

The self-positioning strategies of adult learners in relation to family narratives

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify how young adults position themselves in relation to family stories for better understanding the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity in the process of becoming adults. The qualitative research was conducted in Poland. Author's family narrative sheet was used for data collection. A total of 54 participants aged 19 to 25 were enrolled. Three types of family narratives were recalled by participants, which correspond to the levels in the ecological systems model by Robyn Fivush and Natalie Merrill. Four strategies of self-positioning towards them were identified: construction, co-construction, negotiation, and rejection. The results could be used to support families in deepening relationships through encouraging storytelling. On the other hand, they could help in avoiding idealisation of family storytelling and the recognition of young adults' freedom to re-position themselves towards family stories, myths and legends in order to build their own ideas, values, identities.

Keywords: adult learning, narrative-based learning, family narrative, intergenerational transmission, storytelling

Introduction

People live in a 'narrative-saturated world' (Clark, 2010, p. 4), and the family is the natural environment in which a child learns and creates their first stories. The family is an important community that organises and interprets the experiences gained both by its individual members and as a whole (i.e., the family system). After all, every family has its own story and numerous memories that are recounted through daily and occasional interactions. Intergenerational transmission is possible through family storytelling. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2006, p. 100) argue that 'storytelling is one way of

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doing family', which means that storytelling not only helps to make sense of experiences, but also to build family ties and relationships, unify a family, and define the sense of identity of its members. Storytelling in the family can foster an overall sense of family satisfaction, nurture feelings of closeness, and increase adaptability, providing guidance on how to cope with one's life in a family and beyond it (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Zaman & Fivush, 2011).

Family stories help to teach about the roots and the past of one's family and to understand the surrounding world and oneself in this world, while playing a significant role in making decisions about the future of oneself and one's family. Therefore, they become part of autobiography. The presence of family stories in family life has an impact on the well-being of family members (Sherman, 1990; Koenig Kellas, 2005), building relationships, maintaining family ties and the sense of shaping a community (Koenig Kellas, 2005, 2012), (re)constructing a sense of identity (Cierpka, 2013; Fivush & Merrill, 2016; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016), and coping with difficult situations (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Zaman & Fivush, 2011). According to previous research (Budziszewska, 2015; Drężek & Dryll, 2021), narrative texts have a greater persuasive function than descriptive and argumentative texts. Therefore, family narratives play a significant role in upbringing, instructing, and (re)constructing the identities of family members (Zaman & Fivush, 2011; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2013; Budziszewska, 2015; Merrill, Booker & Fivush, 2019). Family systems are characterised by homeostasis, the essence of which is family members applying mechanisms that allow for maintaining the stability, continuity, and predictability of the family. This can be achieved through the transmission of family narratives, confirming past and given narratives. However, at the same time, families are morphogenetic, focused on change and development over time. Family members create new stories, but they also position themselves in relation to those narratives that have been, or are, transmitted to them. As a result, they question facts and values, re-edit the stories and make certain decisions regarding further transmission to the next generation. Young adults who are just entering adulthood play an important role in this respect. To some extent, the further intergenerational transmission of family narratives depends on them. Some of them will start families of their own. However, the dynamically changing conditions in which they and their families live, as well as their self-development, self-concept, and attitudes towards the past and the future may have an impact on the likelihood of further transmission of family narratives. Part of becoming an adult is re-positioning oneself in relation to received stories. This process is referred to as adult learning. Family stories become learning.

Family narratives

Robyn Fivush & Natalie Merrill (2016) developed the ecological systems model of family narratives. It refers to the assumptions of the theory of ecological systems by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), according to which human development takes place in a series of interconnected environmental systems that interact with each other and at the same time dynamically affect human development with an individual's active involvement. Fivush & Merrill (2016) also refer to the concept of 'narrative ecologies' (McLean, 2016; McLean & Breen, 2016), maintaining that narrative identity development is a collaborative construction between the individual and the stories they have had contact with. The ecological systems model of family narratives consists of three systems: micro-system, exo-system, and macro-system (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). At their centre is the individual autobiographical memory. The narratives that make up these systems interact dynamically with each other.

The micro-system, closest to the centre, consists of ‘shared family narratives’ (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, p. 307). These are stories about events in which members of the immediate family took part. They were thus all involved in an event that became their shared experience and they talk about it together, although each from their own perspective. As the authors write, ‘shared family narratives are both directly experienced and narrated by the family’ (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, p. 307).

