

To Tell or Not to Tell: Disclosure and the Narrative Self

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ABSTRACT Drawing from a narrative identity framework, we present the results of three studies examining the nature of what people do and do not disclose about their life experiences. Across three studies, our findings indicate that (1) the major difference in what people do and do not disclose concerns the emotionality of the events and whether or not the events are transgressions; (2) for everyday memorable events, increased negative emotion is associated with greater likelihood of disclosure; but (3) for more important and/or longer retained events, increased negative and decreased positive emotion were associated with lower likelihoods of disclosure. We also found that *socioemotional consequences* are an important reason for nondisclosure of important past experiences and are predictably related to the extent to which events induce positive and negative emotions. Findings are considered in terms of their implications for narrative identity.

That autobiographical memory is fundamental to self is a notion with a long history (James, 1890), which is garnering increasing empirical support in recent decades (Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Howe, Courage, & Peterson, 1994; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). Much of this

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recent work revolves around the notion of narrative identity. For present purposes, we consider the notion of narrative identity as involving the construction of self in storytelling about the personal past. That is, our sense of self is both reflected in and constructed by the kinds of stories we tell about our experiences, and *it is in the process of creating stories that we create a sense of self* (Bamberg, 2006; McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, 2001). Some of these stories will be retained as parts of our overarching life story, usually with meaningful insights about the self (e.g., Hooker & McAdams, 2003; McAdams, 1996; McAdams et al., 2006), but even those that are not retained have implications for the way we think about ourselves over time. That is, storytelling may impact that life story through the practice of developing stories and meanings about the self, whether or not those stories become a part of the life story (McLean et al., 2007). This understanding of the processes of narrative identity development consequently emphasizes both the “what”—the events about which stories are created and told—and the “why/how”—the meanings we make of those stories for our sense of self. As we review, however, while we know that the disclosure of personal experiences influences the meanings people make of those events, we know relatively little about which events are, and are not, disclosed.

The Role of Disclosure for Narrative Identity: Events and Emotion

Research on narrative and self often presumes that our experiences are frequently told to others. For example, Singer defines self-defining events, a methodological mainstay of this area, in part as events that are frequently told to others (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Singer & Salovey, 1993), suggesting that telling others about events might be one way in which they take on self-defining status. Results concerning disclosure, however, suggest that narratives of memories that have previously been disclosed are neither more nor less likely to include elaborated meanings about the self and the world (Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Results are more consistent when examining the effects of why and how an event is disclosed, in that studies typically find that more elaborative disclosures and disclosures of events in search of meaning are linked, respectively, to more elaborative later recollections and more meaning-laden subsequent memories (McLean, 2005; Pasupathi, 2007; see also Fivush &

Nelson, 2004, for a review of child developmental work). But what about experiences people do not disclose?

Silences and Narrative Identity

In fact, silences—what is not told—are also fundamental to narrative identity (Fivush, 2000). Experiences that people have not told to anyone and do not intend to tell, but still remember, construct narrative identity in absentia—*by not being a part* of the individual's shared and narrated self. Our major goal in this paper was to examine the nature of experiences that people can remember but have not told to any others. Such experiences can be construed as having potential meaning for narrative identity. Thus, our primary focus in this paper is on the “what” of the undisclosed, but still remembered, self. We focused that examination on the types of events people do and do not disclose, as well as on the nature of the emotions associated with those experiences. This focus derives from a consideration of prior work on disclosure and narrative identity, to which we now turn.

Theoretical Perspectives on Disclosure and Narrative Identity

Broadly, there are two different theoretical frames that can be brought to bear on the issue of what people are likely to tell about their lives, and they lead to both convergent and divergent predictions. Discursively based approaches to narrative identity suggest that in order to construct meaning and cope with their emotions, people are likely to talk with at least one other person about most of the meaningful experiences in their lives (McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Phillipot, 1998). This functional perspective implies that disclosure should be particularly important and common with negative events. The caveat, within this tradition, is that although meaning-making often occurs in the context of negative events (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), for *highly* traumatic experiences, disclosure may be less likely (Fivush, 2000).

One alternative to narrative approaches is a self-presentational framework (Baumeister, 1982; Kelly, 2000; Omarzu, 2000). This framework suggests that people act to maintain a positive public, and private, self-image and, consequently, that people are likely to avoid disclosing experiences that involve negative emotions, partic-

ularly those that are inconsistent with a positive self-image. In terms of types of events, this work suggests that people will be less likely to disclose transgressions because transgressions involve negative emotion and also challenge a positive self-image.

It is less clear what happens to negative experiences that people do not disclose. In the narrative identity tradition, nondisclosure is viewed as potentially problematic, in that it reduces the opportunity for integrating an experience within oneself and, consequently, "letting it go" (e.g., Fivush, 2000; Pasupathi, 2007; Pennebaker & Keough, 1999). In the self-presentational tradition nondisclosure is not necessarily viewed as problematic (see, e.g., Kelly, 2000), and it is not clear what self-presentational theorists believe happens to people when they are aware of information they do not reveal to others. Data on the impact of fearing rejection about identity-related matters, however (e.g., Cole, Kemeny, & Taylor, 1997), as well as data on the cognitive efforts entailed by suppressing thoughts and feelings (Wegner & Lane, 1995) suggest that the consequences of avoiding disclosure of important personal experiences may go beyond simply a loss of opportunities for meaning-making.

Empirical findings to date contradict self-presentational frameworks. Both men and women from many different cultures report disclosing highly emotional or impactful events (Rimé et al., 1998). Although this work has not focused on types of events, Rimé and colleagues find little evidence that experiences involving negative social emotions like shame, guilt, or embarrassment are less likely to be disclosed than positive emotional events or negative emotional events involving anger, sadness, or anxiety; such null findings imply that transgression and trauma may be no different from other negative experiences. Rimé's work suggests that most autobiographical experiences of any importance will be disclosed to others.

However, this work focuses on asking people about emotional experiences, and then asks about their prior disclosures of those experiences. Some work focuses on specific emotional events, such as the birth of a child, and other work focused on events entailing particular types of emotions (for a review, see Rimé et al., 1998). Using an event-focused method may mean that people are more likely to report on previously disclosed events, as compared with previously undisclosed events. First, previously disclosed (and therefore more rehearsed) events may be more accessible in memory. Second, previously undisclosed experiences may be those people are less likely to

examine or disclose even in a confidential research setting, given that they did not wish to talk about those experiences previously. In other words, despite the consistency of existing findings, it may still be true that there are differences in what is and is not disclosed that are going to be missed by the event-focused approach. As a consequence, in the studies below, we both examine particular events (the most memorable events of the day, Study 1) and, additionally, ask participants to focus on previously disclosed and undisclosed events (Studies 2 and 3). This combined approach allows us to test hypotheses about emotion and undisclosed experiences, specifically, the prediction that undisclosed events would be emotionally negative and transgressive and to do so across two different methods.

