

Resilience, Coping Skills, Ego Identity, Family History and The Narrative Paradigm

Matthew Havertz

Professor Ryan Cheek

Communication Theory 3000

April 27, 2016

Resilience, Coping Skills, Ego Identity, Family History and The Narrative Paradigm

Introduction

Researchers have demonstrated that family history stories promote mental, emotional, and psychological well-being. I have researched the efficacy of family history stories to build resilience, increase coping skills, and enhance ego identity. I specifically examined the biographical stories of John Hyrum Green and Amos Cook through the lens of the Narrative Paradigm. I looked at how these stories affected a small portion of their descendants. No strong correlation was found in my research; however, other research suggests there is a correlation. The narrative fidelity of family history stories suggest insight into the reasons other researchers have discovered a connection between well-being and knowledge of family history.

An article in the *New York Times* by B. Feiler called “The Stories That Bind Us” cited research about family history that inspired me to put the findings to the test. The same study was referenced in a weekly genealogical podcast called Extreme Genes. The intriguing research done by R. Fivush, M.P. Duke, and J.G. Bohanek claims adolescents who know family history stories are more confident, resilient, and likely to succeed. Their article, “The Power of Family History In Adolescent Identity and Well-being,” specifically measured emotional well-being, family functioning, and identity achievement (Fivush, Duke, & Bohanek, 2010). I wanted to see if the results of this scientific research could be repeated when tested among my own family members. John Hyrum Green and Amos Cook are both ancestors of mine.

Other research exists corroborating Fivush, Duke, and Bohanek’s results; these studies will be discussed later. Because of these previous conclusions, I expected to see a positive correlation between learning family history stories and enhanced ego identity and coping skills, mental skills used to overcome emotional and psychological distress. However, because of my

limited time and small sample size my results were inconclusive. I sincerely hope my research, and the research done by others will promote others to perform and complete more and greater studies with larger and more diverse population samples.

I will begin this article with a review of the scholarly literature available on family history stories and the Narrative Paradigm. The methods of my study will be explained. Next, I will examine and explain the biographical information on John Hyrum Green and Amos Cook using the Narrative Paradigm. I will then illustrate the findings of my research on Green and Cook's descendants. I will offer an overview of the entire study and then offer suggestions for future research on this subject.

Literature Review

The Narrative Paradigm is a framework used to view communication. W. Fisher claims nearly all human communication is story telling—with a beginning, middle, end, and central characters to focus our attention. Furthermore, Fisher asserts the most lasting and impactful stories are those that communicate values to guide our actions and shape our character. (Fisher, 1987). In his article, "Rationality and the Logic of Reasons," Fisher uses five steps to judge a story's influence and narrative fidelity:

1. There are values inserted in the story.
2. The said values have the potential to guide decisions of the story's receiver.
3. There are real consequences to making decisions based on those values.
4. There is consistent overlap with the worldview of the story's author and receiver.
5. There is consistency with the story's values and the receiver's "ideal basis for conduct."

(Fisher, 1980).

The Narrative Paradigm has been used by scholars and researchers for years to examine and interpret various types of communication and their influence. For example, scholars studied the effect of one of Aesop's fables on health promotion (Garista, Sardu, Mereu, Campagna, & Contu, 2015). In another article, K.G. Roberts suggests more folklore research should be done using the Narrative Paradigm set forth by Fisher (Roberts, 2004). Family history stories are also fantastic artifacts for study under the Narrative Paradigm.

A positive correlation was discovered between shared family history stories among family's owning businesses, family commitment, and values (Barker, Rimler, Moreno, & Kapan, 2004). Other researchers discovered family history stories are the primary way parents communicate values to their children; fathers are more likely to share stories about achievement and mothers are more likely to share stories about relationships (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, Schwagler, & Rimmer, 1995). Other articles explain people make decisions based on comparisons they make to stories shared from others' lives. For example, when a couple decides to get married, they will likely compare their decision to stories they have heard from parents or grandparents (Lewis, & Rogers, 2007). Research done by A. McKeough and J. Malcom claims adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 who learn family history stories have increased brain development, self-identity, and reasoning capabilities (McKeough, & Malcolm, 2011). Others found sharing family stories in collaborative ways increases self-esteem (especially in girls) and sense of power of one's outcomes (especially in boys) (Bohanek, Martin, Fivusch, & Duke, 2006).

