Personal Stories of Empathy in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Kendall M. Soucie  Wilfrid Laurier University
Heather Lawford  Brock University
Michael W. Pratt  Wilfrid Laurier University

Age-related and individual differences in adolescents’ and emerging adults’ stories of real-life empathic and nonempathic experiences were examined. A total of 29 adolescents (M = 15.28, SD = .99) and 31 emerging adults (M = 18.23, SD = .56) told stories of empathic and nonempathic life events and completed measures of authoritative parenting and dispositional empathy. Older participants recalled more empathic and nonempathic experiences overall and expressed more meaning making and prosocial engagement in their stories. Higher dispositional empathy predicted a stronger sense of self as empathic and greater prosocial engagement. Perceptions of mothers but not fathers as authoritative predicted more prosocial engagement and a stronger sense of self as empathic. These findings are discussed in relation to the development of the life story and narrative identity (McAdams, 2001), and suggest that this model can be extended in novel ways to the domain of personal empathy.

Empathy is the ability and/or inclination to understand and vicariously experience another’s emotional state or condition (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006). This matching of both emotion and cognition is the outcome of being directly exposed to another’s emotions; identifying, understanding, and processing them; and experiencing a similar affective experience.
reaction oneself. In the case of negative emotions, this reaction can lead to either personal distress or sympathy (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990).

Sympathy is an emotional response arising out of empathy as well as an understanding of another person’s feelings or condition (Eisenberg, 2004). Although sympathy thus arises from both empathy and cognitive processes (e.g., perspective taking or memory retrieval), it does not consist of direct emotion matching, as does empathy, but rather involves other-oriented feelings of pity, sorrow, and concern for a distressed other. The present study investigated both emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy through a narrative lens to describe real-life empathic experiences more comprehensively, even though the distinction from sympathy is sometimes difficult to make because these constructs are so highly interrelated.

The general progression of empathy and sympathy begins with self-concern (e.g., personal distress) in childhood and orients toward concern for others in adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hoffman, 2000). This developmental trend is postulated to be the result of emotional and cognitive development/perspective taking, as well as parental socialization of emotion (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Although relatively stable through childhood and early adolescence, this trend becomes more variable across middle to late adolescence (see Eisenberg et al., 2006). Since most data from these samples are self-reported (e.g., dispositional measures), the pattern of actual empathic change across adolescence is relatively unclear. Consequently, we explored age-related changes in the empathic experiences of younger and older adolescents and the integration of these events into a personal narrative as a way to elucidate the nature of these trends.

Identity Formation and the Life Story

Identity takes the form of a life story comprised of many significant and momentous autobiographical events. Although the life story is a lifelong process of continual construction and revision, it first emerges during adolescence when youth are able to coherently integrate temporal and context-specific notions of the self (McAdams, 2001). One’s life story or narrative identity is formed through extensive reflection and understanding of one’s own unique and ever-evolving set of personal experiences. It seems likely, then, that life-story narration of empathy-related experiences will develop over the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood.
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Meaning Making and Narrative Identity Development

Meaning making refers to what one learns or understands from particular life experiences (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Meaningful interpretations can range from learning specific lessons about the self to in-depth insights into the self-concept. While lesson learning is important, insights enable a more coherent and meaningful understanding of the self, which becomes reflected upon and transformed over time, and thus more developmentally advanced.

The ability to form these connections is tied to developments in cognition and emotion that gradually unfold over adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Since the ability to reflect upon the experience of empathy is difficult and highly abstract, the development of an empathic identity and the meaningful connections made between the self and the empathic/nonempathic event are likely associated with a narrative self as both independent and interconnected with the feelings and thoughts of others.

In terms of autobiographical content, more sophisticated meaning making has been found for stories of interpersonal conflict (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). For example, when examining life narratives of difficult life events, Pals (2006) found that exploring, learning, and constructing a coherent and complete story from such events predicted greater self-transformation and maturity over time. These findings suggest that negative moments (e.g., nonempathic events) might promote greater growth, development, and transformation of the self because they require more cognitive processing and attempts at resolution.

