

The Power of 'When I Was Your Age'

Research on Parental Narratives and Their Influence on Cognitive Dissonance in Children

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Dedicated to:

My loving parents,  
who continue to touch my life  
with the stories of their lives.

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## Abstract

Parents are continually looking for correct and effective ways to discipline and instruct their children. Often, parents will tell a personal narrative beginning with “when I was your age” to demonstrate to their children the appropriate way to think and behave. This thesis asks three research questions: What are the common themes in parental narratives that young adults remember in relation to instruction or discipline? How does the narrative structure demonstrate narrative coherence and fidelity? What do young adults self-report about the impact of the parental narrative on their cognitive dissonance? Through a content analysis of eighty completed surveys by young adults, the most common themes were relationships, hard work/disciplined life, substance use, and driving. Half of the participants reported that the parental narratives made them feel uncomfortable about their behaviors or thoughts on the issues, and the majority reported that they changed their behavior or thinking after hearing their parents’ stories.

Key Words: narrative, cognitive dissonance, Labov, instruction, discipline, parental narrative, family communication

## Chapter I: Introduction

Imagine a woman sitting down eating a delicious, fresh baked, warm chocolate chip cookie. She is thoroughly enjoying her dessert as she is reading her favorite magazine. While she is reading her magazine and eating her tasty cookie, she comes across an article explaining the harm of excessive sugar to the body. Immediately there is a feeling of mental dissonance or discomfort as she looks down at her last bite of her chocolate chip cookie. What will she do with this uncomfortable feeling? The feeling of discomfort was a result of her gaining negative information about an action in which she was participating. According to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, at the point of dissonance, she will try to rid herself of the discomforting feeling by either rationalizing why she is eating the cookie, stopping her action, or searching for information that would support eating her cookie (Festinger 6). She could also change her thinking about the taste of the cookie and stop eating it just like the fox did in Aesop's fable "The Fox and The Grapes." Aesop's Fable "The Fox and The Grapes" is a perfect example of relieving the dissonance by changing thinking. The story is as follows:

One hot summer's day a Fox was strolling through an orchard till he came to a bunch of Grapes just ripening on a vine which had been trained over a lofty branch. "Just the thing to quench my thirst," quoth he. Drawing back a few paces, he took a run and a jump, and just missed the bunch. Turning round again with a One, Two, Three, he jumped up, but with no greater

success. Again and again he tried after the tempting morsel, but at last had to give it up, and walked away with his nose in the air, saying: "I am sure they are sour."

The fox was experiencing discomfort because he wanted the grapes but could not obtain them, so in order to relieve the discomfort he changed his thinking about the grapes and determined that the grapes would have been sour. Once the pursuit of obtaining the grapes became impossible, his actions changed and a change in thinking occurred in order to relieve the dissonance. The woman with the cookie in the earlier illustration could experience the same thing. If she believed the information in the article and determined that she should not eat the cookie due to the effect it would have on her health, she could change her thinking by saying, "The cookie tastes terrible" and then walk away from eating the cookie with peace of mind.

Similarly, a teenage boy is struggling to resist peer pressure and has even engaged in some activities his parents will probably punish him for in order to correct his behavior. During the disciplining session with his father, his father tells him a story about himself, describing a similar past situation in his life. Through the story it is clear that what the teenager has done is wrong, and in the midst of the story there is instruction of what should have taken place. But instead of the father's just describing what should and should not be done, the information is related through a story the teenager could relate to since it had happened to his father. What type of impact would the parental story have on the teenager? Would the story about the parent's life cause the teenager to experience mental discomfort about his behavior? Would the parent's story influence the teenage boy to change his behavior?

The boy, just like the woman in the above illustration, was participating in an activity when he was approached with information explaining the consequences of the activity. The clash between behavior and information might cause mental discomfort, and the mental discomfort must be relieved in some fashion. Therefore, the boy could ignore his father by rationalizing his behavior, change his behavior/thinking, or seek more information. The teenage boy might change his thinking and or behavior not because he was physically punished by his parents, but because he had gained knowledge through his father's personal story.

Now consider if the same teenage boy had grown up hearing his parents tell him stories about their past experiences. Then when he approached a similar situation, he would already have a knowledge base in place from which to judge his actions. Instead of having to wonder what his parents would do in a situation, he would already know because he had listened and learned from their stories they had told him during periods of instruction throughout everyday life. For instance, the mother of the teenage boy told him a story about how she gave into peer pressure one time in her youth when she was asked to smoke, and then she explained to him how she had a horrible time overcoming a smoking addiction that stemmed from that first smoke with her friends. The boy would have that information in his mind, so when he was approached to smoke with his friends and they told him that it would not hurt him nor would he get addicted, the boy would experience some discomfort because the information his mother told him and the information his friends are telling him contradict each other. He would want to be with his friends, yet he would remember the story/information his mother had told him. He then is faced with the choice of what to do with the mental discomfort the clashing

thoughts were causing. The young boy could experience relief from knowing that he was not alone in dealing with peer pressure from friends and could profit from learning from another's past experiences and mistakes without having to learn it himself.

In these scenarios the person wants to relieve his or her mental discomfort. Relieving the mental discomfort, termed 'cognitive dissonance' by theorist Leon Festinger, is as important as relieving hunger. People desire to relieve cognitive dissonance and depending upon the strength of the dissonance a person will change a thinking process or behavior in order to align the conflicting behaviors or cognitions. Therefore, it is vital to understand the significant role of cognitive dissonance in all behavior change. Many professions strive to achieve a change in their clients' behaviors: doctors want their patients to make a change in health behavior, preachers desire their congregations to make a spiritual behavior change, and salesmen request their customers to behave by buying a new product. Probably the most important profession seeking to produce behavior or thinking changes is the parental profession.

Parents are to guide, instruct, and lead their children into a position in which the children can make their own decisions. However, when children are able to make their own decisions, they often times choose actions or think in ways that are not correct or beneficial to society or themselves. How then will the parents change their children's thinking process and/or behavior? It has often been stated that parenting is the hardest job in the world, and it is hard because it is not easy to produce a thinking or behavior change in independently thinking individuals. Therefore, a parent must utilize a variety of tools to help guide, instruct, and discipline children in the way in which they should go. As stated earlier, cognitive dissonance can play an important role in behavior change,

thus parents may want to consider using a discipline or instruction method that may create or relieve cognitive dissonance.

Narratives, written or oral stories of personal experience, could be the tool parents use to create or relieve cognitive dissonance within their children to create a thinking or behavior change. The term ‘narrative’ was proposed by Walter Fisher, who believed that humans are by nature storytellers. According to Fisher, a good narrative has coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to the way the elements of the narrative fit together and make sense, and fidelity refers to how the narrative can be applicable to the listener’s life. Good narratives are one way in which people create identities and understand the world. People behave and think according to their identities and worldviews. Therefore, if parents were to tell their personal narratives to their children, the narratives could generate identities or worldviews in their children, which might be different from the one the children are currently developing. The clashing of thoughts would in essence cause cognitive dissonance, which might result in some form of thinking or behavioral change. Hence, if parents were to tell their personal narratives to their children, the narratives might create or relieve cognitive dissonance in order to produce a thinking or behavior changes, which is exactly what the parents desire to accomplish.

Most parents, and all adults for that matter, are known for telling stories about what happened to them back in their youth. Most of the time the phrase ‘when I was your age’ signals the start of such a story. Since narratives are commonly told to children, it is of importance to know what type of power these narratives have on thinking or behavior and why they have such power on thinking and or behavior. Thus,

this study is connecting the two theories of cognitive dissonance and narrative paradigm by researching and examining three research questions: Question 1: What are the common themes in parental narratives that young adults remember in relation to instruction or discipline? Question 2: How does the narrative structure demonstrate narrative coherence and fidelity? Question 3: What do young adults self-report about the impact of the parental narrative on their cognitive dissonance? In order to accomplish this task successfully, the study will look into the past to examine what previous studies have revealed about the narrative paradigm and the theory of cognitive dissonance and then develop a methodology in order to analyze the themes and influence of parental narratives on children's cognitive dissonance. This study will enhance the research in both theories of cognitive dissonance and narrative paradigm, as well as, influence the field of family communication as parents increase their ability to lead, guide, and direct their children through non-abrasive forms of discipline and instruction.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Cognitive Dissonance

Before examining research studies that test cognitive dissonance, one must understand the theory of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory was developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957. The two hypotheses of cognitive dissonance theory are:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance (Festinger 3).

The theory states that when two cognitions clash, a dissonance is created. Dissonance is the term used for a feeling of discomfort when there is inconsistency in cognitions.

Festinger states, “I will replace the word “inconsistency” with a term which has less of a logical connotation, namely *dissonance*. I will likewise replace the word “consistency” with a more neutral term, namely, *consonance*” (Festinger 2-3). When people experience cognitive dissonance, they will try to reduce that dissonance. In fact, Festinger compares the desire to reduce dissonance to hunger. “Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction” (Festinger 3). Thus, a person will participate in an activity to reduce dissonance. The theory discusses two different

ways a person will try to reduce the dissonance: by changing the original cognition or by acquiring more information and knowledge (Festinger 6).

Festinger discusses where the dissonance could come from: logical inconsistency, cultural mores, opinions, and past experience (14). The amount of dissonance a person experiences from these are affected by the number of conflicting beliefs and the importance attached to those beliefs. Both of these factors play a major role on the extent of the dissonance and how the person handles the dissonance. Often times, the more dissonance created means more attitude or behavior change will result, since the person desires to return to a state of consonance. The factor of how much importance is attached to the beliefs plays a major part because if the belief is not important to the person, then he/she would not be greatly disturbed by contradictory beliefs. This would in turn not create a great amount of dissonance, since the person would easily change his/her initial belief or behavior. Pre-decisional dissonance occurs when there are contradictory attitudes and beliefs before a decision needs to be made. Post-decisional dissonance is what occurs after an action has already taken place and is the most common form referred to in studies. Post-decisional dissonance suggests that the person will change his/her thinking more if the action can not easily be reversed.

All of these aspects of cognitive dissonance theory have been studied and researched by many communication scholars and will aid in understanding how cognitive dissonance can affect how people, mainly children in this study, respond to instruction. One area in which cognitive dissonance was studied was in double compliance studies. In these studies participants were asked to report about their cognitions and then

participate in a differing behavior and then reevaluate the cognition/behavior. The following studies will examine double compliance.

Cognitive dissonance is created when people are forced to accomplish tasks that go against their initial attitudes. Fabien Girandola in his article “Double Forced Compliance and Cognitive Dissonance Theory” looks at how much dissonance is created when a person is forced to participate in two tasks contradicting their initial opinions. He based his study and research on former studies including one study accomplished by Festinger. Girandola’s study had a sample of 100 college students whom he divided into several different groups. One group had no previous cognitions about the task of turning buttons that they had to perform, one group had previous negative thoughts about the task, another group was double forced to complete the task and then negatively describe it to their peers, and then another group was given explanation about the task but did not participate in the task. After completing the task the participants were asked to rate the appeal of the task and the pleasure felt while completing the task.

Girandola combined all of the outcomes and saw that those who had to complete the task and negatively describe the task to others rated the appeal and pleasure higher after the experiment than they had before. He concluded that “cognitive dissonance theory explains why the participants who stated that the task was boring after completing it . . . nevertheless evaluated the task more positively than did the participants who only performed the task . . . .” (Girandola 602). Based on the theory, the participants experienced cognitive dissonance because their beliefs about the task and what they had to tell about the task contradicted. The participants were able to reduce their cognitive dissonance about the task because they expressed their negative thoughts about the task,

realizing that it was not as bad as first perceived. Girandola discussed how another possible wording of the theory would be that through the communication of the negative thoughts, the participants would realize that the task was not as negative as it had seemed before describing it. This study would be a good study demonstrating the rationalization of a negative behavior within cognitive dissonance theory.

Another article on the subject of double-forced compliance was written by Robert-Vincent Joule entitled “Double Forced Compliance: A New Paradigm in Cognitive Dissonance Theory.” In this article he explains Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance using forced compliance, and then he explains double forced compliance. Joule took two different counter attitudinal behaviors concerning smoking and applied cognitive dissonance theory.

His experiment used male and female psychology students who attested to smoking at least 15 cigarettes a day. They were first asked to fill out a survey of how easy it would be to go a day without smoking, and then they were studied based on individual cases. There were two different variables involved in his study. One test involved not smoking for a day, and the second test involved describing the experience of not smoking for a day to a peer as easy. Some students had to complete both tests while other participants just completed one or were given the choice. After completing the conditions they were given another survey in which they had to answer how difficult it would be to give up smoking.

When Joule assembled the data, the experiment revealed that when the participants were forced to complete double compliance actions, the dissonance reduction was greater. Joule states that “the results support the hypothesis that dissonance

reduction is greater when subjects have to carry out two behaviors that conflict with their attitudes (refrain from smoking and lie to a peer) than when they have only to execute one of these behaviors (refrain from smoking or lie to a peer)” (Joule 844). This finding could be due to the fact that people will reduce their dissonance when they are forced to do more than one action that goes against their initial attitudes. They will reduce dissonance because if they have to do multiple things that are contrary to their beliefs, then they need to and will adapt their thinking to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of dissonance.