As afore mentioned, R. Fivush, M.P. Duke, and J.G. Bohanek published findings in an article called "The Power of Family History in Adolescent Identity and Well-being." Aspects like emotional well-being, family functioning, and identity achievement were found in greater degree among youth who knew pieces of their family history. According to the research, the best

types of biographical narratives are those that tell both the positive and negative aspects of a person's life (Fivush, Duke, & Bohanek, 2010). These findings, as wonderful as they are, lack a complete explanation for why family history stories can have these types of influences on adolescents. The Narrative Paradigm could help to explain why family history stories are effective in increasing resilience, ego identity, and coping skills. Furthermore, Fivush, Duke, and Bohanek's study does not address whether or not learning new family history stories in young adulthood can demonstrate similar results.

Methodology

For the first step in my research, I evaluated the biographical information of John Hyrum Green and Amos Cook publically available from Family Search's website; Family Search is a non-profit organization that maintains a genealogical website freely available to the public (Family Search). John Hyrum Green lived from 1801 to 1886. Amos Cook lived from 1854 to 1938. I will examine their biographical stories from behind the lens of the Narrative Paradigm; identifying what gives their stories narrative fidelity using the five steps developed by Fisher.

My qualitative research will focus on the effects these family history stories have on the descendants of Green and Cook. Because of the low-level of funding and time available for this research, a very limited sample size will be used. Ten young-adult (half male, half female) descendants of John Hyrum Green and Amos Cook were asked to take the Ego Identity-Scale and Coping Competence questionnaires. Three were responsive and able to participate fully in the study. The Ego Identity-Scale was developed by A.L. Tan, R.J. Kendis, and J. Porac; the Coping Competence questionnaire L.Y. Abramson, M.E. Seligman, and J.D. Martin, respectively. These questionnaires have been used by researchers for decades and there is plenty of data to validate their efficacy.

The sample was asked to complete the questionnaires before and after reading the stories about their ancestors. One week's time passed before and after the questionnaires were administered for the first and second times. The assessments were scored according to the prescribed method by the assessments' developers. Both assessments can be and were totaled; the total is a whole number value. The same day the sample was asked to read the biographical information, they completed a free-response form asking the following question, "What did you learn from the stories you read?" The reason they will be given this form is to ensure they read the biographical information and to remind them of the information they read.

Because I am related to sample, the questionnaires and form were completed online anonymously; the sample was not asked to identify themselves to ensure their answers were as accurate as self-reporting can be. The sample was assigned a label to connect their first and second questionnaires. A control group of the same size within similar age ranges was asked to complete the questionnaires at the same time in order see if there were any other external factors affecting responses. This group was not be given any information to read.

Analysis

Narrative fidelity is a term Fisher used often. As briefly mentioned above, narrative fidelity is how tightly the story holds together. Narrative fidelity also provides a way to evaluate how effective a story is at sharing its core principles, morals, or message. I evaluated the family history stories used in my study according to the principles of narrative fidelity set forth by Fisher.

The biographical information about Amos Cook covers many compelling stories from his life. I presented my research subjects with summaries and quotations written mostly by Wilda Cook Woolley, Amos Cook's daughter (Woolley, 2014). I also took some information from his

obituary (Holbrook, 2014). The information presented to the research subjects included a story about the hardship of his birth, how he met his wife, a description of his physical appearance, a description of his character traits; his involvement in charity, community, and religion; his experience as mayor of Bountiful, Utah; and brief stories about his family and religious life.

The biographical information about Green was less extensive than that of Cook. However, because he was one of the founders of a city in Utah, there were multiple sources to draw from (Gibbs, 2015). All sources were found on Family Search's website. The information I presented to the research subjects included his story of conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, his story of immigration to the United States, his story of westward migration to Utah, and brief excerpts from his time settling the city of Kaysville.

After analyzing the biographical information of both men under the lens of the Narrative Paradigm, I have discovered that these family history stories fit this framework very well. They each demonstrate narrative fidelity. Fisher's five steps of the Narrative Paradigm can be seen clearly throughout the text. The next few paragraphs will contain a brief analysis of these family history stories step by step.