The exo-system, in turn, creates narratives about events in which not all family members were involved, but they tell each other about them. Therefore, they are stories about experiences gained by the narrator and not by the listener. These narratives are called ‘communicative family narratives’ (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, p. 310) and are about experiences gained by one family member but not by others. A significant type of narrative in the exo-system are intergenerational narratives. They play an important role as they allow the transmission of values between generations, and constitute a reference point for understanding reality and one’s own experiences in a wider context. They can provide specific lessons on how to live and what is important in life.

Family narratives are embedded in culture, religion and history, and thus in a variety of cultural texts, myths, legends, religious parables, etc. They constitute the last of the distinguished ecological family narratives systems: the macro-system. It includes stories about family history, stories about ancestors which often take the form of a family myth passed down from generation to generation, embedded in a certain cultural framework which the narrators often refer to. Apart from these, the macro-system consists of master narratives, cultural myths, and cultural history present in the media, literature, education, etc. They contain universal content, often passed on from generation to generation. As noted by Fivush & Merrill (2016, p. 312), ‘these stories are told, but we know little about how individuals incorporate these cultural and family history narratives into their own frameworks for developing personal narrative identity as members of families, communities and culture’.

The ecological systems model of family narratives provides a theoretical framework to help understand how different types of narrative are shared by family members with each other and how they help people to get to know themselves from early childhood. However, every time a story is told, there are variations. The differences in telling, who the storyteller is, who are the recipient is, and the relationship between them all have consequences on the reception of the story. Narratives are constructed for a specific recipient, often for a specific purpose, and represent the way in which reality is interpreted by their creator. Families also have their secrets, untold and taboo stories, lies, myths, and legends. Some of them are accessible to all family members, while others are shared only with selected family members. Thus, the knowledge about oneself acquired by the recipient is not objective. Stories build more or less true and credible knowledge about family, their members and themselves. On the other hand, they build misleading (oppressive, harmful, partial, exaggerated, or idealised) knowledge. Furthermore, each recipient interprets the narrative independently. Sharing experiences with others gives room for (re)interpretation, searching for and giving sense and meanings in the context of changing circumstances and acquiring new experiences. In turn, the stories of other people about life experiences inscribed in their biographies constitute a certain framework for (re)construction and (re)interpretation of one’s own experiences as well. A similar role can be played by cultural narratives existing within the symbolic universe and assimilated in the process of inculturation (Dryll, 2004). All storytelling involves learning.

Adult narrative-based learning

According to many renowned scientists (MacIntyre, 1984; Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1992), 'life is seen as meaningful, but the meaning is implicit and can become explicit in narratives' (Mazzoli Smith, 2021, p. 109). Stories help us understand ourselves, other people and the world, as well as the relationships between them. The process of storytelling holds instructional potential for both the teller and the listener. The ecology of living and learning concept highlights the interconnections between living and learning, where living is understood as 'complex interactions with others, and otherness, and with diverse processes, systems and encounters with the physical as well as virtual world' (Bainbridge, Formenti & West, 2021, p. 3). Actively constructing and (re)interpreting personal experiences by creating one's own stories and responding to the stories received is the essence of learning, as emphasised by numerous theories of adult learning. Narrative-based learning theories assume that the narratives created by humans are not a faithful reflection of the past, but a reminiscence of what and how was remembered, and they contain an interpretation of past events from the perspective of the present. They are also subject to the processes of renegotiation and reconstruction (Alheit, 2015) based on (self-)reflection (Alheit, 2015; Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2021). Therefore, narratives are 'conceived of interpretively' (Mazzoli Smith, 2021, p. 109). Narrative-based learning theories explore how individuals endow experience with meaning. Furthermore, the narratives that people create are subject to transformations throughout their lives, influenced by experiences, available narratives, and changing narrative competences. Narrativity can go some way to understanding and explaining why people respond differently to the same circumstances, as it enables various ways of responding to the same social conditions, which is related to the process of interpreting events, processes, experiences and the ability to transform one's current way of understanding (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Experiences that are new or difficult (sometimes even crisis-related) but also epiphanies seem to be particularly 'promising' for adult learning. Adult learning happens when a person realises that they are part of a larger system and they are also not satisfied with how it works but do not know what to do (Formenti, 2024). Adult life then requires change and, at the same time, a new narrative. According to Jack Mezirow's (2000) theory, transformative learning occurs, which involves alienation from earlier established conceptions of self, values and one's actions, and the reframing of new perspectives. It can be understood as 'a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3).