However, impression management may bias the recollection and retelling of negative life events in ways which may thwart meaning making and identity development (McLean, 2008; Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009). Because nonempathic events typically project a socially undesirable image, it seems likely that adolescents in our sample will distance themselves from the impact of such events, distorting and downplaying their significance for the self. Consequently, the recall of nonempathic events will likely remain simple, less detailed, and actually less likely to promote meaning making.

Personality and the Life Story

McAdams (2001) outlined a framework for understanding the relationship between personality dispositions and life narratives in which three distinct levels of individuality are depicted as central to the self: traits, character adaptations, and life stories. Whereas personal traits are relatively stable dispositions, character adaptations involve personal goals, motives, and
developmental concerns that are context-based and provide the texture and richness necessary to understand individuality. *Life stories* in the model are the ever-evolving narratives that provide a sense of continuity for the construction of a secure and truly unique identity.

Although each level provides a distinct aspect of personality, only the integration of each component provides a full account of narrative identity. However, little is known about the interrelations among the three levels, particularly the link between personality dispositions and life narratives (Mc-Adams et al., 2004). In fact, dispositional empathy has been shown to vary considerably on a standard self-report measure (Davis, 1983). Because individual differences in personality dispositions contribute to distinct ways in which individuals make sense of their personal experiences, it is likely that a more dispositionally empathic person will reflect more deeply on both empathic and nonempathic events as part of a secure sense of empathic identity.

*Maternal Authoritative Parenting and Adolescent Empathy/Perspective Taking*

Adolescents’ perceptions of their parents’ authoritative parenting practices are conceptualized as reflecting an aggregate of higher support and behavioral control, as well as lower levels of psychological control (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Each of these components are discussed in the following sections in relation to adolescents’ empathy and perspective-taking abilities.

Parental support is characterized by praise, encouragement, warmth, and physical affection. Henry, Sager, and Plunkett (1996) found that adolescents who perceived their parents as supportive scored higher on measures of empathic concern. Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste, and Goossens (2007) also found adolescents’ perceptions of parental support related positively to adolescents’ self-reported perspective taking and sympathy. This association remained significant after controlling for the effects of other types of parenting practices (psychological control and behavioral control).

*Psychological control* refers to harsh, coercive, and restrictive parent control (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006). In fact, Eisenberg and McNally (1993) found that mothers’ expressions of nonpositive emotions, as well as less rational independence training (e.g., a lack of independence, control, and rational guidance) were associated with adolescents’ less competent perspective-taking abilities.

*Parental behavioral control* refers to the provision of regulation or structure via parental monitoring (Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005). Such control has been found to promote the development of empathy and guilt (Hoffman, 2000). Henry and colleagues (1996) found that adolescents
who perceived their parents as inductive (using rational control practices) scored higher on self-reported perspective-taking ability than did others.

**Purpose and Hypotheses**

The present study examined the ways in which adolescents and emerging adults, through their self-defining stories, process and come to extract meaning from personal empathic and nonempathic experiences. Dispositional empathy and perceptions of family authoritative parenting were also investigated as personality and contextual factors that might influence the ways in which these stories are narrated.

**Hypothesis 1: Age differences in narratives.** Older participants were expected to recall both empathic and nonempathic narratives more frequently overall than younger adolescents. Older participants’ stories were also expected to contain greater meaning making, prosocial engagement, and a stronger sense of empathic identity. Their stories were also expected to be narrated more vividly.

**Hypothesis 2: Story-type differences in narratives.** Empathic stories were expected to be recalled more frequently overall as compared to nonempathic stories. These stories were also expected to contain higher levels of meaning making, prosocial engagement, and a stronger sense of empathic identity. Empathic stories were also expected to be more vivid.

**Hypothesis 3: Dispositional empathy differences in narratives.** Younger and older adolescents were not expected to differ in their overall dispositional empathy scores. Higher dispositional empathy was, however, expected to predict greater recall of empathic and nonempathic events, as well as greater meaning making, prosocial engagement, a stronger sense of empathic identity, and more vivid narrations across ages.