Step one is there are values inserted in the story. The family history stories I have referenced both contain rich examples of moral and ethical values. Examples in the biographical information of Cook include the many references made to his character. Cook's participation in his faith is extensively referenced, his involvement in community is excellently shared, and his moral character is well related (especially by his admiring daughter). Likewise, the story of John Green contains detail on the sacrifices he and his family made for their faith after converting to the LDS Church. Green's stories also communicate service to his church through voluntary clerical duties.

Step two is the said values have the potential to guide decisions of story's receivers. Many of Cook and Green's posterity have followed their examples by volunteering extensively for their faith. For example, Amos Cook served as a missionary for the LDS Church twice, including once as a 73-year-old. A majority of Cook's male descendants have served as missionaries as well, others have served as clergy, still others have served as missionaries in their elderly age as well. The good decisions and sacrifices of these men become trail makers to the reader's life path; these men become trail blazers, stomping down the path of life.

Step three in Fisher's recipe is there are real consequences to making decisions based on those values. As discussed above, decisions about serving and making sacrifices have real consequences. A decision to serve as an LDS missionary, for example, can require a full-time sacrifice of anywhere from six months to two or three years. Every decision in life has real consequences, but very few can be as life-altering as decisions about marriage, family, faith, and career. Each of these stories contain information about the decisions these men made regarding these topics.

Step four is there is consistent overlap with the worldview of the story's author and receiver. A majority of the decedents of Cook and Green live in Utah, the area that Green helped to settle and the place that Cook grew up at. Furthermore, most of their posterity share the same faith they lived. Family history stories may be the best examples of stories with worldview overlap.

Step five in the Narrative Paradigm is there is consistency with the story's values and the receiver's "ideal basis for conduct" (Fisher, 1980). Although many of Cook and Green's posterity may not migrate over seas, be mayors of a cities, make journeys over long distances of land, or even serve extensively in their faith, they will make many of the same decisions as these men: decisions about marriage, family, careers, work ethic, etc. Furthermore, because there is

extensive cultural, geographic, and religious overlap, descendants behave similarly already. With some exceptions (e.g., these men practiced polygamy which has since been abolished by the LDS Church and U.S. Government), the standards and conduct these men lived by are lived by their posterity. Their examples of conduct will likely be followed by the readers of their stories.

Again, this five-step evaluation illustrates that these—as well as other family history stories—exhibit narrative fidelity. Family history stories fit nicely within the Narrative Paradigm. Biographic stories about deceased family members are nearly perfect examples of what Fisher would consider good narrative.

Additionally, some of the anonymous comments from my test subjects demonstrate that family history stories are powerful and effective forms of narrative. One test subject expressed, “If we had more men like Amos who worked as hard as he did and put God first like he did, our world would be a much better place. So grateful to know and understand more of an ancestor of mine.” A different test subject wrote, “I learned that it is in the Hodson genes to be a businessman. The Hodsons have always been ambitious and have had their heads on their shoulders” (Ungraduated Research Form, 2016).

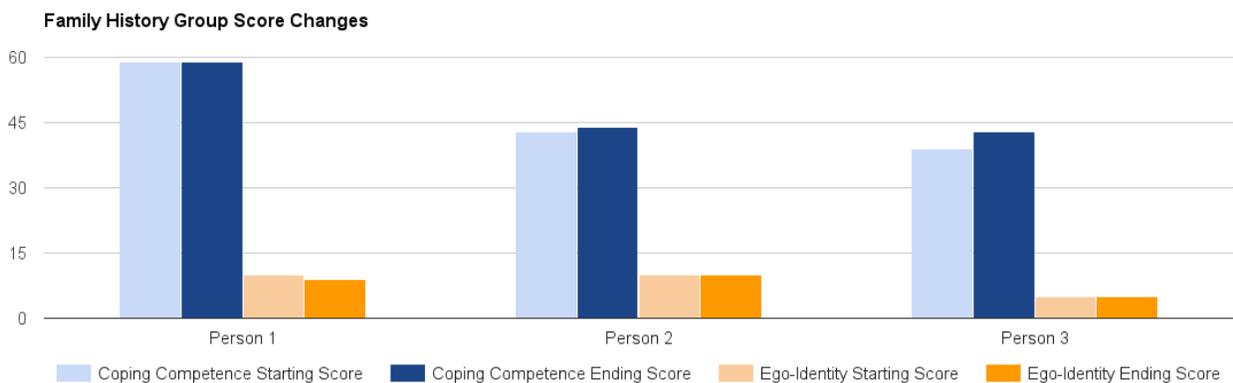
By examining family history stories behind the lens of the Narrative Paradigm, I have realized how important the protagonist is to a story. Yes, every story is a beginning connected to a middle and a middle connected to an end, but at their core, stories are about people. We would not have stories without people; we would not have communication without people; no topic would be communicated if it had no affect on a human being. I made this connection while analyzing family history stories about real people. Fictional stories only imitate what biographical stories already accomplish.