Although the types of events that are and are not disclosed was of particular interest to us, so were the *reasons* for nondisclosure, as there may be multiple reasons for nondisclosure. In addition to wishing to avoid telling other people about something, Fivush (2000) noted that people may fail to disclose because they do not wish to think about their experiences. People also often disclose experiences because of circumstantial reasons related to the ongoing flow of conversation (Hyman & Faries, 1992), so there may be situational or “lack of opportunity” reasons for nondisclosure. Avoiding disclosure due to fear of others’ reactions or of one’s own reaction seems likely to be different than simply having not yet had a good opportunity to talk about an experience—the latter might happen even if an event is perfectly consistent with self-presentational goals. Thus, we also examined people’s reasons for not disclosing experiences to evaluate whether self-presentation models apply best to a subset of the undisclosed narrative self. In other words, the emotional differences in disclosed and nondisclosed experiences that are expected under self-presentation models may apply particularly to those events that are not told for reasons of negative social consequences.

Gender, Disclosure, and Narrative Identity

Gender may influence the extent to which people disclose and the extent to which the frameworks discussed above apply. Early childhood work shows that parents remember differently with girls than with boys (Fivush, 1998) and, in particular, that girls are socialized to be more emotional and elaborative in the context of disclosing

personal experiences. Studies of general talkativeness (Leaper & Ayres, 2007) suggest that adult males talk more than adult women but that gender differences in overall talkativeness are moderated by the content of the disclosure—and that women talk more when self-disclosing. Other work, more directly focused on autobiographical remembering, suggests that adult men and women are equally likely to disclose emotional events (Rimé et al., 1998) but differ in memory accuracy, elaboration, and emotionality in ways that suggest women's disclosures are more elaborated, vivid, and subsequently memorable (Davis, 1999; Fivush, 1998; Leichtman, Pillemer, Liu, & Embree, 2005; Ross & Holmberg, 1990). These findings suggest that when the focus is on the “how” of disclosure—the elaboration, the accuracy, the emotionality in the disclosed narrative—gender differences are more likely. When the focus is on whether or not events are disclosed, as in our studies, few gender differences can be expected. However, one implication of Leaper and Ayres's meta-analysis is that women may be more likely to disclose personal experiences, on average, than men, leading to interactions between gender and disclosure differences.

Summary and Overview

The aim of these studies was to begin to understand the nature of what and why we do not tell about our pasts in order to better consider the implications of disclosure for narrative identity. We examined differences between disclosed and undisclosed events in terms of types of events (relationship, achievement, traumatic, transgression, and leisure/exploration) and whether events were associated with positive or negative emotions. We employed both an event-focused method like that used by Rimé and colleagues in their work, but examining the most memorable event of the day (Study 1), and in Studies 2 and 3, we employed retrospective methods that specifically focused on nondisclosed experiences. Studies 2 and 3, consequently, also allowed us to explore people's reasons for nondisclosure. Finally, we explored whether gender moderated our effects.

At the outset, of course, we must acknowledge that the entire enterprise of studying undisclosed events requires some level of disclosure of previously untold experiences. As such, this work is tapping the most tellable subset of the untold events, and this caveat bears consideration throughout the paper. On the other hand, we

focused on nondisclosure to any other person in our studies, especially Studies 2 and 3, whereas in reality, there are many gradations of disclosure along the continuums of number of people we tell and the ways in which we tell them. Our goal here was to simply identify what people do and do not disclose as a first step in considering the “untold” aspects of narrative identity. This initial step is crucial prior to considering, in any detail, the implications of nondisclosure for narrative identity; it also provides a foundation for more nuanced considerations of disclosure—such as how many people we tell and how elaborate those tellings are. We address those implications in the general discussion as well as where our findings point for future work.

STUDY 1: THE MOST MEMORABLE EVENT OF THE DAY

In Study 1, we took an “event-focused” approach that was analogous to previous work by Rimé and colleagues, but not focused on emotions. We asked college students to record the most memorable event of each day for 1 week, to rate the emotions associated with the events, and to report whether or not they had disclosed the event. Our focus on the most memorable event of the day was chosen to ensure that the events were potentially meaningful and tellable, rather than purely routine. In addition, however, a focus on a daily event allowed us to ask about disclosure very soon after the occurrence of the event, thus minimizing potential distortion in reports of disclosure. The diary method permitted us to examine differences in events by disclosure while accounting for within-person variability and to examine the relation of disclosure to emotion.

Method

Participants

Thirty-two participants were recruited from the psychology participant pool at a metropolitan university in the Rocky Mountain region. Fourteen (44%) were male, 22 (66%) were single, and 10 (31%) were married; the majority of participants were European American (78%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 ($M = 23$, $SD = 5.3$). Participants were offered course credit or \$20 as compensation. Two participants failed to provide enough diary forms for inclusion in the analyses.

Procedures

Participants completed background and demographic questionnaires in a laboratory setting, were provided with a definition of “memorable events” as “the type of event that, of all the things that happened during your day, you would be most likely to remember later in your life,” and were asked to fill out one daily diary for practice. Participants were then sent home with seven diary forms and asked to complete one each day for the following week. Participants returned to the laboratory 2 weeks later, submitted their daily diaries, completed a post-experimental questionnaire not reported here, were debriefed, and compensated.

Participants described the most memorable event of the day. The narrative page stated simply: “Please describe the experience.” Participants then rated, on a series of 7-point scales, the extent to which they felt each of 19 emotions at the time of the event (Carstensen et al., 2000). Ratings of 1 indicated *not at all* and ratings of 7 indicated *extremely*. This emotion rating measure factors into a positive and negative emotion factor, with details available elsewhere (Carstensen et al., 2000; Pasupathi, 2007). The 19 emotions were collapsed into a positive emotion scale (happy, proud, amused, joyful, contented, interested, excited; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$) and a negative emotion scale (anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, frustration, irritation, disgust, boredom, shame, guilt, embarrassment; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$). Participants were also asked whether they had disclosed the event to any other person as well as questions about the person or people to whom they had disclosed. Disclosures overwhelmingly involved family, friends, and romantic partners, and audiences were rated as being important and emotionally close figures. Participants’ descriptions of their events typically involved a narrative form—with a beginning, middle, and end structure; most narratives were reasonably coherent, and the typical length of the narratives was about one half to three quarters of a page, handwritten and single-spaced.

Event narratives were coded by adapting an established scheme for the type of event (see, e.g., Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). The possible categories were relationships, trauma, leisure/exploration, achievement, and transgressions, which were added for the purpose of this study. Relationship narratives focused on interactions with close others, in which the relationship was the focal point of the narrative. Trauma narratives included intensely negative and potentially threatening events, such as death, sickness, violence, intense arguing, and abuse. Leisure/exploration narratives involved enjoying an experience in and of itself (e.g., vacation, hiking). Achievement narratives focused on competence or accomplishment and could be successes or failures. Transgression narratives involved doing something wrong, such as stealing or lying.