**Hypothesis 4: Parenting style differences in narratives.** Perceptions of mothers but not fathers as authoritative were expected to be associated with greater recall of empathic and nonempathic events overall, as well as greater meaning making, prosocial engagement, a stronger sense of empathic identity, and greater vividness.

**Method**

**Participants and Recruitment**

A total of 29 adolescents (13 boys, 16 girls) were recruited from either a local newspaper advertisement (age $M = 15.28, SD = .99$, range = 14–17) or as part of an ongoing longitudinal study exploring value socialization in
the three-generational family (Pratt, Norris, Cressman, Lawford, & Hebblethwaite, 2008). All adolescent participants resided with their biological mothers, but 12% did not live with their biological fathers. All were first-borns, and most lived with younger siblings (91.3%). Because the adolescents were under the age of 18, a parent or guardian provided consent on their behalf. Of parents overall, 77% had completed at least some college or university training.

A total of 31 first-year psychology students/emerging adults (18 men, 13 women) at a university in southern Ontario, Canada, also participated in the study via the psychology participant pool to earn course bonus points (age $M = 18.23$, $SD = .56$, range = 18–20). Most participants reported living with both parents (73.5%) and with older (36.1%) and younger siblings (33.3%). About 75% of parents overall had completed at least some college or university training.

**Procedure**

All participants completed a 1-hr research interview at their homes (in the value socialization study) or with a research assistant at the university. Before the interview began, participants were asked to write down two events for each of the following narrative probes as data on the empathic recall process: (a) a time when they felt sad for someone, (b) a time when they did not feel sad for someone when it seemed that they should, (c) a time when they put themselves in someone else’s shoes, and (d) a time when they did not put themselves in someone else’s shoes when it seemed that they should. These written notes were collected and later used as data on ease of story recall. Participants were then asked to choose the most salient narrative for each probe and discuss that event more thoroughly with the interviewer. They were also instructed to focus on several key features (e.g., when/where the event occurred, who was involved, and the impact of the event on the self). After the narrative section, adolescents completed a survey packet.

**Measures**

**Background information.** Each participant reported his or her age, gender, and living situation. Participants also reported their parents’ level of education.

**Dispositional empathy.** Participants completed a shortened version of the widely used Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983). This 14-item questionnaire assessed dispositional empathy on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = does not describe me well; 4 = describes me well) and
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consisted of two subscale scores: Perspective Taking ($\alpha = .70$) and Empathic Concern ($\alpha = .76$). Since these subscales were significantly correlated, $r = .28$, $p < .05$, they were aggregated into a single dispositional empathy index score.

Perceptions of Family Parenting.

Parental support. Participants completed a 10-item support scale from the revised Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965, cited in Barber et al., 2005). Participants were asked to rate, on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = not like him/her; 3 = a lot like him/her), how well acceptance and supportive parenting items reflected mothers’ ($\alpha = .92$) and fathers’ behaviors ($\alpha = .91$).

Psychological control. Participants completed an eight-item psychological control scale adapted from both the Psychological Control Scale–Youth Self-Report (Barber, 1996) and the Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Barber et al., 2005). Participants responded on the same 3-point Likert scale (1 = not like him/her; 3 = a lot like him/her) on the extent to which items reflect mothers’ ($\alpha = .81$) and fathers’ ($\alpha = .61$) attempts at psychological control.

Behavioral control/monitoring. Participants completed a five-item parental monitoring scale (Barber et al., 2005). Participants responded on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = doesn’t know; 3 = knows a lot) to items reflecting how much their mothers ($\alpha = .81$) and fathers ($\alpha = .83$) “really know” about them.

Perceptions of support and behavioral control were positively correlated for mothers and fathers ($rs > .60$, $ps < .001$), and psychological control was negatively correlated with support for both parents ($rs < -.53$, $ps < .001$). Therefore, a Perceptions of Parental Authoritativeness Index was created (parental support + parental behavioral control – parental psychological control) separately for mothers and fathers for all statistical analyses conducted.

Narrative Coding

Codes of the primary scorer were used in all narrative analyses. Interrater reliability was computed on a random subset of 96 stories by two independent coders.

