to frame the story in a positive way. Two families in this study, for example, told very different stories about boating mishaps that illustrate the importance of story framing. One family told a stressful story about their first and last trip on the family boat. During the middle of their voyage, the boat's motor failed and the story revolved around the father’s overreaction and inability to put his coastguard classes to work. The family ended up being rescued, but crashed the boat when they tried to park it, unassisted, into their slip. Although this family laughed about the experience and acknowledged that they learned a valuable lesson (“We're not boaters!”), they did not work together during the experience or during the telling to explain how they overcame the adversity.

This contrasts with a second family who told a story about getting caught in a horrible storm in their family speed boat. In this accomplishment story, all family members were represented as working together to “get through” the situation and make it back safely to shore. They describe how frightened they were, but they also acknowledged how “everyone was there,” it was a family adventure, and how after overcoming the storm and making it safely back to shore “we went right back out the next day and it’s never been like that again.” In the end, the first family accepted the boat’s crash as evidence that they were not boaters and sold the boat, whereas the second family made sense of the events by focusing on persevering as a family and “getting right back on the horse.”

Previous theory and research, along with the findings of this study, suggest that future attention should be paid to joint story framing. Buehlman et al. (1992), for
example, found that couples who characterized their marriages as “chaotic” were more likely to divorce than couples who “glorified the struggle;” narrative therapists focus specifically on how individuals can restory (reframe) undesirable meanings in their lives (Monk, 1997); and Koenig Kellas and Trees (in press) found that families differed in their meaning-making about difficult experiences during joint storytelling episodes. The findings of the current study suggest that the ways that family members 

negotiate 

a story’s frame together is meaningfully related to family functioning.

In order to better understand how family stories and identity are negotiated and framed interactively, this study also examined how identity emerged in the process of both simple and complex discursive practices. In doing so, it revealed previously untested and interesting connections between communicatively constitutive aspects of family identity including the content of stories, the ways in which families interact, and family functioning. As predicted, the greater extent to which families uttered we-statements and family identity statements, the more collaborative they were in their storytelling behaviors. The link between family “we-ness” and perspective-taking suggests that, although discursive content reflects family identification, it does not supersede the consideration of how individual perspectives contribute to the “we.” Further, although previously untested in this way, family identity statements offered additional support for the links between the discursive practices investigated in this study. The more families talked about who they were as a group, the more engaged, dynamic, attentive, and integrated they were in process. The positive relationship between the frequency of family identity statements and engagement, turn-taking, and perspective-taking was reflected in a mother, son, and daughter telling of their yearly family reunion, as these three family members often affectionately and excitedly interrupted each other to add their perspectives, laughed, and smiled consistently throughout the story, contributing in a lively way throughout the telling.

The results of the current investigation indicate that content and process work together in storytelling and, when examined in conjunction, provide a picture of the ways in which joint storytelling constitutes family identity. These discursive practices also combine in some consistent ways to influence family satisfaction and functioning. Perspective-taking emerged as the most important discursive practice in explaining family functioning and satisfaction. Of all the families in the study, those who attended to and confirmed each other’s perspective during joint storytelling interactions reported the highest feelings of family cohesion, adaptability, satisfaction, and overall family functioning. This finding may not be surprising given the attention that interpersonal and family communication textbooks give to the benefits of confirming versus disconfirming behaviors and that marital and family therapists give to people hearing each others’ perspectives. This study may add to this picture, however, by answering researchers who call for looking beyond the family therapy context at how healthy families talk with one another (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Vuchinich, 1987), particularly given that our current prescriptions are often based on dysfunctional families and are not always characteristic of what healthy families do (e.g., paraphrasing; see Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).
The number of selves-in-family identity statements also related positively to family well-being. It may be that people who feel comfortable talking about how they fit into the family as individuals recognize higher levels of closeness and flexibility in their families. This makes sense given the reasoning that adaptive families are more flexible on roles and rules (Olson, 2000) and that people may feel closer to their families when they feel that their individuality is accepted as part of the larger family system. Family systems theory suggests that we must understand the family as a system (Bavelas & Segal, 1982), and the results of this study suggest that recognition of its component parts (e.g., the identity of individual members) is an important aspect to understanding functionality in the family system as a whole.