A person also positions themselves in relation to the narratives that are told to them. Family narratives can be considered particularly important in this context, because they concern people close to them, but they are also a kind of shared family heritage: they contain memories of family roots, the life stories of close and distant ancestors, sometimes taking the form of family myths or legends transmitted from generation to generation. Positioning oneself in relation to family narratives can be unconscious and changeable over time in the life cycle. Family narratives can therefore be treated as an 'object' in relation to which a person adopts certain positioning strategies related to learning. However, there is a lack of knowledge about how young adults position themselves in relation to family narratives. Within this context, the aim of this study was to identify how young adults position themselves in relation to family stories for better understanding the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity in the process of becoming an adult. A further aim was also to identify the relationship between the types of family narratives from the ecological systems model of family narratives and adult learners'

strategies to position themselves towards them. The following research questions were asked:

- What family stories have people in early adulthood remembered as being often told in their families? What are they about?
- How do young adults demonstrate their own positioning towards family narratives?
- Is there a relationship between the types of family narratives from three levels of family narratives (as theorised by Fivush and Merrill) and the strategies of positioning towards them? How is this related to adult learning?

Methodology

Method and procedure

Assuming that all social situations are a domain of meanings and the social world is the result of interpretation processes (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2013), the study was based on the qualitative approach, in the interpretive paradigm. The qualitative research made it possible to learn about the family stories of the study participants and their interpretations, meanings, and strategies for positioning themselves in relation to these stories. This corresponded to the aims of the study and research questions. The data were collected using a proprietary tool: a family narrative sheet consisting of three parts. The first included a set of questions about sociodemographic data (age, gender, education, place of residence, marital status, family of origin, siblings). The second part included a request to recall a family story using a triggering prompt: 'I am interested in the stories that young people remember about their families, as often told in their families. Could you write a family story that is often told in your family? It can be a story about things that you have experienced yourself, or a story about things that you have not experienced yourself but was told to you by your relatives. Please, write this story providing as many details as possible that you can remember.' The third and final part of the family narrative sheet included open questions about the reasons why the participant chose this particular story, the circumstances under which they received this story, their attitude towards this story, what it means to them and how they position towards it. The family narrative sheet was available online.

Participants were recruited from among students of various fields of study (both social and exact sciences) at two universities in Poland. They were informed about the possibility of participating in the study by the researcher and other academic teachers working at these universities via e-mail invitation. The study was conducted according to the Helsinki Declaration. In particular, before starting the research, the potential participants were clearly informed about the objectives and the data collection procedure, as well as the planned publication of the results. The researchers provided their own contact details to participants. Each participant was assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the research, as well as the possibility of withdrawing from participation in the research for any reason or at any time they felt uncomfortable with their participation in the study. Potential participants had the chance to familiarise themselves with the family narrative sheet before deciding to participate in the study. All participants gave their informed consent to take part in the research. Participation in the research was voluntary and took place in the participants' free time.

Participants

All research participants declared Polish nationality. The selection of the sample was purposeful. Fifty-four people (26 males and 28 females) aged 19 to 27 ($M=23$) participated in the study. All of them were students of various fields of study in the social and exact sciences. The research group was diverse in terms of the place of residence: 32 lived in large cities, six in medium-sized cities, seven in small towns, and nine in rural areas. The vast majority of study participants came from a complete family ($N=47$), while the rest were brought up by one parent. Forty-five had siblings and the remaining subjects were only children. The largest number of participants ($N=23$) had one sister or brother. Five participants were married, while the rest were single.

Data analysis

The material collected in the study was analysed using the thematic analysis method proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022). The six phases of the analysis covered: (1) familiarisation with the data by reading and re-reading the data and noting down initial ideas, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes by collating codes into thematic groups, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming main themes, (6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, the content of the family narratives was subjected to thematic analysis. After coding all family narratives, I searched for common themes and sub-themes, taking into account the assumptions of the ecological systems model of family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). In this way, all the family narratives were divided into three groups corresponding to the three levels of the model. Then, the statements of the participants in the third part of the narrative family sheet were analysed. Finally, seven main themes and 29 subthemes were formulated. After completing the thematic analysis, I conducted a cross-analysis of the results of the thematic analysis of family stories and the statements of the study participants regarding their positioning towards the stories. The cross-analysis allowed me to identify the relationship between the types of family stories and the strategies of positioning towards them of the respondents.