Story recall. The frequency of descriptions/notes generated across each of the four narrative types was counted and used as data on ease of empathic story recall (possible range = 0–8).
Meaning making. Depth of self-learning was assessed by using a linear coding scheme in which a higher score indicated an increased complexity of meaning making (McLean & Pratt, 2006): no learning (0), no evidence of learning from event; lesson learning (1), stories about learning a specific lesson that had implications for subsequent behavior only in that situation; vague insight (2), stories containing meanings slightly more sophisticated than lessons but not as explicit as insights; and gaining insight (3), stories containing meaning extending beyond a specific event to explicit understanding of transformations in the self and relationships (intrarater r = .74).

Empathic identity. Evidence for an empathic identity was assessed though a linear 5-point Likert scale for each story: 0 = evidence of a non-empathic person, 1 = only irrelevant or ambiguous evidence of empathy present, 2 = slightly empathic, 3 = moderately empathic, 4 = clearly empathic person (intrarater r = .74)

Prosocial orientation. Prosocial orientation was assessed for each story through a linear 5-point Likert scale: 1 = no evidence of prosocial orientation in the episode; 5 = completely prosocial in orientation in the episode (intrarater r = .81).

Vividness. Stories were coded for level of vivid detail on a linear coding scheme (1 = devoid of detail, no imagery; 5 = rich in detail, striking imagery (intrarater r = .73).

To illustrate, the following “sad for someone” narrative was from an 18-year-old man. It was coded a 3 for meaning making (gaining insight), 4 for vividness, a 4 for empathic identity (strong evidence of an empathic person), and 5 for prosocial engagement (completely prosocial in orientation).

I went to Jamaica on a self-help mission. We had to teach and I took over the entire classroom. Some of the students weren’t the smartest ones so they got pushed to the back. . . . I felt sad because even though those kids might want to get in the front, they keep getting pushed back. . . . I worked with them to bring them forward. I took them outside and read stories, worked on comprehension, one-on-one stuff . . . [I]t was all about the kids. When we left we realized that we don’t know if they got out of it as much as we did because we learned so much about ourselves . . . [W]e wanted to stay, we wanted to help[,] . . . in a sense (it says) I’m empathic, I sympathized for them, I felt really bad, it was almost a sense where you wanted to cry. . . .

One adolescent participant could not recall a nonsad story. Six adolescent participants could not recall a non-perspective-taking story. Because the sample size was small to begin with, we substituted the average group mean per age group and story type for these seven untold stories.
Unfortunately, two of the interviews could not be transcribed. A total of 58 of a possible 60 participants were used in the final analyses reported. As each narrative measure was moderately correlated across the four story types ($pr = .23$ on average), an aggregate score was computed. Participants, therefore, had one total score for each of the four dependent narrative measures (except for story recall), based on this total score.

**Results**

The means, standard deviations, and ranges for all variables are reported in Table 1. Descriptively, stories were quite vivid and showed low to moderate amounts of meaning, empathic identity, and prosocial engagement. Total story length over four stories was 3,400 words on average. Length was intercorrelated across the four story types (all $rs > .65$, $ps < .001$), and so total length was used as a covariate for most analyses. Because no differences emerged on the narrative measures ($ps > .21$), gender was not included in any analyses below.

**Hypotheses 1: Age in Years and Narrative Measures**

Although age in years was not related to dispositional empathy ($pr = -.09$, $ns$), age was positively correlated with the ability to recall empathic and nonempathic experiences (of eight requested, $pr = .38$, $p < .01$), and with greater meaning making ($pr = .27$, $p < .05$) and prosocial engagement ($pr = .23$, $p < .05$), as predicted. Surprisingly, however, age was negatively associated with vividness of recollections ($pr = -.22$, $p < .05$). No associations were found between age and empathic identity ($pr = .12$, $ns$).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for all narrative and quantitative variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrative variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total word length</td>
<td>3,420.85</td>
<td>1,588.24</td>
<td>712–7,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total stories recalled</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>3–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning making</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial engagement</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>4–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>3–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivid</td>
<td>10.93</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>4–19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questionnaire measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional empathy</td>
<td>36.06</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>22–54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal authoritative parenting</td>
<td>24.46</td>
<td>9.87</td>
<td>–5 to 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal authoritative parenting</td>
<td>21.23</td>
<td>9.16</td>
<td>2–35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $N = 58$.*
**Hypothesis 2: Story-Type Differences**