When there were two potentially relevant codes, coders were instructed to choose the most dominant theme, which was not difficult in this sample. For reliability, two coders independently scored 106 narratives, reaching an overall $\kappa = .84$. The events were predominantly relationship events ($n = 118$, 46%), followed by leisure/exploration ($n = 61$, 24%), achievement ($n = 37$, 14%), transgression ($n = 15$, 6%), and trauma ($n = 8$, 3%). In the Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) analyses that follow, we examined whether emotionality of events mattered for disclosure. We then report some more exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative results on the subset of traumatic and transgressive events.

Results and Discussion

In general, 62% of the events recorded by participants had already been disclosed by the evening of the day they occurred. Our primary focus was on whether the disclosure status of the events was related to either the type of event or the emotions associated with the event.

Disclosure and Type of Event

Table 1 shows the percentages of disclosed and nondisclosed events that were classified in each of our five event types, collapsed across participants. Note that the low frequencies and dependencies in these data preclude the use of inferential statistics—for example, 23 events that were classified as traumatic and/or transgressive came from only 14 participants; fully half the participants in the study reported no event that fell into those categories. Even if we confine our examination to a descriptive one, the data in the table suggest few differences in the prevalence of various types of event by disclosure status; indeed, to the extent that such differences exist, Table 1 suggests that transgressions are more likely in the disclosed event category. Looked at slightly differently, participants reported disclosure of 85% of transgression events and 83% of traumatic events. For relationship (60%), leisure/exploration (57%), and achievement events (66%), disclosure rates were lower.

Because this pattern is inconsistent with theoretical notions about the difficulty of disclosing trauma and transgression reviewed earlier (Fivush, 2000; Baumeister, 1982), we next present some examples to illuminate the nature of “everyday” trauma and transgression.

Table 1
 Percentage of Different Event Types by Disclosure Across Studies
 1, 2, and 3

| | Disclosed | Undisclosed | Effects of Disclosure |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|---|
| Study 1 | | | |
| Trauma | 5 | 3 | Significance tests not performed |
| Transgression | 10 | 1 | Significance tests not performed |
| Relationship | 46 | 52 | Significance tests not performed |
| Achievement | 15 | 13 | Significance tests not performed |
| Leisure/Exploration | 25 | 31 | |
| Study 2 | | | |
| Trauma | 32 | 27 | |
| Transgression | 11 | 29 | $F(1, 104) = 6.7, p < .02,$ partial $\eta^2 = .06$ |
| Relationship | 32 | 26 | |
| Achievement | 12 | 4 | $F(1, 104) = 7.3, p < .01,$ partial $\eta^2 = .07$ |
| Leisure/Exploration | 12 | 9 | |
| Study 3 | | | |
| Trauma | 15 | 10 | |
| Transgression | 6 | 23 | $F(1, 104) = 8.0, p < .01,$ partial $\eta^2 = .07$ |
| Relationship | 50 | 52 | |
| Achievement | 20 | 10 | |
| Leisure/Exploration | 9 | 5 | |

A cursory review indicated that the events themselves were indeed everyday occurrences. For example, one participant wrote the following account, which was coded as a trauma and which had already been disclosed multiple times:

Coming home from school today I was on my usual route home when the extraordinary happened. I was cruising along in the fast line going about 75 miles per hour when the slow-moving truck in the next lane swerved right in front of me! Well, slamming on the brakes wasn't enough, and I was forced to pull over into the

emergency lane to avoid hitting the truck! Amazing, drivers in Utah are HORRIBLE!

Transgressions in the data set were also fairly straightforward ones. For example, one participant wrote the following account, which she had not disclosed:

I didn't set my alarm clock last night I was late for school I entered the classroom 30 minutes late. How embarrassing! I missed the announcements and some of the lecture and then realized I left my bag in the car with my notebook and only had my purse—I couldn't take notes. I just wanted to go home and go back to bed.

Other participants wrote about disclosed transgressions:

A friend of mine sitting next to me, was filling out a survey that had been passed out in that class on reasons for dating. He started writing down humorous, nonsense answers which caused us both to smile. The teacher stopped the class and started berating us for laughing in her class and to share what was so funny with the rest of the class and that every time she looked at us we were smiling. I hadn't realized before that a smile (even w/out sound) was so offensive as to cause somebody to publicly yell at another person.

These “everyday” transgressions and traumas are both forgivable and human, and are sometimes presented so as to minimize the narrator's culpability, as in the case of the teacher. Even though the events of missing class and oversleeping had not yet been disclosed, there is little in the participant's account to suggest that she will not ever disclose that event. Although such events do involve transgressions, they do not involve the kinds of transgressions in which the telling of the transgression is fraught with potential danger for a person's sense of self (e.g., Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004). In fact, these events, because they are in fact both everyday and unusual, may be more tellable in that they provide good material for a story (Bruner, 1990). In this sense, the data do not provide an adequate test of theories about transgression and trauma and can even be interpreted as supportive of the idea that, for trauma and transgression to be problematic for disclosure, they must be quite severe, rather than minimal.

Table 2
Differences in the Emotionality of What Is and Is Not Told

| | Disclosed <i>M (SD)</i> | Not Disclosed <i>M (SD)</i> | Disclosure Effects? |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Study 1 | | | |
| Positive | 3.3 (1.6) | 3.1 (1.6) | No significance tests |
| Negative | 2.3 (1.2) | 2.1 (1.2) | No significance tests |
| Study 2 | | | |
| Positive | 3.2 (2.0) | 2.3 (1.6) | $F(1, 103) = 7.7, p < .01,$ partial $\eta^2 = .07$ |
| Negative | 3.1 (1.5) | 3.7 (1.3) | $F(1, 103) = 9.5, p < .01,$ partial $\eta^2 = .08$ |
| Study 3 | | | |
| Positive | 3.4 (1.9) | 2.6 (1.6) | $F(1, 107) = 13.6, p < .001,$ partial $\eta^2 = .11$ |
| Negative | 3.4 (1.6) | 3.4 (1.7) | |

Disclosure and Emotion

Table 2 presents the average ratings of positive and negative emotion for disclosed and nondisclosed events in Study 1, aggregated across participants and events. Aggregated across participants and events, these averages do not suggest any relations between emotion and disclosure, but they do show that, on average, everyday memorable events were low in overall emotional intensity and tended to be more emotionally positive than negative. However, the aggregation across individuals and events is not the best way to examine whether disclosure of everyday events was linked to emotion. To better evaluate our predictions about emotion and disclosure, we employed HLM 5.0. We fit a Level 1 nonlinear model of whether events were disclosed or not (modeled as a Bernoulli outcome) based on the participants' ratings of how emotionally negative and emotionally positive the event was. At Level 2, we examined whether gender moderated associations between emotion and disclosure. Positive and negative emotion variables were grand centered before entry into the model.