Results

The content of family narratives recalled by young adults

The family stories written by the participants were analysed. As a result of the thematic analysis of the family narratives, three themes were formulated: family history, my loved ones in the family, me in the family. In this way, all the recalled family narratives were divided into three types, which corresponds to the levels distinguished by Fivush and Merrill (2016). The division of all family narratives into three types was necessary due to the aims of the study. Findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes in family narratives

Theme	Subtheme	Number of family narratives
Me in the family	Me and my family's adventure My achievement in the childhood Me in a difficult situation Me in the everyday life of the family	11 (women: 7; men: 4)
My loved ones in the family	Adventures of grandparents' youth Adventures of parents' youth Parents meeting and falling in love Beginning of parents' marriage Childhood antics of siblings or cousins	24 (women: 13; men: 11)
Family history	History of starting a family (great-grandparents' (unhappy) love stories) Family history in the context of World War II Family history in the context of martial law in Poland in 1981-1983	19 (women: 8; men: 11)

The theme 'Me in the family' comprises narratives in which the author is also a participant. In these stories, the narrators recalled events from their biography that they remembered or that came from their early childhood and were told them by their relatives. Family stories forming the theme 'Me in the family' belong to the micro-system in the ecological systems model of family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

The next theme, 'My loved ones in the family', was specific to the narratives about events in which the respondent did not participate but knew from stories. Most of them took place before the participants of the research were born (adventures of the grandparents' and parents' youth, the circumstances in which the parents met or/and fell in love, adventures from the beginning of the parents' marriage). These are thus intergenerational narratives. This theme was present in the majority of the analysed family narratives. The stories in this theme belong to the exo-system model theorised by Fivush and Merrill (2016).

The last theme 'Family history' concerned old times that are the subject of family memories and intergenerational transmission. It concerned the history of the founding of the family (e.g., love stories) or life experiences of family members shown against the background of historical and political events in Poland (e.g., experiences of a great-grandmother or great-grandfather related to deportation to Siberia, resettlement from eastern to western territories, coping during the war, or the captivity of relatives in a prison or concentration camp). Some of the recalled stories were family myths and legends. The stories included in this theme belong to the macro-system in the considered model.

Young adults' strategies to position themselves in relation to family narratives

After the analysis of family narratives, the next step of analysis focused on young adults' positioning towards the stories. As a result of thematic analysis, four main themes were formulated: construction, co-construction, negotiation, and rejection. These themes also name strategies of position towards the family narratives. Findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes in explored statements

Theme	Subtheme
construction	story based on own memories of events study participant as the only member of family who take part in the events study participant is the first author of the story narrator is also a character of the story authenticity as obvious readiness to intergenerational transmission
co-construction	involvement in co-constructing stories recalling the story 'after' someone else acceptance acknowledgement of the (historical) facts the message contained in the story as a value in itself unquestioning the authenticity of the mentioned events announcement to intergenerational transmission
negotiation	questioning the credibility of certain content in a story readiness to intergenerational transmission with the announcement revealing one's own attitude comparing the present with the past as a background for negotiating
rejection	questioning the credibility of the story questioning the advice given in the story

The theme of 'construction' refers to the independent construction of a family narrative based on one's own memories of past events in which the storyteller participated. This strategy to position in relation to family narratives is related to those stories in which the research participant was the only member of the family to take part in the events. This person is the first author of the story. The narrator is also the hero of the story, presenting past events as they remember and understand them. One of the study participants emphasised that only she knows what happened and other family members accept her version of events – they create their own versions of the story based on what she told them ('I was alone in the parents' office. No one saw it. I told them this story. I became a family hero. Now we often mention it during family gatherings.' [W43_21]¹). The story is so significant to the entire family that it is treated as a 'family narrative'.

The theme 'co-construction' concerns the strategy of positioning towards family stories, which consists in active engagement in the co-construction of a story referring to events in which the young adult did not participate or participated but does not remember because they took place in his/her early childhood. The young adult recalls the story 'after' someone else. This is why it is not just 'construction'. One creates their own version of it, taking into account its earlier versions by other storytellers. A characteristic feature of this strategy is taking for granted the content of the story and the message/values contained in it. The message contained in the story is considered a value in itself. The study participants expressed the belief that the story contained a deep message resulting from life wisdom, a warning against something or an encouragement to do something. The strategy of co-construction implies that these family narratives describe undeniable (historical) facts. Mentioned events took place in difficult circumstances (e.g., World War II, martial law in Poland, a cholera epidemic, a health crisis in the family, or separation of family members). Aware of these circumstances, some narrators referred to the actions taken by their ancestors and relatives, describing them as heroic, amazing, risky, and fascinating. On the other hand, they described the reality in which the events took place as sad, difficult and unpredictable. Past experiences sometimes influenced a relative's entire life (e.g., 'he was in Auschwitz. (...)