To investigate story-type differences, composites of positive and negative story types were created and a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA; controlling for total word count) was computed across the five narrative measures. This proved significant, $F(4, 53) = 10.90, p < .001$. Follow-up one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for each measure are listed in Table 2. Of the eight stories requested, empathic stories were recalled more frequently than nonempathic stories, as expected. These stories also contained a stronger sense of empathic identity and greater prosocial engagement ($ps < .05$). No differences, however, were found for meaning making or vividness by story type (see Table 2).

**Hypothesis 3: Dispositional Empathy Differences and Narratives**

Higher dispositional empathy was not related to the recall of more empathic and nonempathic experiences overall ($pr = .04, ns$) but was marginally correlated with greater meaning making ($pr = .17, p < .10$) and positively associated with a stronger sense of the self as empathic ($pr = .33, p < .01$) and with greater prosocial engagement ($pr = .42, p < .01$), as predicted. Dispositional empathy was not related to story vividness ($pr = .09, ns$).

**Hypothesis 4: Parenting Style and Narrative Outcome Measures**

Adolescents’ perceptions of mothers and fathers as authoritative were not associated with the recall of empathic and nonempathic stories overall (both $prs < .06, ns$). However, perceptions of both parents as authoritative were correlated with a stronger sense of self as empathic ($prs > .29, ps < .01$), higher prosocial engagement ($prs > .26, ps < .05$), and more vivid

**Table 2.** Means for story type (empathic, nonemphatic) and narrative measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative variable</th>
<th>Empathic</th>
<th>Nonemphatic</th>
<th>$F(1, 56)$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total story recall</td>
<td>3.58 (.09)</td>
<td>3.19 (.13)</td>
<td>8.93***</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning making</td>
<td>2.37 (1.62)</td>
<td>1.76 (1.46)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial engagement</td>
<td>5.16 (2.12)</td>
<td>3.02 (1.21)</td>
<td>3.60*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>5.17 (1.61)</td>
<td>2.48 (1.72)</td>
<td>17.16***</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vividness</td>
<td>5.77 (2.12)</td>
<td>5.15 (1.83)</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. All analyses were calculated controlling for story length in words.

*p ≤ .10. **p ≤ .05. ***p ≤ .01. N = 58.
story recollections ($prs > .24$, $ps < .05$). Higher levels of meaning making were marginally associated with perceptions of mothers ($pr = .17$, $p < .10$), but not fathers, as authoritative ($pr = .15$, $ns$).

**Summary Regressions on Narrative Measures**

To determine whether age in years, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ authoritativeness uniquely predicted the summary narrative rating measures across all stories, five linear regressions were computed: one for each of the four narrative outcome measures, and one for total story recall (see Table 3).

*Story recall.* Age in years positively predicted the ability to recall more empathic and nonempathic stories overall. Word count, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal and paternal authoritative parenting, however, did not contribute significantly overall to story recall in this equation, which was only marginally significant overall (see Table 3).

*Meaning making.* Age in years predicted greater meaning making across the four narratives, as shown in Table 3, as did total word count. Dispositional empathy and perceptions of mothers and fathers as authoritative, however, did not contribute significantly to meaning making in the stories.

*Empathic identity.* Age, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal authoritative parenting positively and uniquely predicted a stronger sense of self as empathic across the four stories (see Table 3). Word count was also a positive predictor. However, paternal authoritativeness did not contribute significantly to a sense of self as empathic in the stories.

*Prosocial engagement.* Age, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal authoritativeness positively and uniquely predicted greater prosocial engagement across the four stories in this regression. Word count was also a positive predictor (see Table 3). Perceptions of fathers’ authoritative parenting did not contribute to prosocial engagement in the narratives.

*Vividness.* Age, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal and paternal authoritativeness did not predict vivid and detailed narrative recollections in this regression equation. Only word count was a significant, positive predictor.