Stories are everywhere, according to Fisher, almost all of human communication is narrative. Almost any artifact could be evaluated through the Narrative Paradigm; however, family history stories are particularly valuable. There is tight overlap between the culture and values of the communicators and the culture and values of the receivers. Furthermore, family history stories have an easily identifiable plot, beginning with birth or childhood and ending with death. Finally, family history stories make fantastic ways to share values because the example of the characters can be easily researched and followed by descendants.

Research Results

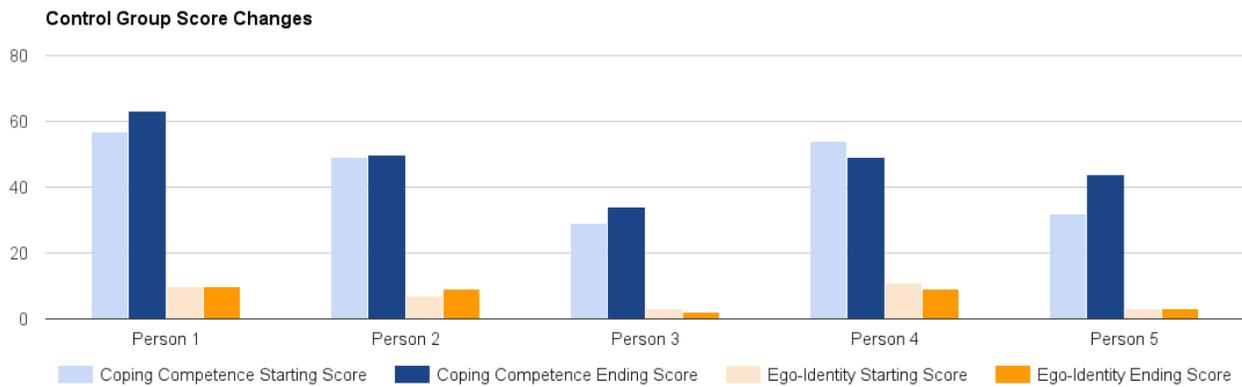
As for the research I conducted on my study subjects, the results were inconclusive. Both the control group and the group asked to read the biographical information on their ancestors showed small increases and decreases on their assessment scores. No strong correlation could be identified for either coping competence or ego-identity (Ungraduated Research Form, 2016).

Below is a bar chart representing the total starting and ending scores on both assessments for the group that was asked to read the family history stories. The scores for coping competence are represented in blue and the scores for ego-identity are represented in orange. The scores for coping competence either stayed the same or slightly increased for all subjects. The scores for ego-identity slightly decreased for one subject and stayed the same for the other subjects. The drastic difference between the coping competence and ego-identity scores are due to the ways the



assessments are scored; the chart should not be interpreted to relate the two assessment scores to each other.

The next bar chart is the control group. The control group was given the two assessments within the same time frame and were not given any family history stories to read. All five of these study subjects showed similar results to the family history group. Four of the subjects increased slightly in coping competence and one subject decreased slightly in coping competence. The scores for ego-identity moved slightly in various directions.



My test results suggest no strong correlation between reading a couple family history stories and coping competence or ego-identity. If anything, the control group exhibited a better example of increased ability to handle challenges. However, a larger sample size and increased time provided to test subjects to learn and internalize family history could corroborate the findings of other researchers. Suggestions for future research will be provided later.

Conclusions

Although my research did not demonstrate the findings of other researchers, it appears clear from previous findings that knowing and learning family history does have a positive impact on one's mental and emotional health. The Narrative Paradigm provides an excellent framework from which to view family history and provides an excellent insight on why family

history stories are so connected to our well-being. Additionally, family history stories fall perfectly within Fisher's five-step process of analyzing narrative fidelity.