later he made a fortune, but until the end of his life he hid bread around the house in case there was a shortage of food.' [W48_23]). The contrast between the (harsh) reality and the (heroic) deeds of family members puts one's family in a good light. The narrator does not have to fear a negative assessment. One can boast of such a story. The context of the story (a reference to difficult times) makes the narrative even more beautiful and at the same time meaningful to the narrator as a member of that family. The participants who adopt this strategy do not question the authenticity of the events of the family stories (e.g., 'it is uncoloured and tells about authentic events [M12_26], Despite serious memory problems (caused by dementia), my grandfather remembered the entire Siberian experience in details.' [M13_24]). Some of them gave evidence of the authenticity of the events that were recalled (e.g., 'Part of the china was unearthed by my grandfather a few years ago and most interestingly most of it was in good condition. (...) I witnessed my grandfather unearthing these things, which only confirmed the authenticity this story.' [W17_26]). This approach to authenticity may result from the fact that these stories refer to events set in the past, often having a historical background. It is difficult for young adults to question 'big' events set in a historical reality (e.g., during a war). Unquestioning the truth of facts, and absorbing the values contained in the story, enhance the likelihood that the story/legend/myth will be transmitted to the next generations, as announced by some participants (e.g., 'I will tell my children this story someday.' [W51_20]). Some participants, aware of the passing of time and the inevitable passing of an older generation, deliberately evoked stories of the old days so that they would not disappear with their grandparents (e.g., 'I asked grandparents to tell such stories a lot. I thought this way the stories would not "die"'. [M23_24]). Sometimes the request for a story did not result from one's own curiosity, but was initiated by someone else. For example:

I got to know this story when we were making a family tree at school and we had to tell a family story. I had to tell it, so I remembered it well. At the same time my parents were also making a family tree and travelling around the family parishes and cemeteries, so I asked about different stories. [W40_22]

Some of participants emphasised that their great-grandparents and grandparents liked to remember the old times – grandmothers more often talked about school, family, their love stories, and grandfathers more often about the war. They listened the stories and wanted to remember them for themselves and for others. Presently, they are ready to retell the story as intergenerational transmission, if there is a necessity or request to recall the story. At the same time, they do not rule out the possibility that the narrative may still change and be revised. So, this strategy has to do with continuation of family bonds and continuity in the process of becoming an adult. Young adults looked for certain connections with autobiography in the stories of old times. For example, one participant said that a certain accidental coincidence reported in a narrative determined that she would be born:

If it were not for these events, neither would my grandmother nor me would have been born. If my great-great-grandfather did not go abroad, if his whole family had not died and if he had not married for the second time, he would not have had two more children. [W1_23]

Three participants told the story of their family settling in the western part of Poland, which in the long run determined where they would live. For example:

The story begins in 1942, when my grandfather was three years old. (...) The family gathered their belongings and went to the train station. (...) The journey took a long time.

In the areas abandoned by the Germans, men would occasionally check the nearby farms. One day, my great-grandfather decided that the family would get off at a given station. That's how they settled in the areas where I was born and raised. [M31_24]

The theme 'negotiation' concerns a strategy to position in relation to a family narrative. It consists in adapting the content and credibility of the story as well as the adequacy of its message to contemporary realities. The participant seems to approach the story with some caution or scepticism. Participants who negotiate the family narrative can question the truth of the story, and in some cases the stories are questioned by other family members as well (e.g., 'I am a dog lover, so maybe there is a grain of truth in this story.' [W35_27]; 'My brother is a dentist and he has always questioned the credibility of this story.' [M4_26]; 'This story will always remind me of my grandfather and as if it is his special trait.' [M4_26]). At the same time, some authors seem to 'colour' the events told by their relatives (e.g., 'they did it to make the story funnier'). The participants who position in this way do not deny the value of family narrative, so it is possible that they will be prepared to retell the story as intergenerational transmission, to some extent. However, they announce that they will present their own attitude and opinion about the story. Some participants expressed the belief that the message contained in the story was not relevant to current times and the problems experienced by young people today. They explained that it is good to know the experiences of family members. At the same time, they are convinced that not all past experiences and the life lessons resulting from them are relevant to the problems of today's young generation and do not provide them with advice on how to live. Times have changed and require the development of new, different strategies of action (e.g. '(...) it was then quite tight with money at home. (...) people tried to take care of everything and not destroy it. Quite different than nowadays. Now I can easily replace something with a new one.' [W12_26]).

The theme 'rejection' concerns the strategy which consists in expressing reluctance towards the story. Rejecting the family narrative is the result of completely questioning its credibility. For example:

(...) his friend broke a tooth and, unable to make an appointment with a dentist, he decided to glue the broken part of the tooth. (...) The last time I heard this story, this friend has had part of his tooth glued to it for over 30 years. I remembered it because it sounds absurd in a way. Grandpa made it up. [M4_26].