In sum, age, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal authoritativeness uniquely predicted a higher frequency of prosocial engagement and a stronger sense of self as empathic across the narrative elicitations, consistent with our expectations. Age in years was a significant predictor of story recall and of greater meaning making. However, none of these predictive measures were related uniquely to the vividness or detail of recollections, which primarily reflected differences in story length (see Table 3).
The present study investigated the ways in which both adolescents and emerging adults narrate self-defining empathic and nonempathic events and integrate them into an overall life story. Several developmental and contextual findings emerged from this study that illuminate the value of a narrative framework for exploring real-life empathic experience and its significance for an individual’s developing sense of identity.

### Table 3. Simultaneous regression analyses for word count, age, empathy, and perceptions of maternal and paternal authoritative parenting on narrative measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative measures</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SEB$</th>
<th>$F/t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Total story recall</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>2.21*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word count</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>2.94***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional empathy</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal authoritative</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal authoritative</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Meaning making</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>4.80***</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word count</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>2.76***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional empathy</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal authoritative</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>1.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paternal authoritative</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identity</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>8.91***</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word count</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>2.67***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional empathy</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>2.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal authoritative</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>3.96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal authoritative</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prosocial engagement</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>10.32***</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word count</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>3.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional empathy</td>
<td>0.15</td>
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<td>3.67***</td>
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<td>0.30</td>
<td>2.53**</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<td>9.80***</td>
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*Note.* Each regression analysis is separated by number.

*p ≤ .10. **p ≤ .05. ***p ≤ .01. N = 58.

**Discussion**

The present study investigated the ways in which both adolescents and emerging adults narrate self-defining empathic and nonempathic events and integrate them into an overall life story. Several developmental and contextual findings emerged from this study that illuminate the value of a narrative framework for exploring real-life empathic experience and its significance for an individual's developing sense of identity.
Age in Years and Life-Story Narration

Age in years was positively correlated with the ability to recall empathic and nonemphatic life events. Age also predicted greater meaning making, prosocial engagement, and a stronger sense of empathic identity in the narratives. Age was, surprisingly, negatively associated with story vividness, though this weak age effect was not apparent in the more comprehensive regression analyses reported earlier in this article. These results suggest that the integration of empathic and nonemphatic life events into a coherent and meaningful life story, and the prosocial responses incorporated as part of these narratives, are more self-defining and worthy of more advanced narrative processing for emerging adults than for adolescents. While these life events were quite vividly narrated by younger adolescents, they seemed to coders less meaningful and important for the life story compared with the stories of emerging adults. Overall, these results are consistent with the findings of previous life-story research and highlight possible developmental differences in younger and older adolescents’ propensities for meaningful insights to be extracted into their empathic self-concepts through a narrative lens (Thorne et al., 2004).

This ability to redefine and reorganize the empathic self as a function of others’ life experiences illuminates a more coherent picture of an empathic adolescent through the description of real-life events (Keller & Edelstein, 1993). An empathic youth reflects on others’ plights as important to his or her life story, and is motivated by prosocial goals to help and care for others, consistent with the development of a moral identity in late adolescence (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Keller & Edelstein, 1993). In contrast, younger adolescents are likely still learning to integrate these experiences into a narrative self, and so the connections made between past events and the self were scored as more superficial and lacking insight for this age group. Whereas the self-report dispositional empathy measure of Davis (1983) did not discriminate among age levels here, our more demanding indices of narrative meaning and coherence did do so.

Story-Type Differences

Empathic stories, which were more frequently recalled overall, contained greater prosocial engagement and a stronger sense of empathic identity as compared to nonemphatic stories. However, no story-type differences emerged for meaning making or story vividness. These findings are consistent with past research in that positive, self-enhancing moments appeared to be more worthy of life-story integration than were more negative
experiences. Others have also shown that self-concept consistent events are incorporated into the life story with greater ease than inconsistent life events and have a stronger impact on current self-views (Collins, Pillemer, Ivcevic, & Gooze, 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2009).