The results (population average model with robust standard errors) revealed only one effect—a significant and positive coefficient for negative emotions, $\gamma_{30} = 1.5, t(26) = 2.7, p < .02$. Transformed

into log-metrics, this coefficient indicates that when all other event characteristics are average, the odds ratio for whether or not the event will be told increases by 1.8 for each unit increase in ratings of negative emotion. Significant individual differences remained across all components, $\chi^2_{(26)} > 40.1$, $ps < .05$. These suggested that there were individual differences in the general tendency to disclose experiences, individual differences in the impact of negative emotion, and individual differences in the impact of positive emotion. Thus, for people in general, more intense negative emotion was linked to a higher likelihood of disclosure of the experience, but this tendency varied among individuals; moreover, individual variability was unrelated to gender.

Summary

The findings of Study 1 suggest that negative emotional intensity is associated with an increased likelihood of disclosing experiences but did not suggest that event type was related to disclosure and found no effects of gender. These results support work by Rimé et al. (1998) as well as the contention that emotional intensity, and perhaps particularly negative emotional intensity, is associated with an increased likelihood of disclosing events to others. That is, on a daily basis, highly negative events are more likely to enter the conversational arena, in which they may be fleshed out into socially constructed narratives. This finding, however, contradicts the idea that we are less likely to disclose—and, consequently, narrate—events that are emotionally negative (Baumeister, 1982).

Nevertheless, as we noted in the introduction, a method that focuses on events and then asks about disclosure may be less amenable to exploring the nature of what is not told to others. In part, this is because of a tendency to report on events that were also disclosed. But in part, it is also because if we take these and other data seriously, people are highly likely to disclose experiences that matter at least a little—by being emotional, memorable, or otherwise noteworthy. Thus, the subset of “not disclosed” but memorable and important events in people’s lives may be small to begin with, and this compromises statistical power when using methods that do not explicitly target that small pool. To address these issues, we adopted an approach that specifically targeted disclosed and undisclosed

memories in Studies 2 and 3. Next, we outline the issues raised by adopting this approach.

STUDY 2: IMPORTANT DISCLOSED AND UNDISCLOSED MEMORIES

In Study 2, we asked participants to generate both disclosed and nondisclosed events, so that we were able to compare what is and is not disclosed by the same participants. Study 2 also focused on important memories, thus moving away from the more mundane context of daily memorable events, in which major life experiences are rare, to the set of memories people deem of central importance to their lives. The use of a within-subjects design ensured equal numbers of disclosed and undisclosed events, in contrast to the unequal base rates of disclosure for Study 1 events and in past research. In addition, we asked participants to respond to an open-ended question about why their undisclosed important events were undisclosed.

Asking people to report on previously undisclosed events raises some methodological issues. Among the most significant are the extent to which people can accurately report on past disclosures (see work on sexual abuse by Schooler, e.g., Schooler, Bendiksen, & Ambadar, 1997) and the fact that people may select, among their undisclosed experiences, those most amenable to disclosure. These limitations are important for how the findings of this and the next study can be interpreted. We return to these issues in the general discussion when considering the findings of all three studies.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eight participants (37 men and 71 women) were recruited from the psychology subject pool at a public university in southern Ontario for a study on “autobiographical memories,” and provided with course credit for participation. The average age was 19.2 ($SD = 2.8$, range = 17–39). The majority of participants were South Asian (32%), followed by European-Canadian and East Asian (both at 20%), European (9%), Middle Eastern (8%), African-Canadian (6%), African, Hispanic, and Native Canadian (all at 1%), and Other (2%). For preliminary analyses of ethnicity, we collapsed participants into four ethnic categories: European-Canadian and European (29%), South Asian

(32%), East Asian (20%), and all others (19%). These analyses showed no important main effects or interactions involving ethnicity and ethnicity was not included in the analyses reported below.

Procedures

Following informed consent, participants completed a questionnaire eliciting four narratives: an important told and untold memory and an unimportant told and untold memory. Given our focus, we excluded the unimportant memories from consideration. Order of recall was counter-balanced. Participants also completed several measures of personality and well-being not included in this study.

The questionnaire provided the following instructions: “We are interested in memories that you have never told anyone. In the space below please describe a memory that you have never told anyone else that you consider to be *personally important*. Please remember that this survey is confidential.” Following each narrative, participants were asked to rate how they felt when the memory originally happened on a 1–7 scale on a list of 19 emotions, identical to those in Study 1. Participants were also asked to rate (on 7-point scales) how important the memory is, whether or not the memory revealed something about the self, whether or not they gained insight from the experience, and, in a free response format, why they did not tell the undisclosed memory.

Coding

Events were coded using the same scheme employed in Study 1 for the type of event, with the categories being relationships, transgressions, trauma, leisure/exploration, and achievement. An independent coder, blind to the hypotheses of the study, coded all narratives. The second author completed reliability coding with this coder on 70 narratives, blind to event disclosure status ($\kappa = .84$).

In addition, for the untold events, we coded participants’ free response to a question about why they had not told this event. Based on an initial pass through the data, using an inductive approach somewhat like grounded theory procedures, nine initial categories emerged: embarrassment in telling, fear of getting in trouble, to not upset the self, to not upset others, fear of not being supported, not being asked, avoiding bragging, too personal, and not important. Avoiding bragging was endorsed by only one person and preliminary analyses showed that the last two categories were redundant with the emotional intensity of the event. Thus, we retained the first six reasons for coding. Each questionnaire was coded for all of the motives on scales of 1 to 3 by the second author, with

3 representing high endorsement. A second coder, blind to the hypotheses of the study, completed reliability coding on 26% of the narratives (all intra-class $r_s > .70$). For analyses, we collapsed ratings into three broad categories: *social consequences* (the sum of ratings for embarrassed, fear trouble, avoid upsetting others, fear others would not be supportive), *lack of social opportunity* (I wasn't asked), and *avoidance* (fear of upsetting myself).¹

Measures

The emotion ratings were done on items identical to those used in Study 1; we collapsed the ratings into a rating of overall positive emotion, Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$ and $.95$ for untold and told events, respectively, and a rating of overall negative emotion, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$ and $.89$ for untold and told events, respectively. To provide some evidence that disclosed and undisclosed events were of equal impact, we averaged ratings of the extent to which the event was self-revealing and provided novel insights, Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$ and $.77$ for disclosed and undisclosed events, respectively. In our previous work these items have correlated highly with ratings of importance.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses revealed no main effects or interactions involving ethnicity or questionnaire order, so these were excluded from further consideration. A general linear model examining event impact as a function of disclosure status and gender revealed no effects, $F_s(1, 104) < 1$, so we were successful in sampling disclosed and undisclosed events that were similar in perceived impact.