Post-decision dissonance is another aspect of the theory and has been studied, researched, and reported. Robert Giacalone, Paul Rosenfeld, and James Tedeschi wrote and studied “Cognitive Dissonance vs. Impression Management.” The study looks at post-decision dissonance and sought out which theory, cognitive dissonance or impression management, better explained a particular situation. Their field experiment consisted of two separate experiments, one of which contained a control group. “Two experiments conducted during academic pre-registration tested the competing cognitive dissonance and impression management explanations for the post-decision dissonance phenomenon in the field” (Giacalone 203). Both studies consisted of upperclassmen who were approached about their decisions on registering for classes. All students were approached by a male who had them rate the classes on a scale from 1-10 (1 being no good at all and 10 being excellent). Some students were approached before they completed registration, and some were approached after their classes were registered and their schedules were set. The rating results showed that students who had not registered for classes at the time of the survey had a lower satisfaction with the classes they were

going to choose than the students who had already registered for the classes. Therefore, students who had already committed to their decision had a higher rating of classes than those in the pre-commitment decision-making stage. Through the experiments the investigators concluded that the data supported cognitive dissonance theory and not impression management. In relationship to cognitive dissonance theory, the study supported the aspect of the theory that states that people will reduce the dissonance more after a decision has been made.

Three years after the previous study, two of the same authors, Paul Rosenfeld and Robert Giacalone joined John Kennedy to perform another study very similar to their previous study on the dissonance effect after a decision is made. Their study is reported in a very short, concise and well-written article entitled “Decision Making: A Demonstration of the Postdecision Dissonance Effect.” The experiment consisted of setting up a gum ball machine in the middle of a large mall and having people guess at the number of gum balls in the machine. They called the contest the “Great Gum Ball Guess.” People had to pay ten dollars in order to guess, and if they won, the prize would be \$20,000.

In order to connect post-decision dissonance with gum ball guessing, they asked people to estimate their chances of winning on a scale from 1-100. Twenty-four people were asked before they guessed. Seventeen people were asked after they guessed, and twenty-one people who were just watching and not planning to participate were asked as well. The results showed that the people who had already paid and guessed the amount of gum balls predicted a higher chance of winning than those who had not guessed or

those just watching. “The postdecision group expressed significantly more confidence in their decision than the predecision group” (Rosenfeld 665).

The authors attribute post-decision dissonance as the reason for a higher winning chance being predicted by the people who had already guessed. They also recognize that the higher winning chance predicted among people who had already made and paid to guess could be related to those individuals’ saving their face, since they might have felt dumb or thought that others would think that guessing was foolish. In either case, the study was useful in proving that dissonance can be created after a decision is made.

David Shaffer reports the different implications of cognitive dissonance in relation to the strength of attitude in his journal article entitled “Some Effects of Initial Attitude Importance on Attitude Change.” In his study he looks at how cognitive dissonance is affected by the initial importance of the attitude held by the individual. He studied forty female students in an introductory psychology class. The results showed that the individuals who placed a greater value on the importance of the belief experienced immense dissonance but were not likely to change their beliefs. People with less attitude importance in their beliefs were less likely to experience dissonance but were more likely to change their beliefs depending on the information they received. Shaffer concludes, “The implication is that subjects holding important initial attitudes experienced more dissonance over their counterattitudinal advocacy than subjects holding moderately important initial attitudes, but they reduced this dissonance by means other than (and/or in addition to) attitude change” (Shaffer 287). The research demonstrated that people would experience dissonance when the belief is considered important.

However, the research did not show that people must change their beliefs if dissonance was present.

The initial attitude or behavior is vital in the study of cognitive dissonance theory. One study testing the initial attitude or behavior in relation to cognitive dissonance was conducted and written about by Thomas Parish and James Necessary in an article entitled “An Examination of Cognitive Dissonance and Computer Attitudes.” They discuss Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance applied to the realm of people and computers. Their conclusions were based upon the analysis of tests taken by 164 undergraduate students at a Midwestern University who took the Computer Attitude Scale developed by Loyd and Gessard in 1984. This scale assesses attitudes toward computers and computer usage (Parish 255). The results showed that “those who had voluntarily used a computer were more likely to demonstrate less computer anxiety and more computer confidence and liking than those who had not voluntarily used a computer” (Parish 256). This would support Festinger’s theory because a person’s position on a subject affects his/her future attitudes and actions.

Not only is cognitive dissonance associated with a positive initial behavior, but it can also be applied to negative attitudes. The theory of cognitive dissonance was applied to the study of the negative feelings associated with cheating between men and women as reported in Bernard Whitley’s article “Gender Differences in Affective Responses to Having Cheated: The Mediating Role of Attitudes.” Whitley’s study sought to test if women have more dissonance than men after cheating and found that “[w]omen did not experience more negative affect than did men, although they reported experiencing less positive affect” (Whitley 249). He took into account that cognitive dissonance theory is

reliant on a person's belief about his or her initial attitude. He said in the article, "Only students who see themselves as honest and for who honesty is an important part of the self-concept may experience dissonance if they cheat" (Whitley 256).

Although the main reason Whitley did the study was to explore gender differences in cheating, the study proves to be an interesting look into cognitive dissonance. The article clearly points out that the person's knowledge of the initial attitude would affect the feeling of discomfort one would feel about cheating. If a person identifies himself/herself with the characteristic of being honest, then he or she would experience cognitive dissonance if he/she were told differently. The clashing cognitions would create the dissonance. This study would also relate to Shaffer's study since he also researched the importance of the initial attitude.

Richard Jensen reports about cognitive dissonance used in behavior therapy in his article "Cognitive Dissonance in Behavior Therapy: Some Basic Treatment Strategies." He discusses how there is contention between behaviorism theory and cognitive dissonance theory, but through his paper he lays out how cognitive dissonance could be applied and used in behavioral therapy instead of being opposite to each other. He states that "[i]t is argued that despite the substantial differences between the positions of the behaviorists and dissonance theorists there is important mutuality" (Jensen 310).

He looks at four different predictions and gives practical ways that the predictions could be used within behavioral therapy. His four predictions are the following: performance of a counterattitudinal task under insufficient justification will produce task-congruent attitude change, the amount of attitude change will be a function of the effort expended in the completion of a required task, lack of social support for attitudes will

produce dissonance and attitude change in the direction of prevailing view, and attitude change will be a function of personal commitment to dissonance-producing events (Jensen 305-308).

### Narrative Paradigm

Walter Fisher is the theorist who proposed the term “narrative paradigm”. Fisher believes that the essence of human nature is that people are storytelling animals. He states in his book *Human Communication as Narration Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, “the narrative paradigm proposes that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience” (24). Coherence deals with how the elements in the story fit together and make sense within the internal structure and within the context of which it is being told, and fidelity deals with how the story relates to the listener’s real life (Fisher “The Narrative Paradigm”). He believes that all of communication is narratives/stories.

To understand the narrative paradigm, one must understand the presuppositions underlying the theory. Fisher’s theory is based on five basic ideas in its foundation. He states the following five premises:

- (1) Humans are essentially storytellers.
- (2) The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is “good reasons,” which vary in form among situations, genres, and media of communication.
- (3) The production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture and character [...]
- (4) Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings – their inherent awareness of

*narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives [...] (5) The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation. (*Human Communication* 64-65).

Fisher believes that narration is symbolic actions – words and/or deeds. Em Griffin expands and elaborates on the definition in his book *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Griffin's expanded definition is:

Communication is rooted in time and space. It covers every aspect of our lives and the lives of others in regard to character, motive, and action. The term also refers to every verbal or nonverbal bid for a person to believe or act in a certain way. Even when a message seems abstract – is devoid of imagery – it is narration because it is embedded in the speaker's ongoing story that has a beginning, middle, and end, and it invites listeners to interpret its meaning and assess its value for their own lives. (325).

This definition provides a clear understanding of how narratives shape a person's understanding of the world.

Laurel Richardson in her article "Narrative and Sociology" shows that sociology is affected by the narrative paradigm because of how history is written for cultures through narratives. She states that "[n]arrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their lives" (133). Also looking at the influence of narratives on a culture are authors Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot.

They declare in their book *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society*,

[n]arrative is a cultural tool in several senses. Narratives are cultural forms often referred to as scripts (or dominant discourses, or master narratives) with embedded values and moralities. Tensions in the practices of cultural and personal narratives provoke the creation of and reflection about individual lives and about the society. (xv)

Having seen that narratives help people understand life, it is important to see how and why narratives have influence. Narratives create understanding because they provide good logic and reasons in which to regard society. Fisher wrote in “Toward a Logic of Good Reasons” that “a reason is good if it is tied to a value and a value is reasonable if it is tied to a reason” (378). He believes that reasons are shown through the use of narratives. He follows up this article with another article, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.” In the later article he continues his argument about the logic of good reason and connects it to his narrative paradigm. He declares, “The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amendable to all forms of human communication” (2). Fisher desires for people to see how narration is one way to reason and make logic out of all communication. In support of this reasoning, Wells states, “When storying becomes overt and is given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others” (194). Hence, narratives allow both the teller and the listener to produce good solid logic to actions and beliefs.

Narratives have been applied to organizational theory, which explains how organizational communication can use narratives to allow managers to instruct and guide employees. In the article “Antenarrative and Managerial Practice,” Kevin Barge cites many studies that declare the functions of narratives. The article proclaims, “Stories represent one of the oldest tools people use to make sense of and transmit their history, beliefs, culture, and meanings about life to subsequent generations (Durrance 1997).” He then covers several reasons stories are used for sense making in organizational members: to create and sustain corporate cultures by constructing shared meaning, socialize newcomer, engage in strategic planning, manage organizational change, and facilitate managerial succession (106).

Also looking at narratives in organizations, authors Kevin Randall and Peter Martin in their article “Developing and Using Stories or Narratives to Transmit Values and Legacy” use the narrative of Mary Kay Ash to show how organizations can transmit the legacy and values of the organization to employees. The employees’ confessions showed that the narrative of Mary Kay Ash proved to be of great value. The authors declare the impact of narratives similar to Mary Kay Ash’s story “These stories also stand the test of time and provide impetus and renewal for other individuals in other groups or organizations who may not have such unique founder stories but are experiencing difficulties in reaching toward their aspirations” (Randall and Martin 46).

A perfect example of how a narrative led someone to challenge his beliefs and change a current behavior is told by pastor and author Donald Miller in his book *Searching for God Knows What*. In his book he explains how he had chewed tobacco for years. He knew all of the facts and statistics about the damage chewing tobacco does to

one's body. However, even though he knew all of the facts and statistics and even printed them out to remind himself of the dangers, he could not kick the habit of chewing tobacco. He would buy a can of chewing tobacco every time he would gas his car. He explains the reason the facts and statistics did not cause a behavior change as the difference between truth and meaning. He knew the truth about chewing tobacco, but the truths did not carry any meaning for him. The meaning came for Donald Miller when he was listening to the radio and an old man told a personal narrative about chewing tobacco. This is how Miller describes the instance and his change:

I was listening to the radio one afternoon, editing a chapter in a previous book, when a voice came on, very distorted and troubled. The man sounded as though part of his face were missing, low and muffled and slobbery. Between songs, the radio station had inserted a commercial, a public service message about the danger of using chewing tobacco. The man in the commercial said half his jaw had been removed, that he had no lower lip, and the reason his face was deformed was because for years he had used smokeless tobacco. He didn't list the facts, he didn't speak of any harmful ingredients, he didn't say he was going to die of cancer. And yet the image of a man without a chin speaking into the microphone was enough to convince me to stop. I never used the stuff again. I just didn't want to (58).

The image a narrative creates in a person's mind is exactly why a narrative can move truth into meaning for a person. Truth without meaning does not change anyone. As Miller states:

If you ask me, the separation of truth from meaning is a dangerous game. I don't think memorizing ideas helps anybody unless they already understand the meaning inferred in the expression of those ideas. I think ideas have to sink very deeply into a person's soul, into their being, before they can effect change, and lists rarely sink deeply into a person's soul (57).

Narratives have influence because they allow ideas and truths to sink into a person's conscience as the person realizes the logic and reason of the narrative.

Telling a narrative can also be considered as storytelling. William Kirkwood discusses the effects of storytelling in his article "Storytelling and Self-Confrontation: Parables as Communication Strategies." He analyzes how people can change their behaviors by hearing stories. The premise is as follows: "This essay will suggest that some stories challenge listeners' established beliefs and attitudes, but also evoke in them certain feelings and states of awareness significant in their own right as the ends, not mere means, of religious discipline" (Kirkwood 59). He is describing the purpose of telling stories and parables. He discusses how parables have been used in many religious settings and researched in many studies, but he looks more at how the stories allow people to challenge their own beliefs and behaviors. His premise is:

Storytelling may achieve this in two ways. First, a tale may evoke in listeners a brief experience of non-rational awareness, directly halting that otherwise incessant flow of their own intellectualizing. Second, and to some degree independent of the first possibility, a narrative may lead one to challenge his or her beliefs about rationality. In more general terms

some parables may involve either or both of two strategies: confronting states of awareness and confronting beliefs and attitudes (Kirkwood 64-65).

He demonstrates how parables or narratives create elements of self-reflection in order to produce change. The change is produced by challenging the person's beliefs or attitudes through telling a story.

Since narratives are a way to understand human experience and provide a tool in which to reflect on lives due to embedded values within narratives, narrative analysis has been used in various studies to research a plethora of subject matters. Several recent studies using narratives or narrative analysis are as follows: social interaction in the classroom (Sandel and Liang), hierarchy in community membership (Moore), news reporting on terrorism (Nossek and Berkowitz), meanings of spiritual texts for women (Henderson), fetal alcohol syndrome diagnosis (Thorne, et.al.), use of sin and redemption language in the public eulogies of celebrities (Kitch), and a self-help book about the philosophy of telling personal narratives to self (Woodstock). Studies that discuss narratives or use narratives as a tool are plenty in number, but there is no one way to go about conducting a narrative analysis. In the dissertation "A Narrative Exploration into the World of Ill Fathers who have Lost a Limb due to Diabetes," the author explains, "Narrative analysis within the field of qualitative research is very much broad based in that there is no definitive structure, approach or methodology" (Grigoratos 66). In the book *Narrative Analysis*, author Catherine Riessman declares, "There is no standard set of procedures compared to some forms of qualitative analysis" (54). Hence, many different methods of narrative analysis can be used for qualitative studies.