Rejecting is also considered as questioning the wisdom contained in the story, and re-positioning oneself towards the story in the present (e.g., 'Priorities are different now. First you need to settle down and then think about a possible family. A big family? That's not for me.' [M9_22]). Study participants who rejected the story by questioning its credibility attempted to explain the attitude of the story's authors. They offered an explanation, for example the author's desire to entertain the family. In this case, the rejection was associated with emphasising a positive attitude. Colouring the past can be considered as an element of family storytelling that allows the listeners to take the stories with a pinch of salt, and to have their own opinions about them, but also to spend pleasant time with their loved ones. A different attitude was expressed by those participants who questioned the meaning of the story, or its moral. They expressed disagreement, arguing that the recalled memories did not correspond to current reality or knowledge. These participants seem to want to live according to their own rules and values, to have the right to make mistakes and define their own priorities and life goals.

Relationships between types of family narratives and adult learners' strategies to self-position towards them

The final stage of data analysis involved a cross-analysis of two categorisations: types of family narratives corresponding to the three levels in the ecological systems model theorised by Fivush and Merrill (2016) and distinguished strategies of positioning towards the family narratives. The findings are presented in Figure 1. The combinations of types of family narratives with strategies of positioning oneself in relation to them presented in Figure 1 result from the analysis of the collected data. It does not mean that other combinations are impossible. In other groups or in relation to other stories, these connections could be different.

Figure 1. Types of family narratives related to young adults' strategies to position themselves towards them. (Source: Author's own)

Me in the family (micro-system)	My loved ones in the family (exo-system)	Family history (macro-system)
↓	↓	↓
co-construction construction	co-construction negotiation rejection	co-construction negotiation

Construction as a strategy of young adults positioning towards family narratives occurred only in relation to narratives from micro-systems. Only this type of story referred to the recalled events in which the narrator both participated in and remembered. Therefore, a participant presented their version of events in their version of the story, of course current at the time of participation in the research and writing the story. It may change. Additionally, the narrator may be aware that other characters in this story may tell it in a different way, according to how they remember and interpret the past. In turn, co-construction was associated with family narratives from all three levels in the ecological systems model. Young adults actively engage in the construction of family stories by recalling the story 'behind someone else', transmitting it further and at the same time transforming it. This strategy is present even in telling stories from one's own biography (micro-system). During storytelling, learning from each other takes place in the family, which may even result in changing the earlier version of the story. Co-construction is intertwined with construction. Only narratives from exo-systems were met with rejection. These are family stories that concern events they did not participate in, but are told by other family members. For various reasons, they question their credibility or the lessons that result from them, and at the same time, they dare to reject them. They do not have such courage in relation to stories about old times, family history, family legends or myths that belong to the macro-system. After all, these have a certain 'fixing' in universal history, not just family history. When they disagree with something included in family narrative from a macro-system they merely negotiate, but do not reject.

Young adults' positioning of family narratives is related to learning. Narratives reflect what they have learned. This is not only about the knowledge they have acquired about the past of their family, its members, or themselves, but also about the ways in which family members have understood past events and their own (re)interpretations of

family stories. The featured strategies of positioning oneself in relation to family narratives indicate the possibility of distinguishing between learning from narratives and learning through narratives. The family narratives available to a person are a source of knowledge about the world, people (including family), and oneself. This is the essence of learning from narratives. On the other hand, learning through narratives consists in taking a stance towards the learned narratives and creating one's own stories on their basis, translating the acquired knowledge into a language understandable to oneself, searching for a connection between the content of the stories and the knowledge one has, one's own life experience, and vision of oneself in the future. Learning through narratives may be expressed through a critical approach to family narratives and the interpretations contained in them, as well as re-positioning oneself and adopting a different narrative. Changes do not have to occur only at the level of narrative, but also in the course of life, self-image and family image (e.g., making a decision not to start a family, breaking off an oppressive family relationship, or not celebrating family traditions).

Discussion

One important form of communicative activity is storytelling. Each family has its own stories and memories that can (or cannot) be told. Stories and memories can be recounted by individuals, although sometimes as part of joint storytelling. If family members develop a common heritage, their shared stories will be treated as 'family' narratives. However, individuals will always tell the 'same' story in different ways. Some relate to events shared by relatives, while others describe the experiences of selected family members, but are seen as so important that they are passed down from generation to generation. Some are or become less significant for some reason, while others more so. Some stories, once told, are forgotten, while others remain in the memory of family members for their entire lives. They often come back to some, are recounted many times, and although it is the same story, it is told in different ways each time. There are also some stories which, although well remembered, are not told: they remain unspoken because they evoke shame, fear, suffering, sadness, anger, or other negative emotions.