Impression management might have motivated participants to conceal aspects of nonempathic events in order to preserve a positive image, a finding also well established in the literature (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). However, it is also possible that current views of the self as empathic may have influenced and shaped the recall of such experiences and the level of meaning attached to the self (Wilson & Ross, 2003). For example, individuals who viewed themselves as empathic likely remembered instances in their lives in which they were empathic toward others more readily, encoded and reflected upon those instances more thoroughly, and integrated them into their self-concepts.

Dispositional Empathy and Life Narratives

Higher dispositional empathy did not predict the recall of empathic and nonempathic experiences or more vivid recall. Higher dispositional empathy, however, predicted more meaning making, higher prosocial engagement, and a stronger sense of empathic identity in the narratives, as hypothesized. These events were also narrated as distinctly prosocial and altruistic in nature, demonstrating that empathic personality dispositions not only predict a stable sense of empathic identity but also guide prosocial orientations in adolescence. It appears, then, that empathic adolescents narrated events in their lives with a greater orientation toward the needs of others and highlighted the importance of caring and helping others as embedded within these elements of the life story. These results strongly support the value of extending the narrative approach to identity (e.g., McAdams, 2008) to understand the empathic domain.

Authoritative Parenting and Narrative Identity Measures

Adolescents’ perceptions of their mothers as authoritative in their parenting practices predicted a more salient empathic identity and greater prosocial engagement in the narratives. No associations were found between perceptions of maternal authoritative parenting and meaning making. Moreover, no direct associations were found between any of the narrative measures and perceptions of paternal authoritative parenting in the summary regression analyses. However, the role of fathers’ relationships in this narrative
framework on empathy deserves more investigation, as earlier work has concentrated mostly on mothers.

The present results are consistent with the notion that authoritative mothers are emotionally invested in their adolescents’ significant empathic and nonempathic life events and that this involvement fosters a salient and secure empathic identity. Our findings may also provide support for the special benefits of mother-child event reminiscence in adolescence, a topic explored extensively in childhood but not as thoroughly in adolescence (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). We suspect that authoritative mothers, through their discussions and interpretations of adolescents’ views on others’ sensitive experiences, may enhance the process of committing to an empathic identity. Such a commitment is reflected in more authoritative families by adolescents’ greater orientation toward prosociality in their narrative recollections.

Study Limitations

There were several limitations in this exploratory study. All analyses were correlational and so no causal interpretations or conclusions can be drawn. Also, since data were collected simultaneously and not longitudinally, inverse causal patterns (e.g., adolescents’ empathic concern levels influencing their ratings of parenting) cannot be ruled out.

Sample size for this exploratory study was quite small. This weakened the power of the study to test hypotheses. However, predicted findings were often significant, despite this low power, supporting the robustness of these effects.

Another limitation is that only self-report data were used to assess the components of empathy and sympathy. Since previous research has shown that trait measures are highly susceptible to social desirability (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991), the retelling of both empathic and nonempathic life events is likely also subject to impression management. The samples for the present study were also generally middle class, with most parents having completed at least some postsecondary education. This potentially limits the generalizability of these findings.

Finally, the order in which the narrative retelling were elicited was not counterbalanced, and this should be considered in future work.

Conclusion

Overall, the ways in which empathic experiences were recalled, reflected upon, and incorporated into the life story appeared to be strongly linked
to the growth of salient and meaningful empathic identities. Being older, rating oneself as higher on dispositional empathy, and reporting experiences of maternal authoritative parenting were all important predictors of a stronger sense of the self as empathic, as reflected in personal life stories told about empathy-relevant events. This pattern of results highlights the potential relevance of an empathic domain that may be part of the developing moral self-construct in adolescence (e.g., Hardy & Carlo, 2005) and that also showed considerable individual variability in our observations.

The findings that life stories of empathy appeared to be related in predictable ways to several of the previously investigated factors in the empathy literature (age, dispositional empathy, and perceptions of maternal authoritative parenting), provided good construct validity for use of the life-story framework in this novel domain. These developmental and identity-based findings broadly support McAdams’s (2001) life-story model and suggest that it may be extended in novel ways to the domain of empathic life experiences and may help clarify the meaning of these experiences in future research.

References