### William Labov's Six Elements of a Narrative

One tool which could be employed to conduct a narrative analysis is William Labov's six elements of a natural narrative. Labov's research deals with narratives told in real-life conversations during the 1960s. He specifically researched narratives told among African-Americans in the inner cities. He was researching what he called 'Black English Vernacular' and whether it was an obstacle to learning. The last section of his book deals with how speakers using Black English Vernacular structure their narratives when reporting an event. He determines that the vernacular does not make a difference when structuring a narrative, and through analyzing hundreds of discourses, he identifies 6 functional or common elements within the structure of all well-formed stories, regardless of vernacular. His six elements are as follows: 1) abstract, 2) orientation, 3) complicating action, 4) evaluation, 5) result or resolution, and 6) coda (Labov 363).

The abstract is a short statement that summarizes the story and marks the beginning of the story by telling what the story is going to be about, and the coda is similar except it is the statement at the end that concludes the point of the story. According to the model, the abstract and coda are "optional elements of the narrative structure and occur at the boundaries of the narrative" (Klapproth 94). The orientation section of the narrative gives account to who is in the story, when the story took place, and where the story took place. After the orientation element, there is the complicating action that describes what happened - the core of the narrative. The complicating action is followed by the resolution stage reporting what finally happened and expressing the final key event. The evaluation element declares why the person is telling the narrative

and what the narrative means to him or her. A summary of the first four elements is expressed by Laura Annamaria Cariola.

The structural abstract unit of a story provides the listener with an outline of the main content and the relatability of a subsequent recapitulated narrative. The structural orientation unit informs the listener about the narrative's participants and their temporal, local, and behavioral circumstances, often found embedded in the opening sequence of a narrative or placed in between the abstract and complication units in the form of free clauses. The structural complication unit conveys a specific or interlinked chain of actions. This is followed by a structural evaluation unit, which functions as the main kernel of a narrative as it establishes the personal relation and interest and conveys the point of the story and its significance in relation to its relatability (16).

The six elements usually follow in the above order, except for the evaluation. The evaluation step is an important element that makes the point or meaning of the story clear. Labov considers the evaluation step as "perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause" (Labov, *Language* 366). Evaluation is important because it describes the person's position and values. Cariola states, "Evaluations can be perceived as an underlying secondary structure in a narrative, since they convey judgment with an attached emotional or ideological value and stand in relation to the described actions and circumstances" (23). It answers the "so what?" question and can be found anywhere through the narrative. Author Paul Simpson states:

Evaluation tends to sit outside the central pattern because it can be inserted at virtually any stage during a narrative. Evaluation is also the most fluid of the narrative categories stylistically: it may take a variety of linguistic forms depending on what particular evaluative job it is doing. However, the insertion of evaluative devices is generally very important as it helps explain the relevance of the central, reportable events of a story.

The evaluation is a key to this study as well because it will be used to reveal the narrative's coherence and fidelity and demonstrate the influence of the narrative as the speaker gives personal value and judgment to the story.

William Labov's narrative analysis tool has been used by several researchers and will be used in this study as a tool to give support to Fisher's ingredients of coherence and fidelity, just as past researchers have used Labov's narrative analysis to support other theories and research. Marcia Macaulay uses Labov's element of the complicating action to analyze and support her position on the play *Othello*. In her article "When Chaos Is Come Again: Narrative and Narrative Analysis in *Othello*," she shows how the play *Othello* is a play about narratives and the construction of narratives (259). In support of her position, she points out that the speech in a play constitutes a narrative because it has William Labov's element of a complicating action (264). She used Labov's model for narrative analysis to back up her claim that *Othello* is a play of narrative constructions.

Researcher Laura Annamaria Cariola in her study "A Structural and Functional Analysis of Dream Narratives" explores the structure of dreams based on Labov's six structural elements. Through her analysis she recognizes that dream narratives do not include clear resolution elements but that the coda and resolution are often times

intertwined with one another (Cariola 24). She attributes the lack of a resolution element in dream narratives to the fact that dreams often end without having a clear resolution, and therefore, the person will tell the end of the dream with just a coda, taking the listener back to the overall theme of the dream. Her findings do not pose a threat to Labov's six elements because Labov himself stated later in life that the coda and resolution can coincide, since sometimes the resolution cannot be distinguished from the end of the complicating action. He explains, "The resolution of a narrative was simply the ending or outcome; there was no very precise way of distinguishing it from the last complication action" (Labov, "Some further" 414). Cariola chose to conduct her narrative analysis by using Labov's six elements, and her use of the elements in narratives about dreams shows the versatility of Labov's elements within narrative analysis.

Labov's six elements of a natural narrative methodology are also used in Nelson and Horowitz's study "Narrative Structure in Recounted Sad Memories." Their study explores the different ways people recount a sad event in life. They wanted to determine if people who did not recount the event with as many details as those who did tell details in the narration suffered from defensive states of mind, including avoidant and repressive characteristics. In order to conduct their research they employed Labov's six elements of a natural narrative to group the narratives. If the person told a story without the elements of a natural narrative, that participant was placed into a group separate from the participants who told an event by including all of the natural narrative elements. Through Labov's narrative analysis the researchers placed the stories into the two groups that they further tested to see if their evaluation was correct, and it was. The participants who narrated their stories with Labov's elements did not suffer from defensive states of mind

as much as those who did not narrate all the elements (Nelson and Horowitz 318).

Labov's framework gave the researchers a way to define a narrative and provided a basis on which to analyze the parts of the narratives.

One researcher that looks specifically at Labov's evaluation element, just as this study did, is Alison Johnson. Johnson used Labov's definition of evaluation to assess police interviews with suspects and witnesses. She applied Labov's definition within the definition she used for her study, which was "those devices that signal the speaker's real-time or retrospective self-assessment of his or her own state of knowledge in relation to the events being described" (Johnson 85). Her study uncovered how the evaluation element is often given by the interviewer during the time when the suspect or witness is telling the narrative of what happened. The suspect purposefully left out the evaluation element within the narrative in order to remain neutral about the event. Because Labov and Waletzky say that evaluation "reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units as compared to others" (32), Johnson concluded that the lack of evaluation expressed by the suspect is due to the fact that the suspect is not wanting to reflect his or her attitude toward the narrative. Therefore, she analyzed the police interview narratives, specifically looking for the evaluation element to determine if it is appropriate for the interviewer to add the evaluation element for the suspect or witness.

Brian Schiff also uses Labov's narrative elements to support his claim that a person's testimony should be endorsed as factual reasoning of a past event (208). Schiff, in his article "Telling It in Time: Interpreting Consistency and Change in the Life Stories of Holocaust Survivors," looks at the consistency of the narratives told by a Holocaust

survivor over thirteen years. Schiff's employs Labov's narrative mapping in order to assess the consistency in the narratives. He discovers the amount of narratives increase over the period of time, but that the narratives are the same in structure. However, Schiff notices that the evaluation statements change after thirteen years, and he looks specifically at the narrative evaluation statements to give reason for the change.

Labov's evaluation element is also vital to the study of Greg Hampton in his article, "Enhancing Public Participation through Narrative Analysis." Hampton reports that narratives can help public policy reflect the consideration of the preferences of the community. He supports his assertion by analyzing the narratives according to Labov's model, paying close attention to the evaluation element. Hampton states, "The use of Labov's evaluation model within narrative policy analysis provides a more detailed form of narrative analysis, which assists with the identification and representation of stories and counter stories" (273). Since the evaluation element "emphasizes the meaning of the narrative and the speakers' attitude towards the matter being discussed" (Hampton 269), Hampton uses the evaluation statements within the narratives to develop the four themes that the community was concerned about in public policy.

Another study using Labov's model was completed by Amos Fleischmann, who conducted research on the adjustment process of parents with autistic children. His purpose was to make the stories of these parents known to the public, and in order to do so he evaluated the stories told by the parents about the adjustment process. He reports his analysis in the article "Narratives Published on the Internet by Parents of Children Autism: What Do They Reveal and Why Is It Important?" He states his method of narrative analysis by declaring, "I found the method put forth by Labov (1972, 1982) to

be the most effective vehicle for examining texts and understanding their significance” (35). He discusses why he chose Labov’s six elements by explaining three areas Labov’s methodology allows the researcher to determine. He writes,

Labov’s methodology enables one to (a) characterize textural units within narratives and identify commonalities among narratives, (b) pinpoint the significant parts of the narrative, and (c) reveal the meaning of and underlying message in the story (36).

Fleischmann uses Labov’s methodology to draw conclusions about how parents overcome and approach the challenges of dealing with autistic children. Labov’s methodology gives him a clear method of organizing the narratives and finding similarities between the narratives, which helps him publicize the parents’ stories and provide encouragement to other parents with autistic children.

The researcher of this present study chose William Labov’s model of natural narratives for the same reasons Fleischmann chose Labov’s methodology. It provides a clear framework in which to analyze narratives to see similarities, identify important parts, and distinguish the meaning of the narratives. Another reason Labov’s methodology was chosen is that it deals with discourse in everyday life. Paul Simpson in his book *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* declares, “The enduring appeal of Labov’s model of natural narrative is largely because its origins are situated in the everyday discourse practices of real speakers in real social contexts” (114). Labov’s methodology also looks at the evaluation of the narrative, which will show in this study the aspects of coherence and fidelity within a narrative.

## Narratives in Family Communication

Narratives have been researched in family communication studies as part of symbolic meaning in a family. Researchers Katherine Galvin, Corina Bylund, and Bernard Brommel discuss functions and types of narratives in their book *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change*. The six functions of narratives in families are the following: to remember, to create belonging and identity, to educate members and socialize/include new members, to aid family culture, to provide stability and connect generations, and to entertain (101). The authors also identify the types of questions that are answered through different narratives told within families. They are: “How did this family come to be?” “Are the parents really human?” “How does a child become an adult in this family?” “Will the family support its members?” “How does the family handle adversity?” and “What does it mean to be a (family name)?” (Galvin, Bylund, Brommel 103-105). This study seeks to add instruction and/or discipline to the functions of family narratives. By telling stories about themselves, parents can not only answer the question of are they really human, but they can also discipline or instruct their children how to think and what to do.

Kevin Randall and Peter Martin analyze students’ narratives in relation to Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel’s types of family narratives in their article “Developing and Using Stories or Narratives to Transmit Values and Legacy.” In their study, they looked at two separate narratives that answer the questions of what a parent is and what it means to be an adult. An example of a narrative explaining what it is to be an adult was told by a middle-age woman. She told a story about her childhood when her father made her feel

special by choosing her to be the special part in his drama. Her father did this to show her how unique and special she was to him. She continued the tradition of making her children feel unique and special by writing lullabies to them.

The second narrative analyzed by Randall and Martin was by a male student recalling a story when his family was under financial hardship. His dad had promised to help him buy some gym shorts but then was faced with unexpected car problems that created extra expenses. Even though the family did not have the money to spend on extracurricular activities, his dad provided the money to buy the shorts because he had given his word. The student reported learning what it meant to be a man of his word. The authors declared,

How powerful and transforming are narratives from family or organizational life in creating meaning and providing purpose for the members. Indeed, without such stories, these crucial yet intangible life lessons might otherwise be lost to those of future generations who experience similar setbacks and situations (48).

Jennifer Wood discusses the persuasive aspect of parental narratives in her article “Living by Parental Narrative: A Narrative Criticism of Marian Wright Edelman’s *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*.” She specifically studied “how the power of the parental voice as a persuasive social force can move an audience to action and generate changes in policy is explored” (107). Her study focuses on the book written by Marian Wright Edelman, then president of the Children’s Defense Fund and a member of the National Commission on Children, entitled *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*. In the book Edelman speaks as a “universal

mother” in efforts to persuade society to take responsibility for children (107). Through narrative analysis of Edelman’s book, Wood attributes Edleman’s success in persuading society to her use of personal narratives. Since narratives are not as direct as demands, people were keener about listening and acting upon the suggestions of Edelman. Wood proclaims,

Parental rhetoric is a successful communication tool for Edelman because she does not try to make people suddenly give up old beliefs and attitudes. Instead, she puts them in touch with their own family legacies and moral values and begins to water and cultivate those ideas through her own personal narratives (113).

Wood also recognizes the persuasive power of parental narratives on children. She states, “Narratives can become the primary basis for how children perceive, judge, and gain knowledge about their lives... to serve as role models” (116). Her study also emphasizes the fact that parents are natural story-tellers as they have inherited their family legacies and can pass those on to their offspring, and when the children become adults they too will remember the narratives to formulate their beliefs. “Many times as adults we go back to the narratives our parents shared with us in our childhoods in order to formulate a decision or affirm out belief about the present context or life situation (Wood 116).” Through her study one can see how influential parental narratives can be on shaping one’s beliefs of what exists, what is knowledge, and what values and morals should be held. Hence, a great responsibility lies within parents to “serve not only as authors of their [own] lives, but also as co-authors of the lives of each of their children” (Wood 116).

Another article discussing parental narratives emphasizes the importance of parents' telling narratives to their adoptive children. "Parenting with Narratives: the A, B, C's of Adoption Stories" by Jean MacLeod explains how vital it is for adoptive children to hear their parents tell narratives. Jean MacLeod declares that telling narratives to adoptive children creates three benefits, the A, B, C benefits.

**Attunement and Attachment** - stories can help teach a post-institutional child the meaning of family, and help him or her to learn to love, trust and feel secure. **Building Identity** -- children need a foundation for "self"; they need the truth AND they need to feel empowered by their story. Kids can't go forward without a past! **Communication and Connection** -- children need to be able to talk about adoption's tough stuff, and they need to be able to count on YOU being there next to them when they do (5).