Young adults are creators and recipients of family stories, and at the same time they participate in transmitting them to family members and people outside the family. Additionally, they can become future transmitters of family narratives for subsequent generations. The results presented in this paper offer understandings of different strategies of self-positioning towards family narratives that young adults put in place. The obtained results confirm that people in early adulthood have access to all types of family narratives distinguished in the ecological family narrative systems model (Fivush & Merrill, 2016, see also Merrill, Booker & Fivush, 2019; Mazurek, 2023, 2024). Moreover, the narratives they indicate as the most frequently recalled in their families are those that referred to the further history of the family and the lives of ancestors whom they themselves did not know (macro-system) and those that concerned events from the biographies of their grandparents, parents or other relatives in which they did not participate (exo-system). Despite the growing distance between generations, young adults are familiar with family narratives regarding the experiences of older relatives and even their own ancestors. Certainly, these narratives concern more family members compared to those from the micro-system, which is why they are recalled more often in families. However, it should be recognised that they are important for the process of identity construction by young people: they help them build a coherent story about themselves and their family, and provide knowledge about their roots. They asked their relatives to tell them stories, although it also happened that family narratives from the macro-system were remembered

by young adults because they were often told by the oldest family members, which resulted from their need for intergenerational transmission or simply to reminisce about old times. Additionally, family stories set in the context of difficult global events such as war, deportations, or resettlements occupy an important place in the memory of Poles. Although the characters of the stories and their recipients are separated by several generations, they are significant to young adults. Some of them feel responsible for passing them on to subsequent generations. They treat some family narratives as life lessons (see also Budziszewska, 2015, Mazurek, 2024), others as stories worth saving from oblivion, and still others as family anecdotes.

According to previous research (Ashbourne & Baobaid, 2014a, 2014b), both the narrator and the receiver of a story engage in creating meaning of the experiences recalled in the narratives. These interpretations do not have to be compatible or even complementary. They are related to how people position themselves in relation to the remembered experiences or the received narratives. In the research presented in this paper, young adults use different strategies to position themselves in relation to family narratives: construction, co-construction, negotiation, and rejection. Each of these is an active strategy that engages the young adult in interpreting the family narratives they listened to or family narratives related to events from their own biography. Young adults construct or co-construct family narratives, but they also negotiate their content or the messages they contain, or they reject them. Generations benefit from the wisdom of the legacy of the previous ones – also contained in narratives – but sometimes negotiate with the content of the messages or reject them (Dryll, 2021; Drężek & Dryll, 2021), or even question their credibility.

The strategies of self-positioning towards family narratives identified in this study can be related to four different positions that adult learners take in relation both to knowledge and to the teacher or educator: passive reception, task-oriented activation, self-directed intentionality, and playfulness (Formenti, 2024). Passive reception of family narratives did not occur in the analysed empirical material. Perhaps because self-positioning in relation to narratives is always an active process, requiring involvement and arousing emotions. Or perhaps because it is easier to actively refer to a narrative than to knowledge. Other positions in relation to knowledge are interwoven with strategies of self-positioning in relation to family narratives. The study participants made an effort to write a family story and responded to it, independently searching for its meaning for themselves. For some, this situation was probably caused by participation in the study, while others had already made such an effort earlier, when they were reflectively thinking about the meaning of family narratives for their life story. These efforts should be associated with task-orientated activation and/or self-direction. The study participants who recalled funny family stories emphasised their role in the family: building bonds, spending time pleasantly, the personality of the characters/authors of the story, or the image of the family. Although they sometimes negotiated with these narratives or rejected them, they were a source and space for learning. It can therefore be assumed that although the four strategies of positioning oneself towards the family narrative do not fully overlap with the strategies of positioning oneself towards knowledge, they are intertwined to some extent. According to Laura Formenti (2024), the educator can take on different roles in teaching an adult. Sometimes they will be complementary to the positions taken by the learner, and sometimes there will be great disharmony between them. This lack of complementarity can be an opportunity for learning. A similar process can happen during narrative learning, which occurs during storytelling in the family. The different perspectives of the narrator and the recipient of the narrative, presenting their points of view, can be both encouragement for learning and a space of learning. Ivor Goodson et

al. (2010, p. 127) emphasise that narrative learning is ‘not solely learning from the narrative, it is also learning that goes on in the act of narration and in the ongoing construction of the life story’. Family narratives can be part of the life story. Learning from family narratives refers to acquiring intersubjective knowledge about the past of the family, while learning through family narratives involves interpreting them and creating one’s own understanding of them. Young adults’ strategies to position themselves in relation to family narratives distinguished in the presented study show that young people appreciate family narratives – including those that refer to old family history – but at the same time they notice that some stories have become outdated and the world they live in now requires new stories. They construct new ones, based on their own life experiences, but also change those they have learned, revealing their attitudes towards them.