Are Some Types of Events Less Likely to Be Disclosed?

The data here pose difficulties because they are both categorical in nature and repeated measures in design. However, based on prior work with similar data (see, e.g., Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001, footnote 3), we adopted a general linear model approach in the following analyses. We also repeated the reported analyses with a series of nonparametric McNemar's tests, and the findings were quite similar in terms of pattern and significance levels.

A general linear model approach suggested main effects of disclosure status, $F(5, 100) = 2.8$, $p < .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$, and gender,

1. Cronbach's alphas are not reported because endorsement of one motive in a category does not imply that other motives will be endorsed.

$F(5, 100) = 4.5, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Table 1 presents the percentages of disclosed and nondisclosed events that fell into each of the event type categories. As shown there, the overall effect of disclosure status was attributable primarily to differences in the disclosure rates for transgression and achievement events. Disclosed events were more likely than nondisclosed events to involve achievement and less likely to involve transgressions.

The gender effect was attributable to trauma, $F(1, 104) = 8.1, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$, leisure/exploration, $F(1, 104) = 5.1, p < .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and achievement, $F(1, 104) = 8.7, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$. Estimated marginal means revealed that women's events were more likely to be classed as traumatic, $M (SEM) = .36 (.04)$ than were men's, $M (SEM) = .17 (.05)$. Women's events were less likely to be classified as leisure/exploration, $M (SEM) = .07 (.03)$ and achievement, $M (SEM) = .04 (.03)$, than were men's, leisure/exploration $M (SEM) = .18 (.04)$, achievement, $M(SEM) = .17 (.03)$.

Below are examples of transgressions in this data set. The first transgression was disclosed, the second and third were not:

When I was in grade 1, I did not know how to read or write. So in class we were asked to write a letter to Santa Claus. Since I did not know how to read or write, I copied word for word what my friend had wrote. The teacher called me up and asked if I had wrote this, and I said yes. The teacher then asked why did it say Jason's name and not mine.

I went to a party with some friends and I had too much to drink. There was an acquaintance of mine there at the party and we hit it off the moment we saw each other. One thing led to another and we ended up having intercourse. None of us thought of being "protected" at the time as we were both extremely intoxicated. It wasn't until after it was all over with that I realized that a condom wasn't used. Just the thought made my heart drop and I felt so dirty. My friends and I went home and I never told them what happened. I went to a walk-in clinic the next morning and had to get a morning after pill. I always thought badly of girls who took that pill yet I was the one that time.

When I first moved to Canada, there was no one of South Asian descent in my school. Most kids left me alone, but there were a few

who insisted on calling me Paki and dirty Indian. I didn't speak much English so I didn't fight back against those kids. I eventually found out that one of those kids lived in the same neighborhood as mine. I was particularly angry at this kid. One day I was walking home from school and I didn't see anyone on my street. I decided then to vandalize his house. I quickly grabbed rocks from his garden and I smashed as many windows as I possibly could. I smashed 3 windows when I heard people yelling. I ran to a park nearby and hid near the playground. About an hour later, I went home and my parents told me about what happened to that kid's house and asked if I did it or knew anyone who did. I denied it and I think they believed me because I was a very nice and polite kid who had never gotten into any major trouble before. The next day at school, I was surprised that no one had suspected me. One kid thought I would have been too scared to even walk past this house. My family moved 2 years later and I'm surprised I never got caught I got away with it!

Consistent with the instructions, these were relatively significant and potentially consequential transgressions in comparison to the types of events discussed in Study 1. Note that the disclosure in the first one might be termed forced by the teacher. All involve moral considerations of justice and welfare, and all involved some consideration of mitigating factors—the inability to read and write, the alcohol, and the discrimination experiences.

Disclosure and Emotion

A general linear model of ratings of positive and negative emotion, with gender as a between-subjects factor and disclosure status (told vs. untold) as within-subjects variables revealed only a main effect for disclosure status, $F(2, 103) = 4.9$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. As shown in Table 2, previously nondisclosed events were significantly less emotionally positive and significantly more emotionally negative than previously disclosed events.

Heterogeneity in Nondisclosed Events: Exploring Motives for Non-disclosure

In Study 2, we were also able to collect data on the reasons people report for nondisclosure. These data allow us to examine

heterogeneity in nondisclosed events. We first examined whether motives for nondisclosure varied as a function of whether the event was a transgression or not, given our finding that transgressions were more likely to be untold. Based on the distribution of the motives, we examined only social consequences motives and avoidance motives, because disclosure opportunities were infrequently mentioned. As shown in Table 3, social consequence motives were more strongly endorsed by participants whose untold event was classed as a transgression, $t(104) = 4.3, p < .001$.

Second, we examined whether motives were linked to the emotionality of the events. We computed Pearson's correlations between motives and emotions (see Table 3). Social consequences were associated with greater negative emotions and the avoidance motive was associated with greater negativity and less positivity. In additional analyses, we tested for two-way interactions involving gender or event type and the motives to examine whether the associations found above were moderated by these factors. These analyses showed that the correlations presented in Table 3 did not vary for men and women or by whether an event was a transgression or not.

Table 3
Heterogeneity Within Nondisclosed Events: Relations of Motives to Emotional Characteristics of Events and Transgression Events

| | Positive Emotions | Negative Emotions | Transgressions <i>M (SD)</i> | Non-Transgression <i>M (SD)</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Study 2 | | | | |
| Social risks | -.12 | .26** | 3.3 (2.0) ^a | 1.6 (1.0) ^b |
| Disclosure opportunities | .08 | -.16 | 0.0 (0.0) | 0.2 (0.7) |
| Avoidance | -.31*** | .24* | 0.5 (1.1) | 0.7 (1.3) |
| Study 3 | | | | |
| Social risks | -.21* | .52*** | 3.6 (1.9) ^a | 4.5 (1.7) ^b |
| Disclosure opportunities | .00 | -.13 | 3.2 (1.8) | 3.1 (1.9) |
| Avoidance | -.51*** | .48*** | 3.2 (2.6) | 4.3 (2.2) |

The scales of measurement for the motives differ in Studies 2 and 3. Means with differing superscripts were significantly different ($p < .05$).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The findings of Study 2 suggest that, compared to disclosed events, undisclosed events were more likely to involve transgressions, were more emotionally negative, and were less emotionally positive. Moreover, transgressions and negative emotions were associated with nondisclosure for socioemotional reasons. Although women disclosed different types of events than did men, there were no interactions involving gender.

STUDY 3: HETEROGENEOUS EVENTS, COMMUNITY SAMPLE

Our last study was designed to replicate the findings of Study 2 in a more heterogeneous sample of events and persons and using a closed-ended motive assessment. We made use of existing data drawn from an adult community sample that ranged in age and in the importance of the recalled events,² allowing us to replicate the findings of Study 2 in a community, adult life-span sample.