The authors use the term "narrative" to mean any type of story whether real or fiction, and they focus on the narrative influence on adoptive children. In doing so, the influential power of narratives on children is emphasized throughout the article.

MacLeod demonstrates through the adoptive stories that narratives help people remember the past and shape the future. Dr. S. M. Macrae states in the introduction to MacLeod's article,

Our stories are different in capacity to any other creatures' songs and gestures. Our stories can be told to reinforce the past, yes, but... we can change the endings, reflect new happenings. Our stories have an infinite of ways of being told... and we have the capacity to tell them differently, so they reflect our thoughts as they change (2).

MacLeod and Macrae are encouraging parents to tell narratives in such a way that it reflects their thoughts to their children. A story can have fidelity, the power to ring true in a person's life, which is indicated through Macrae and MacLeod's article.

Even though the influence of narratives has been researched in families, the issue of parents' telling their children stories about their past experiences to instruct and discipline their children has not been found in previous studies. However, studies should be completed on the area because parents may be able to use their narratives to indicate proper thinking and behavior to their children. When parents instruct or discipline their children, they are doing so in order to challenge and correct the children's beliefs and/or behaviors. A challenge of beliefs, behaviors, or thoughts will possibly create a form of cognitive dissonance (mental discomfort) because cognitive dissonance theory states that the clashing of beliefs, attitudes, or actions produces mental discomfort. Also according to the theory, people must rid themselves of the mental discomfort by producing a change in thinking or behavior. Hence, if parents use narratives when they want to correct a belief or behavior, the narrative could induce some form of cognitive dissonance, which may result in a behavior or cognition change to reduce the dissonance.

### Chapter III: Methodology

Three research questions this study explored were: **Research Question 1:** What are the common themes in parental narratives that young adults remember in relation to instruction or discipline? **Research Question 2:** How does the narrative structure demonstrate narrative coherence and fidelity? **Research Question 3:** What do young adults self-report about the impact of the parental narrative on their cognitive dissonance? In order to answer the two research questions concerning the themes in parental narratives and the influence of these narratives on children's cognitive dissonance, the investigator connected Festinger's cognitive dissonance and Fisher's narrative paradigm. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is primarily studied through self-reporting or deduced through before and after behaviors as seen in the literature review. Other than observing behavior changes, researchers use self-reporting because they cannot determine what the feelings or emotions are in an individual person. Fisher's narrative paradigm reveals that it is possible to find themes and elements of coherence and fidelity in the stories people tell. A qualitative approach was used to find the themes in the parental narratives. William Labov's model of a narrative was used to look at how the narrative structure demonstrates coherence and fidelity. A quantitative approach was used to discuss the influence of narratives on cognitive dissonance.

There were many possible ways to conduct a study on parental narratives and their influence on cognitive dissonance, so before this study was completed, two preliminary studies and a pilot study were completed to develop the final decision of how

to conduct this current research. Each study was used to narrow the topic to the current study that asks the specific research questions listed above. Therefore, it is useful to look back at the preliminary studies' methodologies and results.

### Preliminary Study 1

The first study completed by the researcher in the area of parental narratives began by asking the following research questions: Is telling personal stories as a parent a good way to instruct and discipline children? If so, will college students remember their parents' stories? Did the personal parental stories help children learn and avoid problems? Is there a connection between having a strong relationship with parents and parents' telling personal stories? What themes were common in the remembered stories?

From those questions three hypotheses were formed. First, the more parental narratives are shared, the better the relationship between parent and child will be during childhood. This hypothesis was formed, because when a person tells a narrative about himself or herself they are self-disclosing, and self-disclosure usually is reciprocal and promotes intimacy (Griffin 135). Therefore, the more a parent self-discloses by sharing a personal narrative, the more the child is likely to create an identity, disclose to the parent, and feel an intimate relationship with the parent. This strong bond between parent and child will help parents instruct and discipline their children.

Second, the parental narratives remembered will have common instructional themes, even if details are different. This hypothesis was formed, since there are common issues that parents must instruct their children about throughout the children's

lives. Details within the stories should vary, but the main purpose of the story should fall into common themes.

The third hypothesis was that parental narratives will have a positive impact on children. This hypothesis was based on personal experience and on the premise that narratives help shape reality. If parents create a reality for their children by narrating a personal experience, then the children will be able to apply their parents' experience to their own experience. This way the parents have instructed the children by telling a personal story instead of through verbal or physical forms of instruction/discipline.

In order to test the hypotheses, a questionnaire was made available to approximately 180 students at a central Virginia liberal arts university. The 180 students were men and women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two. Completing the survey was voluntary. The questionnaire provided a brief description of a "narrative" at the beginning in order to orient the participants with the term. It stated that "a narrative or story is a written or oral composition that reveals and describes someone's experiences." The questionnaire consisted of two nominal categorical questions dealing with gender and age and two Likert scale questions (see Appendix A). The first question stated, "Growing up, I had a good relationship with my parents." The participants could answer "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", or "strongly agree". The second Likert scale question was "My parents told me their own personal stories to instruct or discipline me" with the answer options of "never", "sometimes", "usually", or "always". These four categorical questions were followed by two open-ended questions stating, "Describe in detail a narrative/story that you remember your parents using to

instruct or discipline you,” and “What type of impact did your parents’ personal stories have on you?”

The categorical questions were asked in order to show a relationship between having a good parent/child relationship and telling personal parental stories, hypothesis one. The two open-ended questions were constructed to assess hypothesis two and three by determining what types of themes are shown throughout parental narratives and to establish what the child thought about the stories and what was remembered from them.

The college students completed the questionnaires and either emailed the responses online or turned the questionnaire in to the researcher. Out of the 180 students available to complete the survey, 86 completed and submitted their surveys. However, two surveys were considered invalid because of incompleteness. There were 41 valid male responses and 43 valid female responses. The gender difference had not been considered as a factor, but since there was a close ratio of males and females, the questionnaire was tallied according to male and female. However, the responses did not vary between gender roles.

On both Likert scale questions there seemed to be a high consensus. According to the questionnaire, 64 participants reported “agree” or “strongly agree” to having had a good relationship with their parents while growing up. In fact only ten participants reported “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” while ten reported a “neutral” response. According to the second question concerning the frequency of parental narratives, only five participants stated that their parents never told personal stories to instruct or discipline them. Therefore, the majority, the other 79 participants reported that their parents did tell personal stories to instruct or discipline them with 40 participants marking

“sometimes”, 28 marking “usually”, and 11 marking “always”. Since both questions were answered positively towards having a good relationship and parents’ telling stories, hypothesis one was supported. In fact, out of the five participants that reported that their parents never told personal stories, four responded as “neutral”, “disagree”, or “strongly disagree” to having a good relationship with their parents. Only one participant stated “agree” to having a good relationship with parents and “never” for parents’ telling personal narratives. Even though the sample was small, hypothesis one was supported by the given evidence.

The open-ended questions were varied in length and details. Some participants wrote extensively in their descriptions of parental narratives and others just told the basic idea of the narrative. There were a few who reported a children’s story that their parents’ used, instead of a parent’s personal story; for instance, the story of the boy who cried wolf was written as an example. In the narratives described by the participants, several themes were shown. The common themes found throughout the narratives were as follows: dating, college life, responsibility, punishment forms, friends and peer pressure, obeying, sibling fights, work ethic, financial issues, education, drinking, and smoking. Since there were some common themes that can be rhetorically analyzed, hypothesis two was partially supported.

Hypothesis two stated the following: The parental narratives remembered will have common instructional themes, even if details are different. One could easily identify the themes in the narratives after examination and analysis, but the themes were not necessarily clearly presented in the words that the participants used. However, there were some narrative examples that were very similar to other ones, which showed the

common themes stated above, even though the details in the stories were different from each other. Hence, hypothesis two stands.

After describing parents' narratives, almost all the participants wrote positive responses to the type of impact the stories had on their lives. Many reported that even though they did not appreciate the stories at the time told, they grew to appreciate the stories later in life. The participants said that the stories allowed them to be grateful for what they had and helped them relate to their parents. Through the parents' stories, they were able to recognize issues in their own lives. A very clear explanation was reported accordingly:

They helped me to see my parents in a different light. I realized that [they] were once a teenager like me, and I was able to see how the choices they made affected their future, and this really helped me to trust their advice. For instance, if my Dad had simply warned me not to hang around the wrong crowd, I probably would have thought that he didn't know what he was talking about, and I would have not listened to him. But, since he told me about his experiences as a teen, it really helped me to see that there was a reason behind his instructions.... It made a big difference in how I related to my parents and it made a big difference in my decision-making as a child.

Another example demonstrating the impact of the narrative is as follows:

When my parents would tell me stories it made them easier to relate to as people and not just authority figures. It made me think as a child and a teenager, okay, maybe there is a reason they are telling me to do or not to

do something. I think the stories they tell gives rationale behind their rules and ideas. While I know parents are authority figures and should be treated with respect we also need to see them as people. I actually think I am able to respect them better because of the stories they have told me and I know where they come from. It's like when you are reading a story, it's comprehensible and you can draw things from it but when you know the background of the author that is when you can truly understand the story as a whole. It's easier to understand your parents when you see their life experiences – it makes them credible.

These two examples reflect what the majority of responses described as the impact of parental narratives. Hence, hypothesis three, which stated that parents' telling their personal narratives will have a positive impact on their children, was supported. This positive influence was children's relating to their parents, respecting their word, applying the lessons taught, and being grateful for what they had.

Through the research all three hypotheses were supported based upon the sample size. There was a strong connection between having a good relationship with parents and parents' telling their own personal narratives – supporting hypothesis one. The common themes throughout the questionnaires were dating, friends, punishment forms, and discipline – supporting hypothesis two. And finally, participants reported positive benefits from hearing parents' narratives. The participants viewed their parent's stories as helpful and insightful, which then allowed them to respect and relate to their parents – supporting hypothesis three.

The above study shows positive implications for how the use of parental narratives can impact the field of family communication. As parents instruct and discipline their children, they can utilize their own personal stories to influence their children. The study shows the power of parental narratives to build stronger relationships and positively impact children's lives. It also creates even more research questions for study. Through analyzing the basic concepts of the narrative paradigm and knowing that young adults had reported positive influence from hearing their parents' narratives, the researcher began asking what the narratives were producing within a person to cause the change in thinking or behavior. "Could the impact on the adolescent be narrowed down to how the parental narratives affected their thinking and behavior on an issue?" Having studied the theory of cognitive dissonance, the researcher realized that the narratives may be producing or relieving cognitive dissonance, which would then lead to a cognitive or behavioral change. Therefore, the following research question developed: What type of behavioral impact, due to the increase or decrease of cognitive dissonance, do parental narratives foster? The question led to the second preliminary study.

### Preliminary Study 2

A qualitative research method of a focus group was chosen to test the research question about the behavioral impact due to cognitive dissonance. A focus group was used because the researcher had found that people remembered more parental narratives and the impact on their behavior when they were able to discuss the topic openly with other people instead of having to think of examples on their own. The focus group consisted of seven participants. There were two male participants and 5 female

participants: Robert, Chandler, Danielle, Amy, Amber, Tina, and Martha (pseudo names). The participants were 17-21 years old and varied in ethnicity. The students were selected based on their expressed willingness to participate and on the criteria that they could remember their parents' telling narratives. The criterion was based upon a preliminary survey completed by the willing participants, which asked about the frequency of their parents' using narratives. The participants were notified by email of the day, time, duration, location, and topic. The focus group was held in a college classroom at a central Virginia liberal arts university for thirty minutes.

A basic question outline was formed with a broad, starter question and then four related follow-up questions (see Appendix B). The starter question/statement was "Describe stories that your parents told you about themselves." The other four questions were as follows: "How did you respond to those stories when you first heard them and how do you respond to them now? Did you appreciate the stories? Why or why not? Did the stories help you feel more uncomfortable or comfortable about your behavior and why? How did the stories impact your behavior then or now? These questions were focused on the idea that the college-aged participants would be able to remember the stories their parents had told them and that those stories had produced a change in behavior. The first two questions dealt with reactions to hearing the narratives. The last two questions were aimed at judging the cognitive dissonance created through the parental narratives.

The first focus group question had the participants describe a story they remembered their parents telling them. It was interesting to note that when one participant started a theme of a story, that same theme seemed to continue being

discussed by the other participants when they shared what stories they remembered. The two themes that were prominent were high school activities and dating experiences. The reason these themes were remembered more notably was that the participants were in college right out of high school and were in the midst of participating or considering their own dating lives. At the same time, the dating-themed stories are likely to be remembered because the story is closely associated to their personal identity. It is related to their identity because the story behind how their parents met and dated is a major factor in how they came into the world, which is the beginning of who they are as a person.

The second question focused the participants' attention on their responses to the stories. The question led them to discuss how they reacted to the stories when they first heard them and what they think about those stories now when looking back. The majority response was that they would associate their parents' experiences to their own situations and assume that their parent's experiences should or would happen to them in the same fashion, and depending on the narrative they would at least wish to experience life the same way as their parents. That way of thinking continued to appear when they would make statements explicating the idea that if their parents did something, then they should be allowed to do it and experience certain situations for themselves.

After the theme surfaced about the students' wanting to experience similar situations as their parents, the focus group then discussed what they learned from the narratives, which was the purpose of the focus group from the beginning. There were comments that demonstrated that they did not have to experience the same situation in order to learn, but that the narratives did affect their behaviors by easing their minds or

creating a discomfort that had a staying effect on their lives. The participants responded to questions about why they appreciated the narratives, what impact the narratives had, and if the narratives gave them feelings of comfort or discomfort. Since these responses are the basis for this study linking the narrative paradigm to cognitive dissonance, an excerpt of the focus group dealing with this section is given below:

Amber: I think it eased it because they are like relating to you and like you're not the only one that messed up, or at the same time it's showing you what you shouldn't do or what to do to fix it

Amy: Yeah, I think that when they relate with you at that level, it makes them, like you said, more like a person then just a parent, more like a friend. We all know that your parents aren't supposed to be your friends, but it helps you deal with and go to them 'cause you know that they can relate to you with just about any topic, so yeah I guess it does ease.