Limitations of the study

Although the chosen method seems appropriate for conducting research on strategies of young adults’ positioning through family narratives often recalled in their families, there are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the use of the family narrative sheet in written and electronic form allowed for the collection of a fairly large number of responses. However, the written data collection form did not provide an opportunity to ask additional questions of the study participants. Such questions would have been desirable in that they would have deepened insight into both the adults’ positioning towards recalled family narratives and learning from and through the narratives. Furthermore, the written form may limit the expression of people who prefer to speak rather than write. Interviews would provide such opportunities. Secondly, limited diversity in the sample is another limitation. For this reason, the findings may not be applicable to young adults from single-parent families or those not brought up by their biological parents. It can be assumed that reaching out with invitations to a more diverse group of individuals would provide a deeper picture of the discussed issues. Finally, the study participants were only people in early adulthood. In future studies, it would be worth knowing how adults later in life position themselves in relation to family narratives. Comparing the perspectives of different groups of adult learners could be very interesting.

Conclusion

The results presented in this paper offer understanding of different strategies of self-positioning towards family narratives that young adults put in place. The results of the presented study confirm that young adults have access to all types of family narratives listed in the ecological systems model of family narratives (Fivush & Merrill, 2016). Young adults apply different strategies to engage with family narratives, such as construction, co-construction, negotiation, and rejection. Construction refers to the creation of a family story based on the narrator’s personal memories, where they are the central character. This strategy allows the storyteller to present their version of events, though it may evolve over time. Co-construction involves telling stories that were learned from others, but adapting and transforming them based on the storyteller’s own understanding. In turn, negotiation is associated with a sceptical and cautious approach towards family narratives by young adults. They may question the credibility of the mentioned events or consider the life lessons to be irrelevant to their own lives. In some cases, young adults completely reject family stories, especially when they find them implausible or incompatible with their personal beliefs and contemporary values. As a

result of rejection the narrative, they re-position towards it in the present. These strategies are related to the types of family narratives. In the analysed empirical data, construction is used for family narratives from the micro-system, co-construction is applied to stories from all three levels of the ecological systems model, negotiation is applied to exo- and micro-systems, and rejection occurs only in relation to family narratives from the exo-system. It is worth emphasising that more strategies to position oneself towards family narratives are possible, as are other combinations between them and the types of family narratives.

Furthermore, self-positioning towards family narratives is seen as a learning process. Family stories provide young adults with knowledge about their family roots, the past of individual family members and about themselves, including from childhood, which they do not remember. The narratives transmitted within the family contain interpretations that have been given to past events by family members. Sometimes these interpretations are repeated for generations, but they are more often modified by individual storytellers who position themselves in relation to the narrative. Young adults, like other family members, have the freedom to re-position themselves in relation to family stories, myths, legends, and secrets in order to build their own ideas, values, and identities. Self-positioning is variable over time, undergoes transformations, and, like learning, has a lifelong dimension. The narrative can therefore be ‘a tool for learning’ (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 111). Learning from narratives refers to acquiring knowledge about the past. This knowledge comes not just from the factual content of the stories, but also from the way the family interprets and understands the events. At the same time, and more crucially, ‘the on-going act of narration and re-narration – the modification and adaptation as well as the verbal reiteration of our life narrative’ (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 111) is learning. Self-positioning towards family narratives is a process in which learning occurs. Learning through narratives involves actively engaging with and interpreting family stories, creating one’s own understanding based on them. Attending to a family narrative allows for a flexible response to it. As it was found, one can adopt a strategy of construction, co-construction and negotiation, or completely reject a family narrative. These strategies are a flexible narrative response to new and changing circumstances and opportunities. This finding is significant, considering that storytelling in the family can strengthen family bonds and provide intersubjective knowledge about the family. On the other hand, family stories can disrupt or even destroy family relationships and build misleading knowledge. Each recipient of a family narrative interprets it independently based on their own knowledge, experience, and emotions. There is enormous potential in this, because it can, for example, interrupt the transmission of oppressive, harmful content contained in stories, or explain previously stigmatised behaviors and attitudes in a new way than before, or provide a new interpretation of past events that takes into account the current socio-cultural context or the biography of the storyteller. Thus, both the storyteller and the recipient are learners. The transformations of family narratives are endless. It is a process that is constantly happening within and outside of families. Self-positioning in relation to family narratives is crucial to these transformations.

Notes

¹ To maintain the anonymity of the research participants, the following designations were adopted: W - woman / M - man, research participant number, age of the research participant.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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