Method

Participants

Flyers, newspaper advertisements, and radio announcements were used to recruit 123 individuals (M (SD) age = 42.9 years (19.1 years), range 18–89 years) from a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States for a “study of life experiences.” Sixty-four percent of participants were women. The majority were European American (79%), followed by Native Americans (7%). Forty-four percent reported they had never been married, 24% were divorced, 20% were married, and 8% had been widowed. Most participants (66%) had not completed a bachelor’s degree, and the remainder of the participants were evenly split between those who had completed a bachelor’s degree and those who had gone on to graduate or professional training. Participants were compensated with \$10 per hour. Most completed the study in less than 2 hours. No main effects or interactions involving age reached statistical significance in the analyses below and age is not further discussed.

2. These data were originally collected for other purposes. Data bearing on overall positive and negative emotion when retelling the told events has been published elsewhere (Pasupathi, 2003; Pasupathi et al., 2002), as have linguistic analyses of the memory narratives (Pasupathi, 2007). The present results have not been previously reported.

Procedures

Participants completed two questionnaires, one on a previously disclosed event “something you have told to at least one other person,” and one on a previously undisclosed event, defined as “one you have never told anybody about.” Participants were asked to describe the event and to rate, on 7-point scales, the same items employed in Studies 1 and 2. For the untold events, we asked participants to rate the extent to which each of 11 motives for nondisclosure applied on 7-point Likert-type scale, with lower values indicating lower endorsement of the motive.

The 11 reason items were based on exploratory interviews with undergraduate students about nondisclosure. They assessed *social consequences*, such as “because I was afraid of what others would think” or “because I or others could get into trouble,” and *lack of opportunity to disclose* reasons, such as “there wasn’t any appropriate time” or “nobody asked me.” Finally, we included one item analogous to the *avoidance* motive from Study 2: “because I wanted to forget about it.” Of the 123 original participants, 115 produced both a told and previously untold narrative account. Some participants failed to complete some of the post-event ratings, resulting in slightly different sample sizes for analyses (range = 109–115).

Measures

Event types were coded as in Studies 1 and 2 by a coder blind to disclosure states and the hypotheses of the study—the categories were relationship, achievement, leisure/exploration, trauma, and transgression. The second author completed reliability coding with 50 narratives, blind to event disclosure status (overall $\kappa = .86$).

Emotion ratings were collapsed as in Studies 1 and 2 to provide indicators for positive and negative emotion for told and untold events. For previously disclosed events, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$ and $.88$ for positive and negative emotions. For previously undisclosed events, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$ and $.90$ for positive and negative emotions.

An exploratory factor analysis of reasons for not telling (principal components extraction and oblimin rotation) yielded three factors with eigenvalues above 1, accounting for 62% of the variance. The first factor, with five items accounting for 29% of the variance, corresponded with *social consequences* (it was supposed to be a secret; I didn’t want others to know; I or others could get into trouble; it was embarrassing/shameful; I was afraid of what others would think). The second factor, with four items accounting for 22% of the variance, corresponded with *lack of opportunity to disclose* (it didn’t come up; nobody asked me; I hadn’t

thought about it; there wasn't any appropriate time). The third factor, accounting for 11% of the variance, included only one item (because I wanted to forget about it). We excluded one item, "because I didn't think others would want to hear about it," because it loaded relatively equally on all three factors. We computed averages across the items loading on each factor to provide indicators of *social risk*, $\alpha = .82$, *opportunity to disclose*, $\alpha = .75$, and *avoidance* (single item).

Results and Discussion

Order of completion of questionnaires for disclosed versus undisclosed events was counterbalanced and was unrelated to any results reported below.

Type of Event and Disclosure

As in Study 2, we employed GLM analyses to test differences in event types by disclosure and participant gender. The results revealed a significant effect of event type, $F(4,102) = 3.0$, $p < .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$, and no other significant effects. As shown in Table 1, previously disclosed events were significantly less likely to be classified as transgressions than previously undisclosed events. Recall that in this study, events could vary in importance, in contrast to Study 2, which focused on important events.

Below is an example of a transgression that was disclosed:

When I was in Kindergarten my sister was in second grade. She decided one day that I was to go to her school class. When it was time for the school to be over the teacher gave a note to my sister to take to our mother. We read the note and because mom wouldn't like what it said we torn up the note and put it in the trash on the school grounds. We moved from this school and about 5 yrs later this teacher came to our home, my sister and I kept trying to hear the conversation the teacher was having with our parent. We even went into the room a couple of times when the teacher left my mother asked my sister and I why we kept trying to hear the conversation. We told her really expecting punishment. However she just said that if we had kept this experience to ourselves for that long we already had our punishment.

This event, while clearly a transgression, is relatively minor and occurred when the narrator was a very young child. And it is consistent with other disclosed transgressions in this sample. Now, consider two examples of an undisclosed transgression:

I work at the library and I had a friend who had a large amount of fines on his card, a charge that wasn't really his fault but the library put a charge on his card for a broken video. Instead of going to my boss to get permission to take it off his fines, I simply used the authority I have to waive fines and took them off myself.

While driving a friend's car in the winter time I was in the parking area of an apartment complex & I turned the wheel to turn a corner but the vehicle did not respond on the Ice & I slid & hit a tall curb with my friends car.

In these cases, the transgressions are more severe—they involve harm to other people and violations of job obligations. Note that they are not major transgressions in a life-changing way, but they are not as harmless as the disclosed transgressions in the sample.

Emotional Quality of Events and Disclosure

A general linear model of ratings of positive and negative emotion, with gender as a between-subjects factor and disclosure status (told vs. untold) as within-subjects variables revealed only a main effect for disclosure status, $F(2,106) = 8.0$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. As shown in Table 2, previously nondisclosed events were significantly less emotionally positive, but were not significantly more emotionally negative than previously disclosed events.

Motives for Nondisclosure

In Study 3, we were also able to collect data on the reasons people report for nondisclosure. These data allow us to examine heterogeneity in nondisclosed events. We first examined whether motives for nondisclosure varied as a function of whether the event was a transgression or not, given our finding that transgressions were more likely to be untold. Based on the distribution of the motives, we examined only social consequences motives and avoidance motives,

because disclosure opportunities were infrequently mentioned. As shown in Table 3, social consequence motives were more strongly endorsed by participants whose untold event was classed as a transgression, $t(104) = 2.3, p < .03$; differences for avoidance fell just short of statistical significance, $p < .06$. There were no gender differences in endorsement of the motives.

We then computed Pearson's correlations between the three different motives for nondisclosure and the emotionality of the events; these correlations are shown in the bottom of Table 3. As seen there, the pattern of results is similar to but stronger than that observed in Study 2—social consequence and avoidance motives were both associated with increased negative emotion and decreased positive emotion.