Chandler: I agree, but in some situations, like parents forewarning me not to do something, I felt bad if I did it.

...

Amber: I think it is always on your mind, but it depends on the situation whether you do it or not.

...

Tina: ...I had to weigh out the differences, but like I used and listened to her advice because like I knew she was looking out for my best interest...I had to make my own decision, but I also followed her decision and what she told me to do.

Danielle: ...I look at the decisions she makes and if the way that I am living now, and if it is different from that, and I make my choice and I see that if I do, I see where that will go, so I do this and it ends up better.

The comments from the focus group indicated that the stories parents tell to their children can have instructional and discipline value because they can create cognitive dissonance by challenging beliefs or actions in children's minds or relieve the cognitive dissonance already in children's mind due to conflicting thoughts or beliefs. Parental narratives are powerful because they allow parents to relate to their children, as well as create dissonance in order to change their children's thinking or behavior.

The focus group provided a good discussion about the impact of the narratives and allowed the researcher to ask more questions surrounding why parental narratives impact children's cognitions and behaviors. Through the focus group the responses showed that parental narratives were told in both instructional situations and discipline situations. Therefore, it provided insight to analyze the narratives in terms of instruction or discipline, and instead of asking the respondents to discuss open-ended about how the stories influenced them, the study should specifically ask about how the narratives affected their cognitive dissonance.

### Pilot Study

Based on the two preliminary studies, the researcher chose to focus on the parental narratives young adults, ages 18-28, remembered and how they would self-report the dissonance they felt after hearing the stories. A survey was developed for young adults to fill out asking them about the narratives told by their parents and their response.

The survey went through several revisions and a pilot study before being completed for this study.

The initial survey developed started by asking frequency questions with the options of: always, often, sometimes, seldom, and never. The first question asked how often their parents told them personal stories to instruct them, and the second question asked how often did the stories make them feel uncomfortable about their behavior. It then continued by asking the following three Likert scale questions: “After hearing their story I thought about it and changed my behavior”; “After hearing their story I defended and rationalized my experience and dismissed what they said”; “After hearing their story I looked for more information that supported my position.” The participants could respond to the Likert scale questions with “strongly agree”, “agree”, “undecided”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”. The survey then ended with one open-ended question: “Please give an example of a story your parents told you about themselves in order to instruct you.”

Even though the survey obtained stories for the analysis of themes, and the Likert scale questions led to self-reporting the cognitive dissonance felt by the respondents, the organization of the survey needed to be changed. Asking the questions before writing an example of a parental narrative led to the respondents’ answering the questions based on a generalized knowledge of when they were told stories by their parents instead of answering how a specific story influenced their cognitive dissonance. Therefore, the organization of the survey was reversed. The participants were asked to describe a specific story first, and then based on that specific story they answered if the story caused cognitive dissonance and how it affected their thinking or behavior (see Appendix C).

The other issue concerning the survey was whether to use the word “discipline”, “instruct”, or both. The term “instruction” was interpreted by the researcher to mean telling someone what should or should not be done in an effort to influence future behavior or thinking in the listener’s life. The term “discipline” was used with the interpretation that the listener had been involved in an action or way of thinking and the teller is correcting that behavior or way of thinking by “disciplining”. The original goal was to test only stories meant for the purpose of instruction, but if the study was going to test cognitive dissonance, then stories to discipline would also be valid. Stories to discipline would be valid because the respondents would have already participated in a behavior or demonstrated a way of thinking that the parents were trying to correct and change. Therefore, cognitive dissonance might be present since the parental narrative would have information contrary to what had already taken place with the adolescents. Hence, the word “instruct” was changed to “discipline”.

The pilot study was conducted by handing out twenty surveys in a class of young adults at a liberal arts university in central Virginia. Completion of the survey was voluntary. The students were asked to complete the survey immediately but were not under a time limit. They were given all the time that they needed to finish the entire survey. Not limiting the time was an important factor, since the survey was asking for the participants to remember and then retell a story in detail. Giving them enough time allowed for them to think through their past experiences and thoroughly describe the parental narrative as they remembered. Once the respondents were finished, the surveys were collected, and then the researcher asked the participants what they thought of the survey and if they had any suggestions. The participants generated suggestions that dealt

with the clarity of the wording and their comprehension of the questions. The suggestions given by the students were to allow stories used to instruct as well as stories used to discipline and if “never” was marked for parents’ telling narratives then a statement was needed about not continuing with the survey.

### Current Study

The suggestions from the pilot study provided great insight into the methodology for the current study. The issue over whether to include only instruction stories or discipline stories was reconsidered and resolved when many of the pilot study participants had marked through the word “discipline” and wrote the word “instruct”, and yet they still were able to respond to the cognitive dissonance questions. Stories told for the purpose of instruction would be valid. A person can have one way of thinking about a position or action without having participated in the action, so when a story is told to instruct about that position or action, the story could clash and conflict with the present way of thinking. Hence, the clashing of the two ways of thinking might cause cognitive dissonance. Therefore, both words were included in the current study’s survey. For the purpose of the current study, some of the Likert scale questions were reworded to include changing thinking about a position or behavior.

The comment concerning not being able to complete the survey if the answer was “never” on the frequency question, made the researcher realize that the study was not intending to test the frequency issue of parents’ telling narratives. Rather, the study sought to analyze themes and discuss the self reports about narratives’ influence on cognitive dissonance. All of the preliminary studies already showed that parents do tell

personal stories to instruct and discipline. Hence, the frequency question was removed from the survey.

The purpose of the preliminary studies and the pilot study was not only to validate the practicality of the study but also to narrow the study's subject matter and develop a well-written and tested survey. Therefore, this study looks specifically at the past influence of specific parental narratives used to discipline or instruct children reported by young, college-age adults. The data were collected from young-adults who volunteered to complete the study.

The final survey created for the current study (see Appendix D) started out by asking age and gender and then gave half a page to answer the following request: "Please retell, in detail, a story your parents told you about themselves in order to instruct or discipline you." After the space provided for the story, a question was asked dealing with whether the story was told for the purpose of instruction or discipline. It stated, "The above story was told for the purpose of (please circle one)" with the option to circle "instruction" or "discipline." This question was added to the survey after including both "instruct" and "discipline" in the first instruction.

The first half of the survey was developed to report the narratives parents told their children. The stories were first analyzed thematically based on content analysis in terms of common subjects being taught by the parents. The content analysis to determine themes was assessed by looking at the narratives' complicating action and evaluation elements. Secondly, the study analyzed how the respondents retold the story to see if they re-told the narrative in such a way that it shows coherence and fidelity. Fisher's narrative paradigm says all humans have the natural capacity to recognize coherence and

fidelity (Fisher, *Human Communication* 24). Coherence is the unity, understanding, and clarity of the story; whereas, fidelity is the trustworthiness and reliability of the story in relation to the listener's life. In order to analyze coherence and fidelity and to discuss the influence of the narrative on the respondent, William Labov's structural elements of a natural narrative will be used as a tool. As discussed in the literature review, Labov's research dealt with narratives told in real-life conversations. After analysis of hundreds of discourses he identified that there are 6 functional or common elements within the structure of all well-formed stories. These elements are as follows: 1) abstract, 2) orientation, 3) complicating action, 4) evaluation, 5) result or resolution, 6) coda (Labov 363). Explanation of the six elements was covered in the literature review.

William Labov's model of natural narratives has been used in this study because it deals with common discourse and because it looks at the evaluation element of the narrative. In this study, the evaluation element showed the aspects of coherence and fidelity, as well as what the respondents learned from the narrative they heard their parents tell or what their parents emphasized during the story. What the respondents learned was closely associated with how they dealt with cognitive dissonance created by the narrative. Paul Simpson in his book *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* declares, "The enduring appeal of Labov's model of natural narrative is largely because its origins are situated in the everyday discourse practices of real speakers in real social contexts (114)." The narratives gathered for this study were written by young-adults who have heard a narrative within a conversation with their parents, making them "natural narratives." The respondents took their parents' natural narratives and told their own narratives by including the original narratives told by their parents. Therefore, this study

looked to see how the young-adults re-told the natural narrative according to the structural elements as a tool to show coherence, fidelity, and influence. Five reported narratives were specifically analyzed to illustrate how Labov's six elements could show the narratives' coherence and fidelity.

After the two statements dealing with retelling the narrative and whether the narrative was told for instruction or discipline, the researcher asked four Likert scale questions. The purpose of the four Likert scale questions was to determine how the respondents self-report the cognitive dissonance that may or may not have been created after hearing the stories they reported. The four questions were stated as follows: "When my parents told me the above story/experience, it made me feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts on the issue." "After hearing the story I thought about it and changed by thinking/behavior." "After hearing the story I defended and rationalized my thinking/behavior and dismissed what they said." "After hearing the story I looked for more information that supported my thinking/behavior." The first question was trying to ask if the respondents felt cognitive dissonance when they heard the stories, but since the term "cognitive dissonance" is not understood by most college age young-adults, the term was replaced with a phrase that briefly explains cognitive dissonance – "feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts." According to the theory, cognitive dissonance can be defined as "mental discomfort" or "mental inconsistency" that is created after clashing thoughts or actions (Festinger 2-3). Based on the theory's definition of cognitive dissonance, a person that feels uncomfortable about his or her behavior or thoughts due to conflicting actions or thoughts is experiencing "mental

discomfort” labeled by the theory as “cognitive dissonance.” Hence, the wording of the question aimed for the participants to self-report their cognitive dissonance.

The purpose of the following three questions was to see how the respondents dealt with cognitive dissonance if it was present after hearing the story. Cognitive dissonance theory states that cognitive dissonance must be relieved by changing thinking/behavior, justifying or rationalizing thinking/behavior, or seeking more information (Festinger 6). Therefore, if the participants responded that they had participated in one of these behaviors then it would show that some cognitive dissonance might have been created to lead to the action.

The developed survey was made available to approximately 130 college age young-adults who were all students at a central Virginia liberal-arts university. Since the pilot study showed that students needed to have enough time to think about instances when their parents told them narratives, the students were asked to take the surveys home, give full thought to the questions, complete the surveys, and return them within a week. This method insured ample amount of time for the surveys to be completed thoroughly with well thought out responses. Participation from the students was not mandatory. Out of the 130 surveys made available to the students, 87 completed surveys were returned. The students placed the surveys into a folder so that their identities remained anonymous. After a first read through of the surveys, the researcher threw out seven surveys due to the participants’ writing about a story that was not related to what was being asked, such as a fictional story their parents had told them to demonstrate a lesson (e.g. the boy who cried wolf) or a moral story that was not a story about the parent (e.g. Jesus’ life example). Eighty surveys were then analyzed in order to answer

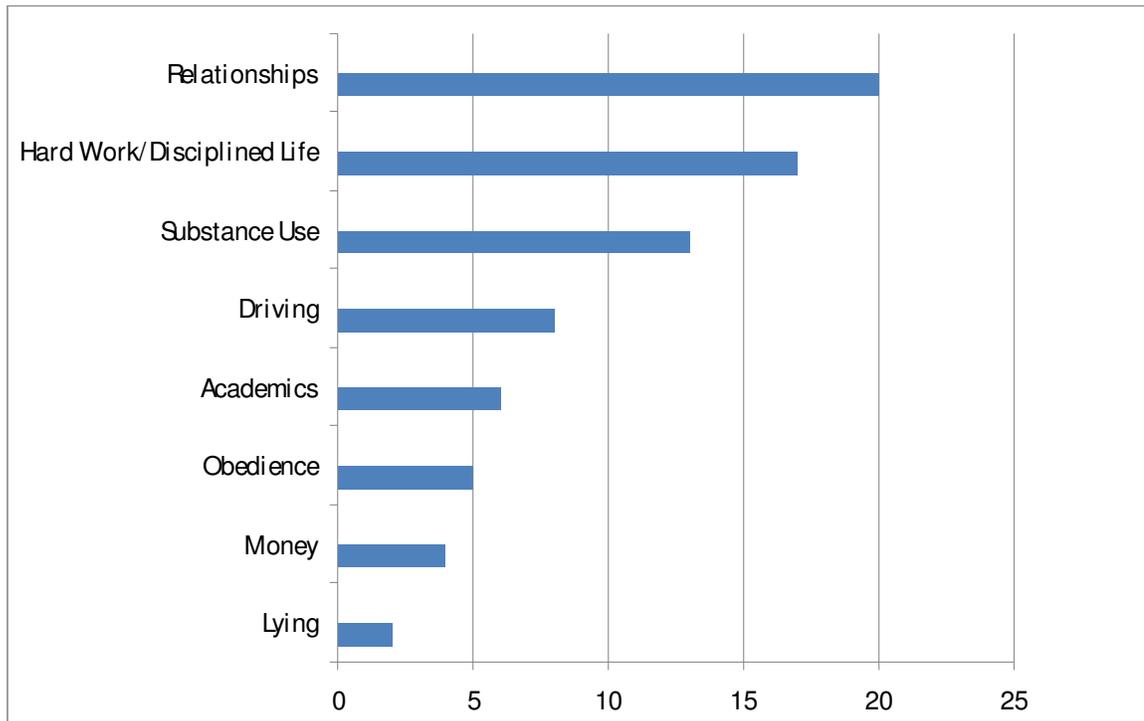
**Research Question 1:** What are the common themes in parental narratives that young adults remember in relation to instruction or discipline? **Research Question 2:** How does the narrative structure demonstrate narrative coherence and fidelity? **Research Question 3:** What do the young adults self-report about the impact of parental narratives on their cognitive dissonance?