Finally, identifying as a storytelling family was the strongest predictor of family functioning overall. Although Langellier and Peterson (2004) argue that all families have and tell family stories, there appears to be an important perception associated with what a storytelling family is and how often people perceive that they tell stories as a family. The findings of this study provide further evidence that people see storytelling as a powerful part of constituting family climate and suggest that telling family stories may influence overall family satisfaction, engender family closeness, and increase adaptability by offering lessons for dealing with each other and the outside world. According to Norrick (1997), families retell stories because the stories enable involvement and create a sense of familiarity. Thus, interaction acts as both the reason for telling stories and the link between stories and family functions.

In addition to these conclusions, the study’s limitations also warrant mention. The most notable include the potential constraints associated with a laboratory setting and the ecological validity sacrificed by only having three family members present for the telling, when the families may have included more than three members. Although this limits a complete picture of family culture as it is enacted in storytelling conversation, the current study has begun to paint a more vivid picture of how families communicate identity and functioning in joint storytelling interactions.

Conclusion

This study offers empirical support for the links between storytelling content, process, and relational qualities, and further positions storytelling as a communication phenomenon worthy of further consideration. Taking a narrative approach, while at the same time viewing family culture through a communication lens, requires attention to the many ways in which families constitute their identities. This study explored one context in which families thematically, discursively, and collaboratively communicate who they are. By examining joint storytelling in families, the results indicate that not only do our family stories shape us, but we also shape our family stories and our family identities together, in talk.

Notes

[1] Three families in the study had nontraditional parent–child roles. One family consisted of a grandmother, a granddaughter, and an aunt, all of whom lived together and considered each
other to be like mother and two daughters. Another family consisted of a mother, daughter, and a female friend of the daughter who lived with the family and identified as a daughter in that family. Finally, a third family consisted of an aunt and her niece and nephew. All three of the individuals in this family identified the aunt as the parent figure for the children. Of the 27 two parent—one child triads, 23 included father, mother, daughter combinations, and four included father, mother, son combinations. Of the 31 two child—one parent families, 11 consisted of a mother, son, and daughter, and 11 included a mother and two sons, one family was comprised of one mother and two daughters, two families included a father, a son, and a daughter, five families consisted of a father and two daughters, and one family was comprised of a father and two sons. In total, 35 fathers, with a mean age of 51 years ($SD = 10.76$) participated in the study. Twenty-eight fathers were White, three fathers were Asian, and four fathers did not report their ethnicity. Fifty mothers participated in the study and identified themselves according the following ethnicities: 41 were White, one was African-American, five were Asian, two were Hispanic, and one did not report her ethnicity. Mothers reported a mean age of 48 years ($SD = 5.52$). The children in the study—64 daughters and 20 sons—ranged in age between 14 and 41 with a mean age of 20 years ($SD = 2.89$). Seventytwo reported their ethnicity as white, four as Hispanic, 10 as Asian, one as African-American, and one as East Indian. Using the tables provided by Cohen (1988), the sample of 58 families had sufficient statistical power to detect moderate effect sizes (e.g., $r = .33$).

Although asking families to tell a story that represents them and that they often tell may encourage more positively valenced stories (presumably because of their public nature), the choice was made to elicit stories in this way to (a) help families think of a family story, since families may have trouble selecting a story that best represents them based on this criteria alone; and (b) distinguish this type of story from a second story that was told about a difficult family experience (not relevant to the current study). Given the prevalence of the “stress” theme across this sample, however, it appears that this choice did not preclude families from sharing stories of negative experiences.

References