When we repeated the analyses checking whether the Study 3 correlations in Table 3 were moderated by gender or by the motives for nondisclosure, the results suggested that the correlations in Table 3 were similar for men and women and regardless of the extent to which participants endorsed the avoidance motive. However, endorsement of the social consequences motives in this study did significantly moderate the associations in Table 3, $F(2, 97) = 5.5, p < .01, \eta^2 = .10$. For nontransgression events, social consequences motives were significantly associated with both positive, $r(80) = -.32, p < .01$, and negative emotion, $r(82) = .62, p < .001$, in the directions depicted in Table 3. However, for transgression events, social consequences motives were significantly associated with *increased* positive emotion, $r(24) = .47, p < .05$, and were not associated with negative emotion, $r(24) = -.12$.

The findings of Study 3 suggested that again, compared to disclosed events, undisclosed events were more likely to involve transgressions and were less emotionally positive. Moreover, transgressions and negative emotions were again associated with nondisclosure for socioemotional reasons, and in this case, such reasons were also associated with reductions in positive emotions. In this study, we observed no gender differences.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of these three studies was to explore differences in what people do and do not disclose to others about their experiences. This

question is important because narrative identity—an individual's life story—is affected both by what people do talk with others about and what they do not disclose. To explore such differences, we conducted three studies comparing what people do and do not disclose. Our first study was event focused—assessing whether the most memorable event of the day had been told or not. Our second and third studies took a new direction within this area, by asking people explicitly to report on previously disclosed and undisclosed events.

Gaps in the Narrative Self: What People Do and Do Not Disclose

If one examines everyday memorable events, as we did in Study 1, people report high rates of disclosure in general—above 60% for events. Moreover, our Study 1 findings revealed little evidence for differences in what was and was not disclosed based on the type of event. In fact, in Study 1, the only predictor of disclosure was basic negative emotion, and the more intensely the experience was negative, the more likely that participants had disclosed that event already by the evening of the day it occurred. These findings are consistent with those of Rimé and colleagues (e.g., Rimé et al., 1998) and suggest that in normative samples, most people tell someone about the more notable experiences of their everyday lives; there were no differences by gender or event type. Further, the tellable everyday experiences are those that are somewhat negative. The picture is different if we ask directly about nondisclosed events. Across two such studies, we found a very consistent pattern of effects. First, people reporting on an untold event were more likely to write about transgressions than when they reported on a told event. Second, untold events were less emotionally positive and more socially emotionally negative than were disclosed events. Our findings in these studies also suggested at least three classes of motives for nondisclosure: *lack of social opportunity*, *socioemotional consequences*, and *avoidance*. Within the set of untold events reported by participants in Studies 2 and 3, these motives were associated with different features of the events themselves. Again, we found little evidence for gender differences related to disclosure—that is, gender was associated with different types of events being reported in Study 2, but it did not moderate the likelihood that events would be disclosed in any study.

Resolving Differences Across Studies

There are several differences between our second and third studies and our first study and prior work by Rimé and others. First, Study 1 and related prior work come rather close to examining actual disclosure behavior. Their findings suggest that the primary factor in what we do and do not tell seems to be emotionality—based on our data and Rime’s—and in fact, negative emotionality. This finding is also consistent with the idea that storytelling is governed by “trouble” (Bruner, 1990; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; McLean & Thorne, 2006). That is, a story without any emotional punch lacks a point and ought, really, not to be told. In contrast to looking at disclosure behavior, Studies 2 and 3 capture what people *believe* to be their untold selves. There, the primary factor in what we do not talk about also involves less positive emotion, more negative emotion, and, not surprisingly, transgressions.

At least two different explanations integrate these disparate findings into a coherent picture of untold aspects of narrative identity. One is that on an everyday basis, people tell the more salient and emotional experiences they have. Over longer time periods, people may then forget what they did not disclose, largely because it was not significant or emotionally salient—indeed, not part of narrative identity at all. On occasion, however, people experience something that they do not wish to disclose but which has emotional significance for them. These instances become remembered and are the incidents captured in Studies 2 and 3. These are the events with problematic implications for the self—transgressions and experiences involving substantial negative emotion.

Another account would be that people actually tell the important and emotional events of their lives *regardless* of their implications. But, when asked to identify something they have not previously told anyone, they think of experiences that are shameful, transgressive, and problematic, suggesting that they may be responding to cultural expectations of the untold self. Such experiences may be truly untold, but it is also possible that participants have disclosed them in ways they do not recall. Based on laboratory work by Arnold and Lindsay (2002, 2005), as well as on case study work by Schooler and colleagues (1997) on recovered memories of abuse, people may believe they have forgotten something for a period of time when, in fact, during the period of “amnesia” they did engage in recall of the

event. In other words, memory for past recollection occasions is faulty. Schooler's work documents cases of forgotten disclosure explicitly. How might this work in explaining the present data? Importantly, in the "forgot-it-all-along" phenomenon, the interpretations people make of the event and the nature of the cues for recall are critical. When there are qualitative shifts in those interpretations and cues, the phenomenon of forgetting past recall occasions is more likely to occur.

Consider some examples. A young woman decides to skip classes in order to spend a little time with a friend. Later, she mentions this to her spouse, who responds with some anger and suggests that this is a behavior that reflects poorly on her. She subsequently reevaluates the event in terms of guilt-laden pleasures and irresponsibility. This change in her interpretation of the event results in less accessibility of her original recollection—one of a relatively neutral, "what I did today" sort. Or a student leaves his car unlocked one day in the parking lot at his university. He returns after his classes end to discover that his radio has been stolen but also, given that the car is unlocked, that he is somewhat culpable for the theft. He tells others about the theft but leaves out the crucial detail of his own contribution. Later, the studies presented here ask for an undisclosed event, and he thinks of this event as undisclosed because his partial disclosure was such that it fundamentally changed the meaning of the occurrence—the partial disclosure does not really amount to disclosing the event. As a final and more serious example, Schooler and colleagues (1997) present a case in which a woman told her then-husband about being raped, but did so with very little evaluative, interpretive content. Rather, she stated the event as a fact, neutrally. Later, she reported having forgotten the rape during the same period in which this disclosure occurred. In some sense, disclosing that one was raped without any affect or interpretation—without consideration of the very painful and traumatic aspects of that experience—amounts to not remembering, and not disclosing, the experience.

We believe it is likely that all of these explanations apply, but perhaps to different subsets of the experiences our participants reported upon. In future work, the use of both prospective, event-based and retrospective, disclosure-based methods may shed light on these two processes and further differentiate degrees of disclosure and shifting meanings attached to events across time.