## Chapter IV: Results and Discussion

When considering the eighty completed surveys, the researcher separated the stories into groups based on the marked purpose behind the parents' telling the narratives, whether instruction or discipline. There were forty-eight surveys marked as "instruction" and thirty-two marked as "discipline." While looking through the narratives and comparing the ones told for the purpose of instruction versus the ones told for the purpose of discipline, the researcher could see a difference in the amount of details given by the respondents. The stories told for discipline seemed not only to tell the parental narratives but also to describe the context in which the stories were told. The discipline stories would start with or include statements about the respondents' participating in specific behaviors that indicated the reason why the parents told them the narratives.

After the researcher conducted a content analysis on the reported narratives, many subject themes within the narratives were evident. Based on Labov's six elements, the content analysis focused on the complicating action and evaluation statements to determine the themes. The complicating action element was found within statements about the chain of events and the main issue within the narrative, and the evaluation element was found within statements concerning the participant's understanding of the lesson being taught by the narrative. Table 1 illustrates the number of occurrences of major and minor themes found within the reported narratives.

Table 1 – Occurrences of Major and Minor Themes



The four most common themes were relationships, hard work/disciplined life, substance use, and driving. Other issues that were reported more than once were stories dealing with academics, obedience, money, and lying. There were five narrative subjects that were only reported once: The treatment of animals, false accusations, shaving, anger, and fire.

After determining major themes, the narratives in each major theme were broken down into specific sub themes. Table 2 shows the sub-themes under the four main themes.

Table 2 – Sub-themes of Major Themes

<p><b>Relationships</b>  Romantic – 11  Friendships – 4  Siblings – 3  Parents – 2</p> <p><b>Hard Work/Disciplined Life</b>  Parental Controls – 10  Hard Work – 7</p> <p><b>Substance Abuse</b>  Alcohol – 11  Drugs – 1  Cigarettes – 1</p> <p><b>Driving</b>  Caution – 5  Speed - 3</p>
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### Relationships

The most common subject theme reported by the young adults was the subject of relationships. Many types of relationships were covered under this theme: romantic, friendships, siblings, and parents. Romantic relationships were the most occurring type of relationship mentioned in the narratives, covering 11 of the 20 relationship-themed narratives. The romantic relationship-themed stories dealt with how girls should be treated, how girls should view boys, and not rushing a relationship or getting married young. The following are examples of the lessons learned in the romantic relationship themes.

### Examples - The Treatment of Girls:

#### Example 1:

She told me that when she was younger, she had a boyfriend who never came in to meet her parents, and when he came by her house to pick her up, he would screech to a stop and honk the horn until she came out. She told me that it was important to find someone who would respect me.

The mother was explaining how she was poorly treated in order to demonstrate to the daughter the proper way a boy should treat a girl. The same was the case with the next two examples.

#### Example 2:

While growing up my mom always warned me about over-protective, possessive boys and how I should not sell myself short by just dating one guy all of my high school years. She dated a guy for all of her years in high school and it was not healthy at all. They broke up multiple times and got back together. They were not right for each other. Her boyfriend at the time, Tony, would tell her what she could/couldn't wear. If he didn't like something, she would go upstairs and change.

#### Example 3:

My (mom) would tell me a story from her youth in order to instruct me in how to treat girls. She talked about when she was out on a date her boyfriend would tilt the rear-view mirror so that he could glance at her every 10 seconds. She said that that creeped her out a lot and she wound up breaking up with that particular boyfriend. My mom used this story to

give me a negative example, to tell me how to be a gentleman/good boyfriend/husband. Consequently I have never done that particular mirror trick, nor have I tried to become too...er...romantic, too soon.

Through the examples of what happened to the respondents' mothers, the children learned what not to do or expect when it came to the treatment of girls.

The next topic covered under the theme of romantic relationships was moving too fast into marriage.

Examples - Rushing a Relationship or Getting Married Young:

Example 1:

When I was in High School my mother was very strict on dating and being alone with boys. The last thing she wanted was for me to get "knocked up." When my mom and dad graduated from High School they were in a pretty serious relationship. She had been planning to go to college until she got pregnant. This enabled [*sic*] her from going to college. As a result she had 2 children at a very young age (18). This is something she did not want to happen to me. She wanted me to be able to go to college and get the education that I need.

The mother was explaining to the daughter that rushing a relationship hinders achieving goals and aspirations. The mother not only told her daughter her personal story, but she also created rules in which to influence her daughter from making the same mistake.

Another example of a mother's telling her personal narrative to show a possible result of getting married young is seen in the following:

## Example 2:

I told my mom about me [*sic*] getting a little serious with my boyfriend, just like how we were planning to stay together. She took the liberty then to go into how she got married so young, and why I shouldn't rush into anything. She told me that when she was young all she wanted to do was get married. Then she said that she should've waited longer for God's timing instead of making the decision for herself without involving God... She told me that she rushed to marry my dad, and she also wished she waited because of the fact that she didn't get to go into an occupation for herself first or even finish college for that matter, and she wished that she could've learned more about herself and settled down a little bit more before she made the decision to get married.

The most common relationship stories were of romantic relationships, whether how to treat a girl or how not to rush a romantic relationship and get married too young. However, under the theme of relationships was also the topic of choosing and trusting friends. The following is an example of narratives discussing putting trust in a relationship.

## Example - Trusting:

While my parents were dating, my father had a habit of "borrowing" money from my mother (in the form of checks). The checks all bounced. My mother spend [*sic*] somewhere between a month to three months in jail.

Another example concerning the theme of trusting people in a relationship was a narrative about a mother's explaining how her best friend abused her trust. She trusted her best friend so much that she was shocked when her friend was caught stealing clothes from her closet. The mother was telling the narrative in order to instruct her child not to trust a person just because he or she is a friend, but to allow people to earn trust.

#### Hard Work/Disciplined Life

The next common theme after issues with relationships was the theme of a parent's background being harder than the child's and how it demonstrated hard work and a disciplined life. Seventeen of the reported narratives discussed the subject of working hard and following rules to have a disciplined life. The young adults reported stories about how their parents told them about their work backgrounds, parental controls, and educational backgrounds to express that the young adult should work hard in life, be appreciative of their freedoms, and not complain about responsibilities. By way of illustration the following stories were reported.

#### Example 1:

My father has always told me about how he has worked really hard to get what he has and that I should do the same [...] [H]e says, "I've worked 3<sup>rd</sup> shift for a company called Nacco handling materials for 14 years. My house is paid for as well as all my vehicles."

In the above example, the father was indicating his persistence and patience in the work field. The father declared that he presently had certain things because he worked hard at his job in the past. Through these narratives about hard work and discipline the parents

also showed the obstacles and challenges they faced and overcame in life in order to succeed.

Example 2:

My dad comes from a huge family. His mum had three children from the first marriage and six from the second marriage. My dad worked as a poultry boy where he earned a little over a dime to go to school. After the civil war broke out in 1967 he was withdrawn from school and sent to a Norwegian refugee camp in Emigu, Nigeria. He persisted with hard work and earned a scholarship to study in Norway and Belgium. He graduated in 1978 and returned to Nigeria to work as a civil engineer in the Nigerian Power Sector.

Example 3:

My father tells me the story about how hard he worked in highschool [*sic*]. He tells me this story so that I will work harder with my school work. He grew up on a 500+ acre farm in WV. He had to wake up early to get stuff done for the farm, and then he went to school. He said he had a 45 min. bus ride each way to [and] from school. So during that time, he worked on his school work. Then when he got home from school, he had to work on the farm till dark or after. So then he had to finish his homework after all of that. Because he did this all through highschool [*sic*], he became Valedictorian of his class. He said that there were people who were smarter than him [*sic*], but he worked harder, and it profited him greatly.

Parents used their difficult past to teach gratefulness to their children. The parent in the next example was not only talking about her past to convey that it was hard but also to use the story to show how grateful the child should be for freedoms.

Example 4:

My mom grew up in a very strict household. Her parents were very conservative and wouldn't let her do a lot. They had rules for everything I am so free to do. For example, my mom was never allowed to go to the movies. She also wasn't allowed to leave her house with any kind of make-up [...] The point of all the stories and sneaking around was to show how ridiculous that rules were and that I should be thankful for all I get to do.

Many parents instruct their children to work hard and be thankful for what they have in comparison to what the parents had to experience. These stories are obviously memorable to the children as they have been remembered and expressed by the young adult participants who reported the given stories.

### Substance Use

After the twenty reported narratives about relationships and seventeen on hard work/discipline, thirteen narratives dealt with substance use, primarily drinking alcohol. Two narratives discussed drugs and smoking, but the other eleven illustrated lessons concerning drinking alcohol. The parental narratives under the sub-theme of drinking alcohol were told for various reasons. Parents discussed drinking alcohol examples as a way to warn, instruct, or discipline their children about resisting peer pressure,

understanding the repercussions of drinking alcohol, and lying. Some of the different purposes for using drinking examples in the narratives are demonstrated through the examples below.

Examples - Resisting Peer Pressure:

As I was growing up and began experiencing peer pressure I can remember a story my mom used to always tell me. She would tell me how drinking affected my papa, which is her father. When my mother was growing up, she had to deal with her father coming home drunk. He was a good father most of the time, but when he started drinking he became a totally different person. According to my mom he was very mean and more susceptible to blowing up...She never knew what to expect from him when he was drinking. My mom tells me this story hoping to help me realize that nothing good can come out of drinking.

Even though the story showed the negative effects of drinking alcohol, the mother told the story in order to instruct her child against the peer pressure of drinking alcohol. The purpose for the mother's telling the story is reported by the respondent at the beginning stating, "As I was growing up and began experiencing peer pressure..."

A second story about alcohol used to display the importance of resisting peer pressure described how the brothers of one student's father were trying to get the student's father to drink, but his father kept turning them down. However, since his dad was the youngest and he needed the protection of his brothers, he ended up giving in to the peer pressure. The respondent states:

With time, he made up his mind to drink alcohol with his brother and friends so as to get protection. This was the result of a lot of pressure. He did not get involved in drugs. One day, after going to a friend's house and having drunk a lot, he fell sick; later on he passed out on the way back home. He had alcohol poisoning. This was the worst experience he had. From then he made up his mind not to drink no matter the favors set up for him. This was a story that he told me to instruct me to make wise decisions in life and to overcome peer pressure.

The issue of alcohol was used to teach the child about peer pressure along with the advice to stay away from alcohol. Not only did parents use alcohol stories to teach about peer pressure, but they also used them to explain the repercussions when one drinks alcohol.

Examples - Repercussions of Drinking Alcohol:

Example 1:

My mom used to tell me about different times when her dad would come home drunk. He was an avid drinker in his earlier years and she told me how he would abuse his wife and sometimes kids.

Parents' concern for their children's choices was evident through the stories in which parents talked about the consequences of drinking alcohol. The parents were so concerned about teaching their children the consequences of drinking alcohol that they self-disclosed about major consequences in their own lives.

Example 2:

When I left for college my mama was very very afraid I would party. She thought I would pick up drinking. She told me when she went to nursing

school she would stay by herself on the weekends. She went and bought a bottle of vodka and some orange juice. Every weekend she got smashed (by herself!) She told me how she became an alcoholic. My mother told how her grandfather was an alcoholic. She didn't want me to become one like her or her grandfather before her. My mama told me this so I wouldn't follow her.

The above stories about drinking alcohol were given for the purpose to instruct or discipline children about peer pressure and the consequences of alcohol. However, there were also stories not only illustrating the consequences of alcohol but also demonstrating the importance of telling the truth after getting into trouble for drinking alcohol.

Examples – Telling the Truth:

Example 1:

My father once told me about when he went out partying and came home drunk and smoke covered. My grandpa was waiting for him when my father returned and my grandfather knew what had happened. My grandpa asked my dad if he had been drinking and my dad lied. My grandfather said that because “he trusted his son” he was going to share a few drinks with him. My father was lead [*sic*] to the kitchen where my grandpa pulled out a whole bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses.

The story continued by sharing how the father ended up vomiting and passing out because the grandpa would not allow him to leave until they had finished the whiskey. The next morning after the father was made to clean up his mess and go to his room, the story continued: “Later my grandfather came in and told my father that if he hadn't lied

then my father's punishment would have been 'go to your room and we'll talk in the morning.'" The story clearly showed that lying causes more problems than telling the truth. This is a different way of using alcohol as the main focus because it was instructing and teaching about telling the truth after a wrong behavior. The following is an additional example:

Example 2:

My mom told me about a time that her [*sic*] and her friends were caught drinking at one of her high school football games. Her friends all came up with different stories but she told the truth. They all got in some trouble but she got in less because of her honesty.

The theme of drinking alcohol was the most common theme found within the reported stories, but the goal behind the drinking alcohol narratives was to instruct or discipline about peer pressure, consequences, and lying.

## Driving

The last most common theme found was narratives told to instruct or discipline children about driving. Through the parents' personal experience with driving in dangerous weather, getting a ticket, or being involved in a wreck, they taught their children to be careful when driving. The following are the parental narratives concerning the issue of driving.

Example 1:

My father told me a story about his first hot rod and the trouble that it got him into. He said that he was driving his new 67 Corvette and was

showing off to some girls. He was doing burnouts and other illegal care maneuvers to impress the girls. Before he knew it, he had flashing lights in his rear view mirror. He got charged with wreckless driving and got his license taken away.

This first example speaks to the issue of being dumb and stupid when trying to impress others with a car; whereas, the next example speaks to the issue of speeding.

Example 2:

My dad always lectures me about speeding, and I never realized he had his own story though. When he was 17 he was driving on a curvy road [and] he was going 20 mph over the speed limit. He lost control of the car and hit a telephone pole head on. He hit it with so much force it knocked the engine block back in the car. He broke his nose and from then on he doesn't speed anymore.