Another theory that could be useful in providing additional insight is Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) developed by W.B. Pearce and V. Cromen. CMM contains the LUUUUTT Model (lived stories, unknown stories, untold stories, unheard stories, untellable stories, story telling, and stories told). This communication theory largely deals with the development of the social world through interpersonal communication. This theory also provides a lot of room for differences between the way the story has been passed down and the way the story may have actually occurred; as far as family history stories are concerned, this is fantastic because most stories are elaborated and exaggerated overtime (Gudykunst). With that being said, this theory does not provide the same insights into explaining the efficacy of family history stories on our ego-identity and our ability to cope with stressful challenges among other psychological health indicators. However, it could provide different insight on the connection between mental well-being and family history stories.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is my deepest hope for this research, that other professionals will expand upon these findings. Two major suggestions for future research immediately come to mind. One, a larger and more diverse sample size needs to be tested. Two, more time needs to be provided for the test subjects to learn, digest, internalize, and apply family history stories.

R. Fivush, M.P. Duke, and J.G. Bohanek's research indicates that adolescents who know and have been raised on family history stories are more likely to exhibit mental, emotional, and psychological well-being. My research focused on those that are learning new family history stories. My research demonstrates there is much we do not know about the connection between

learning family history stories and our mental condition: How much family history must be learned before a significant change begins to occur? When in our life cycles must we learn family history stories for them to make an impact? How much times needs to pass after we learn family stories before we begin to see significant changes? Future researchers may also consider examining the effects family history has on different age groups.

References

- Barker, R. T., Rimler, G. W., Moreno, E., & Kaplan, T.E. (2004). Family business members' narrative perceptions: values, succession, and commitment. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 34(4), 291-320.
- Bohanek, J.G., Martin, K.A., Fivusch, R., & Duke, M.P. (2006). Family narrative interaction and children's sense of self. *Family Process*, 45(1), 39-54. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2006.00079.x
- Family Search. Free Family History and Genealogy Records. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2016, from <http://familysearch.org/>
- Fiese, B.G., Hooker, K.A., Kotary, L., Schwagler, J. & Rimmer, R. (1995). Family stories in the early stages of parenthood. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 57(3), 763-770.
- Garista, P., Sardu, C., Mereu, A., Campagna, M., & Contu, P. (2015). The mouse gave life to the mountain: Gramasci and health promotion. *Health Promotion International*, 30(3), 746-755. doi:10.1093/heapro/dau002
- Gibbs, W.E. (2015, February 26). A Brief Sketch of the Life of John Hyrum Green. *John Hyrum Green Memories*, 1-7. Retrieved March 30, 2016.
- Griffin, E. A. (2006). *A first look at communication theory*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Gudykunst, W. (Ed.). (2004). The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, 35-54. Retrieved April 15, 2016.
- Holbrook D.R. (2014, Jul 20). Obituary of Amos Cook. *Amos Cook Memories*, 4-9. Retrieved March 30, 2016.

Lee, J., Sleeter, C., & Kumashiro, K. (2015). Interrogating identity and social contexts through

“Critical Family History”. *Multicultural Perspective*, 17(1), 28-32.

doi:10.1080/15210960.2015.994426

Lewis, T.Y., & Rogers, R. (2007). Family stories and the life course: Across time and

generations. *Discourse & Society*, 18(2), 225-230.

McKeough, A., & Malcolm, J. (2011). Stories of family, stories of self: Developmental pathways

to interpretive thought during adolescence. *New Directions For Children & Adolescent*

Development, 2011(131), 59-71. doi:10.1002/cd.289

Reese, E., & Flvush, R. (2008). The development of collective remembering. *Memory*, 16(3),

201-212. Doi:10.1080/09658210701806516

Robers, K.G. (2004). Texturing the Narrative Paradigm: Folklore and communication.

Communication Quarterly, 52(2). 129-142.

Ungraduated Research Form [By M.S. Havertz]. (2016, April 16). 1-1.

Woolley, W.C. (2014, July 20). Life Story of Amos Cook. *Amos Cook Memories*, 1-4. Retrieved

March 30, 2016.