Implications for Narrative Identity

Our findings on what people disclose about their lives have two general implications, one relating to the fact that people do talk about the majority of their everyday emotional experiences and the other relating to not told experiences. First, our findings and others' show that people generally do disclose most of their moderately and intensely emotional experiences to other people; moreover, we found no major differences by gender, similar to other work in the area. Such high disclosure rates are quite adaptive for several reasons, but perhaps especially for the ways that telling stories serve to create identity within social relationships. In terms of narrative identity conceived of in life story terms, telling others about our everyday emotional experiences permits close others to be collaborators in the process of writing our life stories. From a more process-oriented view of narrative identity, it means that people express their narrative voice within their social worlds, even for experiences that will never become an official piece of their life story. Relatedly, even if the types of events that were disclosed in Study 1 are forgotten rather than knitted into an enduring life story, the disclosure provides practice for telling negative events, something that may matter when people encounter more significant negative experiences.

Disclosure is also linked to people's capacity to interpret experiences in ways that foster coping, adaptation, and growth (Pennebaker & Keough, 1999). By contrast, repression (perhaps linked to our avoidance motive) has been linked to greater intrusiveness of memories (Wegner & Lane, 1995). As a consequence, the act of talking about those everyday emotional experiences permits people to make meaning from the more negative kind of event that might otherwise form the basis for intrusive and unwanted thoughts. For example, Baumeister, Stilman, and Wotman (1990) have shown that people tell stories about harming others in ways that mitigate the impact of their transgressions and (they hope) the resulting social risk for disclosing a transgression. We saw some evidence for this in data from Studies 2 and 3.

Further, McLean (2005) found that stories told for the function of entertaining others often involved transgressions (see also McLean & Thorne, 2006). Thus, transgressive experiences can be turned on their heads to lessen the impact of the transgression and even to make them positive and funny stories, though perhaps with some

details left out. Most importantly, perhaps, is that such stories also mitigate the negative implications of transgressions for the self. So, just as storytelling constructs a sense of who we are for consumption by ourselves and others, disclosure to other people allows those individuals to influence the way we recall and interpret our experiences—disclosure opens the narrated self to social and cultural shaping toward socially and culturally adaptive forms (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Rich, 2005; Wang & Conway, 2004).

This brings us to the second issue, which is that our findings also point to some gaps in what people include in their shared narrated self. Across our second and third studies, there were differences in what people did and did not disclose, revolving around emotionality and also event type. Disclosed events were reliably more emotionally positive, across both studies, and less emotionally negative. They were less likely to be transgressions. Thus, people's own construction of their "untold" self is a less emotionally positive, more emotionally negative, transgressor.

Despite not disclosing those events, people do retain them and, in some cases, even consider these events as having real importance in their lives. Only a subset of experiences remain undisclosed because people fear the social consequences of disclosure, but that subset, across studies, was reliably emotionally negative. Similarly, only a subset, and likely a related one, of experiences remain undisclosed because people want to avoid thinking about them, but again that subset is reliably more emotionally negative and less emotionally positive than the remainder of the untold events.

The relative similarity of findings for social risk and avoidance motives for nondisclosure suggests that these two motives are highly intertwined and is consistent with ideas about introjection (Benjamin, 1996), internalized audiences (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987), and other features of dialogical theories of selves (Hermans, 1996). These two motives map onto the social and self functions identified for autobiographical remembering in general (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Cohen, 1998; Pillemer, 1998; Webster, 2003) and also fit into models of motives for remembering in conversation that posit self-construction as a primary function of conversational remembering (Pasupathi, Lucas, & Coombs, 2002). That is, these motives relate to regulating the self from both one's own and others' perspectives, by both disclosing some types of experiences and withholding others.

What are the implications of differences in what we do and do not tell? It likely depends on the framework from which they are viewed. For example, consider the idea that positive illusions are beneficial to mental health (Baumeister, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988) or, relatedly, that self-presentation, even when deceptive, can be adaptive in therapeutic settings (Kelly, 2000). In fact, silences in therapeutic settings can be quite productive—they can allow for internal rethinking to take place (e.g., Levitt, 2002). Under such circumstances, the withholding of particularly shameful experiences might hold benefits for mental health, by letting people themselves avoid too-frequent thoughts about such experiences and by preventing such experiences from being part of their public identity, with potentially negative social consequences.

However, one can easily imagine that the dynamics of keeping a shameful self private has psychological and physiological costs, in terms of the effort and intrusiveness that may come with avoiding experiences (Cole et al., 1997; Wegner & Lane, 1995) and the threat of being “discovered” to be less socially acceptable than one’s public narrative suggests and, perhaps most tragically, the failure to capitalize on the potential for storytelling to help make sense of and mitigate the consequences of these experiences (see Thorne & McLean, 2003, for a discussion of serial storytelling in search of an accepting audience and meaning-making).

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

Because the data collected above are all retrospective, though to varying degrees, our data cannot address whether the characteristics of events determine what becomes public or whether differences *emerge* from the process of disclosure or nondisclosure; that is, perhaps what we tell comes to be perceived as more emotionally positive, and what we do not tell grows more negative and less positive through its suppression. Both are interesting alternatives, and one of the most important directions for future work is to take an increasingly prospective approach. If people’s assumptions about what they do and do not tell bias their selection, recall, and evaluation of told and untold events, then our data reveal those assumptions, and the next step would involve examining the consequences of believing oneself to have undisclosed transgressions. This might entail examinations of individual variability in the extent to which shame, guilt, and fear of social consequences are salient to an individuals’ undisclosed self.

Further, narrative and disclosure are not the same. Disclosure may entail a range from minimal narrative, such as “We went to Disneyworld,” to lengthy elaborated accounts of the varied events of the trip, as implied by our earlier discussion of the “forgot-it-all-along” effect. Second, disclosure varies in the number and breadth of the audiences for whom it takes place. That is, some events are told only to a spouse or highly trusted individual, whereas others are effectively broadcast throughout a social network. Certainly the types of events that are given the first type of treatment differ from those given the second type. Moreover, the impact of having at least one place where transgressive events can be shared could be extremely large from a clinical standpoint. This is one way to construe the purpose of therapy, in fact, to allow people to create a viable story about their lives. That viable story may involve choosing to keep some events out of the narrative (e.g., Kelly, 2000) and may also entail new interpretations and connections that render the story a more functional one (see Angus & McLeod, 2004). Much of the work on listeners, disclosure, and remembering has examined variations in *how* experiences are disclosed (e.g., McLean, 2005; Pasupathi, 2007; Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). Addressing the limitations of the present studies with respect to both the audiences and the nature of disclosing experiences would begin to link work on disclosure and nondisclosure with that existing literature.

These beginning findings underscore the importance of looking at what is narrated to others, even if only one other, and what is not disclosed. The parts of our narrative self that are told to others have benefits and costs—greater acceptability, greater “fit” with culturally understood narratives, but also constraints on our sense of self. Once a story about ourselves is told to at least one other person, we have given up part of the authorship of our narrative identity. On the other hand, the stories we withhold from anyone reflect a troubling, perhaps unwanted sense of ourselves—even in these studies, which are likely capturing the least troubling events. A full account of narrative identity needs to address the consequences of that untold trouble.

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