The last example when it comes to driving carefully deals with driving in bad weather and taking time to get to the destination no matter what the circumstances.

Example 3:

My mother just moved out to Colorado after graduating from college. She was driving home from work one night, and it was snowing. The snow started earlier that day. She was tired and hungry, so she was in a rush to get home. She was driving down a hill going way to [sic] fast for the conditions and the rear end of the car started to spin. She panicked and slammed on the breaks, which made the car spin faster. She ended up drifting in the other lane of traffic and then drifting all the way into on

coming traffic. A truck barely missed her, but a Honda hit the back side sending her off the road and into a tree. She wasn't wearing a seat belt, but walked away from the crash with a couple of cuts and bruises. She tells me this story every time it starts to snow and I'm leaving to go somewhere. She said no matter the rush, just take your time and be safe.

The past few pages have given examples of the four most common themes found within the eighty surveys: relationships, hard work/disciplined life, substance use, and driving. There were a few more themes that were reported in more than three surveys: academics – six narratives, obedience – five narratives, and money – four narratives. Each story reported by the young adults was unique in the details and events, but the lessons being demonstrated by the parents in their narratives were comparable throughout all eighty surveys, enabling them to be categorized through content analysis into themes.

After the themes were identified, a closer look at the reported narratives showed the coherence and fidelity aspects of Fisher's narrative paradigm. The study answered the second research question by analyzing five well-written narratives using the tool of Labov's six elements of a natural narrative. The researcher chose the five examples based upon the depth of the narrative's detail and if it discussed a topic not already reported in the theme section of the study. As shown in the literature review, researchers use Labov's model as a guide to determine the quality of the narrative, and they look specifically at one of the elements to add support to their claim. This study analyzed the evaluation element in order to determine coherence and fidelity. Coherence and fidelity are important to recognize when considering the narrative's influence, since it is through

coherence that the story fits together and makes sense, and through fidelity that the story can apply to a person's life.

Labov's elements are as follows: 1) abstract, 2) orientation, 3) complicating action, 4) evaluation, 5) result or resolution, 6) coda (Labov 363). The abstract is a short statement that summarizes the narrative and marks the beginning by telling what it is going to be about, and the coda is similar, except it is the statement at the end that concludes the point of the story. According to the model, the abstract and coda are "optional elements of the narrative structure and occur at the boundaries of the narrative" (Klapproth 94). The orientation section of the narrative gives account to who is in the story, when the story took place, and where the story took place. After the orientation element, there is the complicating action, which describes what happened - the core of the narrative. The complicating action is followed by the resolution stage, reporting what finally happened and expressing the final key event. The elements usually follow in the above order except for the evaluation.

The evaluation step is an important element that makes the point or meaning of the story clear. Labov considers the evaluation step as "perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause" (*Language* 366). It answers the "so what?" question and can be found anywhere through the narrative. The "so what?" element would contribute to the coherence and fidelity for the listener. The participant is declaring in the evaluation element what the story meant to him or her or how the story impacted him or her.

This study asked the participants to retell in detail stories their parents had told them about themselves in order to instruct or discipline them. Hence, the participants

were going to be writing their own personal narratives by explaining their parents' narratives. Therefore, within the reported narratives, there are two narratives taking place that can be identified. First, the participants are telling their narratives of when and why they heard their parents' stories. Second, the parental narratives explaining what happened to the parents are found within the participants' narratives. In each of the following narrative examples, Labov's six elements are recognized in the participant's overall narrative and in the parent's narrative embedded in the overall narrative. The two narratives will be referred to as the participant narrative and the parental narrative.

#### Example 1

One day when I was approx[imately] six or seven years old, I was teasing our dog by throwing its toys into the creek near our house. The dog didn't comprehend that there was water in there so he would just dive in and search for the toy. My mom came outside and scolded me, saying the the dog could drown [sic] and then I would feel guilty. After she went inside I continued picking on our pet. She eventually caught me and came outside. Instead of being harsh or scolding me, she started telling me a story. When she was a little younger than I was, she had owned a small metal dollhouse. The roof of the tin house was removable for easy access to play. While my mom was playing outside one day, she took the roof off, placed her pet cat inside, and then put the roof back on. My grandmother called for her after that and she went inside – leaving the metal house and cat in the sun. She remembered two or three hours later.

When she took the roof off, the cat stumbled out, foamed at the mouth, went into seizures, and died. After hearing the story of my mom baking her cat, I was extremely disturbed. I have always taken great care of animals since!

In Example 1 almost all of the six elements are identifiable in both the participant and parental narratives. First in the participant narrative, the abstract is not present as the participant jumps right into the orientation element telling all the introductory information of how old he was, where the story took place and who was involved. The entire orientation element is found within the first three sentences. He was six years old when the incident involving playing with his dog and the correction of his mother took place outside of his house. The core of the participant narrative is the mother's coming out of the house to tell him to stop pestering the dog, his continuing to tease the dog, and then having the parental narrative found within the middle of the story. The result/resolution and coda elements are together in the last two sentences when he states, "After hearing the story of my mom baking her cat, I was extremely disturbed. I have always taken great care of animals since!" Evaluation is the key to all natural narratives and can be seen when he declares, "I have always taken great care of animals since!" The participant is answering the "so what" question and shows coherence and fidelity by basically saying, "All of this happened so that I would learn not to mistreat animals." The story was seen as true and believable to the participant because he stated that it disturbed him, not that he could not believe her or that what she told him could not have happened. And, the story must have had fidelity and rung true in his life, since the story

affected his behavior concerning the treatment of animals. His narrative clearly shows fidelity in that he recognized the connection to his life and changed his behavior.

Second, Labov's six elements are also seen within the parental narrative. "When she was a little younger than I was, she had owned a small metal dollhouse." This statement begins the orientation element and continues to the complicating action element of putting her cat into the house, the grandmother's calling her into the house, and her leaving the cat in the dollhouse for hours. The result element is seen when the mother comes back out to find the cat disabled. The parental narrative did not include an abstract or coda, nor did it explain how the mother evaluated her own situation, instead it went back into the evaluation of the participant narrative, which could have been the evaluation of the parental narrative as well.

#### Example 2

I had told a big lie to my mom, and after I had got caught in my lie, she grounded me (of course) and told me this story of how it's always better to tell the truth and suffer those consequences than to lie because then there will be even larger consequences.

When my mom was a senior in High School, she had always her whole life gotten all A's and B's, and that's always the grades her parents just expected. Well come report card day, my mom got a D in math. Before she brought home the report card, she added a line in the D to make it look like a B. Her mom was excited to see her all A's and B's, but then noticed that under the "comments" section the math teacher wrote

“worked under potential this time” and “can do much better” and “doesn’t complete homework on time.” So she thought how could she receive all these negative comments if the grade is a B?! So she met up with teacher, and soon realized what my mom had done. So my grandma had a talk with my mom about her lie, and told her if she had not lied and been truthful about her “D”, she would have only been grounded for a week. But since she lied and cheated about it, she’s grounded for a month.

Moral of the story: It’s always better to tell the truth.

Example 2 can be primarily looked at as the parental narrative because the only portion that includes the participant narrative is found within the one sentence beginning paragraph. However, the one sentence paragraph can be broken into the orientation, complicating action, result, and evaluation – the participant and her mother were involved, she lied, she was grounded and was told a story, and this all happened so she would learn that it is better to suffer the original consequences than to lie and suffer even more. Or instead of looking at the first sentence’s being the participant’s narrative, it can be viewed as the abstract of the entire reported narrative, participant and parental narratives together, since the first sentence states the overall point of the event. When looking at the parental narrative, one can identify the orientation element through the first sentence of “When my mom was a senior in High School, she had always her whole life gotten all A’s and B’s, and that’s always the grades her parents just expected.” This sets up the complicating action element of when she received a “D” and turned it into a “B.” The result/resolution element begins early on in the narrative with the mom’s noticing the comments, consulting with the teacher, and then punishing the daughter for a month

instead of just a week. The participant ends her entire narrative with the evaluation for her own narrative and the parental narratives by concluding, “Moral of the story: It’s always better to tell the truth.” Again, the evaluation step shows the story’s coherence and fidelity in the young adult’s life. She believed her mom’s story because all of the elements fit together, and the story matched the situation in her own life, reflecting fidelity. She was able to recognize how everything fit together and connected to her, which taught her to tell the truth.

### Example 3

When I was nine years old, my dad decided to sit me down and teach me a lesson. He told me this story of how when he was a three years old, his dad was tragically killed in a car wreck. He grew up with his grandparents and single mom. One day, when he was working on his grandfather’s farm, his grandpa told him to plant some corn. My dad, not listening to the directions – spent hours digging holes, dropping each seed one by one, and then covering the holes up. His grandpa came out a few hours later and asked what was taking so long. His grandpa saw what was going on, called him over, and asked my dad to repeat back the directions. My grandfather told him that he had not listened, and that if he would have listened, he would only have spent minutes spreading and throwing the seed; he didn’t have to plant it. My dad told me that story so that I’d pay attention to instructions.

Once more, in Example 3 the participant narrative's elements are found within the retelling of the parental narrative, and the parental narrative's evaluation element is seen in the participant narrative. The participant gives the abstract and the orientation in the first sentence. His father told him the story to teach him a lesson when he was nine years old. The orientation element for the parental narrative explains why the father was living with his grandparents and working on a farm. The father creates the complicating action element when he spent all day digging holes to plant the corn until the resolution element takes place when the grandfather told him that he had not listened and that he only needed to spread the seed, not plant it. The coda is also the evaluation, which gives evidence that the story had coherence and fidelity. The participant states, "[I should] pay attention to instructions." He knew that his father's story was true because it was believable and demonstrated to him that one should always follow instructions. If the parental narrative had not rung true in the respondent's life, than the respondent would not have recognized the importance of the lesson his dad was teaching him in the evaluation element.

#### Example 4

Let me begin the story by saying that my father, the one instructing and telling me the story, was born and grew up in Columbia. In that country, because the Father works so much, the oldest son essentially becomes a "father" figure for his younger siblings. If he did not do so, and the father found out that he was not watching over his siblings, he was severely punished.

So, knowing that, my dad had expected the same of me. One day I was home watching my brothers while my parents were out. Well, I fell asleep on the couch while watching t.v. [*sic*], and while I did my parents got home. My dad came in, woke me up, and asked me where my brothers were. I was scared to answer, because I had been asleep for two hours and had no clue where they were. My dad was furious. Later we found that they were just outside playing, but that didn't save me from a lecture.

My father told me a story of when he was younger. He also had been at home watching his brother and sister. While he was watching them, one of his friends came over and asked him if he wanted to play basketball. My dad resisted, but then finally gave in. He took my brother and sister with him, and left them in the playground. Well, he lost track of them while playing and about two hours went by. When he finally looked back at the playground for his brother and sister, they were gone. As you could imagine, he was hysterical. He knew that he had messed up big time. He looked everywhere for them, but could not find them. Finally, he ran home to tell his parents. When he got home, he found his brother and sister playing in the living room. He was so glad, up until he found his father waiting for him. His father had picked them up while he was playing to scare him and teach him a lesson. He realized how easily his brother and sister could have gotten abducted.

He told me this story to warn me about what could happen, and also to warn me that there would be repercussions if I did not watch my brothers.

Example 4 is a well-written report because it includes a thorough participant narrative and a thorough parental narrative. The participant first gives needed background information about why the oldest sibling is expected to watch the younger siblings. This information would be considered a part of the abstract element for the both the participant and parental narrative – why it is being told. After giving the background information needed to understand the reason behind the story, the reporter starts by telling his narrative. He gives the orientation element through his description about being at home and watching his brothers when his parents went out. The complicating action occurs at the point where he fell asleep, his parents woke him up hours later, and he did not know where his siblings were. He concludes the participant narrative with the result element, which was: “My dad was furious. Later we found that they were just outside playing, but that didn’t save me from a lecture.” He evaluates his narrative after telling the parental narrative.

The parental narrative starts with an orientation element by stating that his father was young and watching his siblings at their house. A friend came by, asked the father to go play basketball, and the father went to play with his friend, which posed the complicating action element. The father lost track of his siblings while playing basketball which resulted in the resolution element of looking everywhere for the siblings, just to find them back at his house where his own father had taken them to scare him. The participant concludes with the coda/evaluation element by proclaiming, “He

told me this story to warn me about what could happen, and also to warn me that there would be repercussions if I did not watch my brothers.” The final statement answered the “so what” and demonstrated the reason behind the entire narrative. This is another example of the evaluation step demonstrating coherence and fidelity. The story had fidelity with the child because the parent told a narrative describing an experience that was similar to what the child had just experienced. Not only was the story believable with all the elements fitting together (coherence), but it also directly related to the child’s experience and situation (fidelity), allowing the child to be influenced by the parental narrative.

#### Example 5

Well one of the stories that my parents told me to instruct me was told by my mom. She once told me a story about her getting involved with the crowd [*sic*]. You see I had just started to drive and I started to think I could hide my life from my parents. But they some how [*sic*] knew some of the things I was doing. They did not want to come right out and tell me I was wrong because they knew I was in a stage in life w[h]ere I was looking for ways to rebel. So my mom just started talking to me about her younger life. At first I was trying to ignore her but then she started talking about how she got in to this group of concert junkies. This is the group that I was hanging out with so when she said that [,] even though I was still not want[ing] to hear her [,] I was. Then she started talking about how everyone of these “friends” were not really friends at

all. She found this out the hard way though. They never were there when she needed help. They just want to have fun and forget about the [*sic*] life. She told me how these “friends” acted and I realized this was the same group I was hanging out with. So the next time I was with them I watch[ed] how they acted and was able to get out of the group with out [*sic*] getting hurt like my mom had.

Example 5 has the participant narrative and the parental narrative intertwined. The participant includes his thoughts about the parental narrative in the midst of his own narrative. Unlike the previous examples, the abstract element is very clear in this example. He writes, “She once told me a story about her getting involved with the crowd [*sic*].” Before he tells what he had done or what his mom said, he tells the purpose of the narrative in a simple sentence. He orients his audience with the portion that describes his just starting to drive and his parents knowing that he was looking for ways to rebel. The narrative continues with the complicating action of his mother’s talking about her young years and his not wanting to hear about it. When the mother continued to talk, the boy reaches his result/resolution by realizing that what she was saying related to him and he was able to see that his “friends” weren’t really his friends, just like his mother’s experience with her friends. The evaluation element is seen in the narrative when he relates his experience to his mom’s experience and explains what happened when he took his mother’s advice: “So the next time I was with them I watch[ed] how they acted and was able to get out of the group with out [*sic*] getting hurt.” The evaluation statement clearly reveals the narrative’s coherence and fidelity. The participant would not have stated that he acted upon the advice the next time he was

with his friends if he did not believe his mother's story was true. He demonstrates the coherence of her narrative by believing it; and he shows the narrative's fidelity by applying the concepts in his mother's narrative to his own life and personal situation.

The tool of Labov's six elements model of a natural narrative was used to analyze and break apart the reported parental and participant narratives because of the evaluation element, which helps show the narrative's coherence and the fidelity the narrative had to the listener's life. Parental narratives, seen as story-telling, can cause the listener to self-confront by challenging his/her current beliefs, which can be seen in the evaluation element. Just as Kirkwood declares in his research, "Some stories challenge listeners' established beliefs and attitudes, but also evoke in them certain feelings and states of awareness significant in their own right as the ends..." (59). The story would not evoke the feelings demonstrated in the evaluation element if the story did not have the ingredients of a good narrative, which are coherence and fidelity.

Narratives have been researched and shown as influential in an array of studies, but this study is looking at why they are powerful in a parent/child relationship. The parental narrative would just be only another story told to a child if the participant did not recognize fidelity in the narrative and evaluate the "so what" question to why the parent was disclosing a story about his or her past experience. With many of the participants' clearly writing evaluation elements, the surveys showed good cause that the children were making connections in their own lives with the stories parents told and understood why their parent had told them the stories. As a way of demonstration along with the ones given in the examples above, here are more evaluation element phrases found in the

reported narratives that give good reason to believe the narratives had fidelity and influence:

- The overall moral of the story was, while it seems like the end of the world, it really isn't.
- So she told me don't compound your problems or issues. Confront them from the beginning.
- The main theme of what they were trying to instill in me was being grateful, in a sense discipline and instruction.
- He is always telling me that I need to be patient, save my money and then get it. PARENTS (sigh).
- This story always reminded me never to take anything for granted.
- My dad told me this story to encourage me not to go to a college just for football, but to academics, and above all, God's will first.
- The point was to tell me to work hard even though I didn't really like my earth science teacher.
- Moral don't drink and a good run is better than a bad fall.
- Another point my mom was trying to make was not to start drinking because it's easy to become an alcoholic.
- Their point? If you get married young and poor you are going to struggle.
- Don't speed if you don't have enough money to pay the ticket.
- My mom told me this to get me to obey her.

- Telling me this, my mom did not want to see me do something that would hurt or possibly cost someone's life.

These examples reveal that the parental narratives did instruct and discipline the children to know what to do or not to do because the elements of the narratives were coherent and connected to their life.

Example 5 is given last because it clearly shows how the child's cognition was changing as the parent started telling a personal narrative. The boy stated that he did not want to listen to his mother, but he found himself listening after she made a point of connection. "At first I was trying to ignore her but then she started talking about how she got in to this group of concert junkies." Even though he did not use the words "cognitive dissonance" to express what he was feeling, one can point to the indication that he was experiencing cognitive dissonance because his first thoughts about his experience started to clash with the information his mother was giving him. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, dissonance will be created if two thoughts or actions clash (Festinger 2-3). He first tried to ignore what she was saying by not listening to her, but then as more information was given, he realized that she was correct and that he needed to change his behavior in order to relieve the dissonance that was created by the current behavior clashing with the mother's experience and information.

Research Question 2 asked, What do young adults self-report about the impact of the parental narrative on their cognitive dissonance? The question was tested by asking the participants to respond to four Likert scale questions. The results are shown in the Table 3 and explained in the following paragraphs.

Table 3 – Answer Percentages of Likert Scale Questions

<b>Question:</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
When my parents told me the above story/experience, it made me feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts on the issue.	6%	44%	17%	26%	7%
	Instruction 2%	Instruction 36%	Instruction 23%	Instruction 29%	Instruction 10%
	Discipline 13%	Discipline 56%	Discipline 6%	Discipline 22%	Discipline 3%
After hearing the story I thought about it and changed my thinking/behavior.	20%	51%	14%	13%	2%
After hearing the story I defended and rationalized my thinking/behavior and dismissed what they said.	0%	6%	14%	55%	25%
After hearing the story I looked for more information that supported my thinking/behavior.	1%	20%	21%	44%	14%

The first Likert scale question asked the respondents to report “strongly agree”, “agree”, “undecided”, “disagree”, or “strongly disagree” to the question “When my parents told me the above story/experience, it made me feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts on the issue?” Fifty percent (50%) of the respondents marked either “strongly agree” or “agree” to having felt uncomfortable about their behavior or thoughts when their parents told them the reported story, as opposed to thirty-three percent (33%) who

marked “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to the same question. This left seventeen percent (17%) responding “undecided” about feeling uncomfortable.

Just to see if there was a difference, the researcher divided the narratives into stories told for the purpose of instruction and those told for the purpose of discipline to compare the responses to the question. Looking at the responses to the thirty-two surveys reporting stories told for the purpose of discipline, sixty-nine percent (69%) marked “agree” or “strongly agree” as compared to twenty-five percent (25%) marking “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with six percent (6%) undecided. These percentages were positively much higher than the overall percentage of the narratives told for the purpose of instruction. Out of the forty-eight surveys reporting instruction narratives, thirty-eight percent (38%) reported “agree” or “strongly agree,” twenty-three percent (23%) reported “undecided”, and thirty-nine percent (39%) reported “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” The stronger positive response to the cognitive dissonance question among the narratives told for purpose of discipline would be understandable, since there may be a stronger dissonance created after having participated in an action than just thinking about or believing in an action. The strength of the dissonance could be attributed to post-decisional versus pre-decisional dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is primarily self-reported unless there can be observation of subsequent behaviors. Since the researcher was not present at the time the parental narratives were told, this study is only analyzing participants’ self-reports about their feelings after hearing the story and then their subsequent action. The theory of cognitive dissonance states that the clashing of thoughts or actions produces a mental discomfort labeled “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 2-3). Since the researcher decided that young

adults would not know what “cognitive dissonance” meant, she decided to use the phrase “feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts on the issue” to assess the cognitive dissonance. There are limitations with the wording of the question, but due to the responses given to the three following questions about the ways dissonance can be relieved, it is reasonable to say that the participants were possibly assessing their cognitive dissonance when answering the question about feeling uncomfortable about their thinking or behavior.

The next three questions on the survey were worded to test what the participant did with the cognitive dissonance or the “uncomfortable feeling” if it was present. Since the theory of cognitive dissonance states that a human being will resolve dissonance if it is present by changing a cognition or behavior, rationalizing the cognition or behavior, or by seeking new information (Festinger 3-6), the respondents who marked that they did feel uncomfortable should have marked “agree” to at least one of the three statements. And if they had not felt any uncomfortable feelings, then they probably would not have felt the need to rid the feeling with one of the above options. Therefore, if a respondent marked “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to the question about the story’s making them feel uncomfortable and then marked an affirming answer to one of the resulting forms of action, consideration would need to be given to what caused the action to take place if the story did not create the discomfort/cognitive dissonance. This was the case with seventy percent (70%) of the respondents. Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents who had marked “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to the question concerning the creation of cognitive dissonance marked “agree” or “strongly agree” to one or more of the action statements given after the first question. Whether the young adult identified the cognitive

process that took place, the parental narrative did influence their behaviors, and it had to have created a desire to change, rationalize, or seek new information through some cognition process, and it may have been because of cognitive dissonance.

The first action option to show the influence of the parental narrative read, “After hearing the story I thought about it and changed my behavior.” This question had an overwhelming positive response with seventy-one percent (71%) of the respondents marking “strongly agree” or “agree” to having changed their behavior after hearing the narrative. Only fifteen percent (15%) said that they did not change their behavior and fourteen percent (14%) were “undecided.”

The believability of the responses was shown from the results to the third Likert scale question. The third question stated, “After hearing the story I defended and rationalized my thinking/behavior and dismissed what they said.” Even though this is one way to relieve cognitive dissonance, it is in contrast to relieving it by changing thinking or behavior. Therefore, the results showed legitimacy by having an overwhelming negative response to this question in comparison with the positive response to the one before. Eighty percent (80%) reported “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to dismissing what their parents had told them. Fourteen percent (14%) were “undecided,” and six percent (6%) marked “agree.” The power of parental narratives to help produce change is shown through self-reports.

The last question posed the option of seeking out new information by asking the respondents, “After hearing the story I looked for more information that supported my thinking/behavior.” Fifty-seven percent (57%) marked “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” twenty-two percent (22%) were “undecided,” and twenty-one percent (21%) reported

“agree.” This provided evidence to the researcher that the respondents did carefully mark the survey questions and did not just guess at the response. Because the response to the changing behavior question was positive, the last two questions should have been and were negative responses, since rationalizing behavior and seeking new information are not changing behavior.

Overall the Likert scale questions did answer Research Question 2 by showing that after hearing a parental narrative, cognitive dissonance was reported to have been felt by half of the respondents. The majority of the participants responded to the cognitive dissonance by relieving it through changing their thinking and or behavior, and there were a few who relieved it by dismissing what their parents had said or by seeking more information. Regardless of the way they handled the cognitive dissonance, this study has shown through the self-reporting of young adults that parental narratives do influence children, and this influence could be the result of cognitive dissonance being created in the children at the time of hearing the stories. So, regardless of the narrative theme, whether it is drinking alcohol, relationships, driving carefully, or working hard, parental narratives are remembered by young adults and have an influence on thinking and behavior.

Therefore, this study has furthered the field of communication by expanding the theories of the narrative paradigm and cognitive dissonance, relating the influence of narratives to cognitive dissonance, and by enhancing the field of family communication as parents can use these examples to start instructing and disciplining their children in a non-abrasive form that produces positive results. Parents should never hesitate to

recognize the power behind beginning a conversation with their children that begins with  
“When I was your age.”

## Chapter V: Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Throughout the current study many limitations were recognized, mainly due to the wording of questions in the survey or the fact that cognitive dissonance cannot be firmly established in this study, but inferred by the investigator from self reports. The first question on the survey stated, “Please retell, in detail, a story your parents told you about themselves in order to instruct or discipline you.” The wording implies that the respondent should just tell the story the parent told him or her, not the event surrounding the storytelling. Many of the respondents did tell the whole event surrounding the parents’ narratives about themselves to instruct or discipline the children, which proved to be of great value when evaluating the purpose of the story; however, the question would have been of greater use if it had been worded differently, asking the participant to “describe a situation where your parents told you a story about themselves in order to instruct or discipline you, including retelling that story in detail.” The rewording would lead the respondent to describe when and why the parent told the story, instead of just what the story was about, which would also help in the division between stories told for discipline purposes versus stories told for instructional purposes.

The last question should have also been re-worded to state, “After hearing the story I looked for more information that supported my thinking/behavior present before hearing the story.” Adding the phrase “present before hearing the story” in regards to the thinking/behavior would have clarified that the participant sought more information concerning the subject after hearing the story and before deciding to change or rationalize

the thinking or behavior, instead of possibly looking for more information that supported the new way of thinking or behaving. The correction would result in a more accurate response to how the respondents acted upon the cognitive dissonance.

Participants' understanding of the meaning of the words used in the questions was another limitation within this study. When asked the purpose of the parents' stories being told, the participants should have been given the definition of "discipline" and "instruction" that the study was going to use. "Discipline" can mean self-control or punishment. The participants may have viewed the word "discipline" as punishment involving a consequence to a behavior, instead of recognizing the stories as a way to "discipline," meaning to stop a current thinking process or behavior and guide them to correct thinking and behavior. Another example of a word that was probably misinterpreted was the word "uncomfortable" in the question that stated if they felt uncomfortable about their behavior or thinking after hearing the reported story. "Uncomfortable" could have been interpreted to mean physically uncomfortable when participating in the behavior instead of mentally uncomfortable when the information challenged the current thinking or behavior, which is what the question was trying to ask. Clarification of these meanings could have been done by adding a brief definition of each word under the questions or by adding one or two adjectives stating "mentally or emotionally uncomfortable."

The study was limited by relying on the retelling of the parental narrative instead of having the actual parental narrative. To analyze fully the influence of a natural parental narrative, a researcher would need to observe the context in which the narrative was told. Many factors would play into the child's response to the narrative, such as,

which parent told the narrative, what the relationship was like between the parent and child, how often that parent told his or her own narratives, when the narrative was told in relation to the behavior that needed to be corrected, and even the paralanguage and other nonverbal messages attached to the verbal narrative. Each of these areas could be observed and researched. However, if a lab setting was created to analyze these factors, it would also be limited by the participants' knowledge that they were being observed, instead of demonstrating "real-life." Researchers could set up cameras in people's homes hoping to capture some parental narratives, and perhaps the family would forget that the cameras are there.

If the researcher wanted to rely on written narratives, a good way to determine the effectiveness of a particular narrative would be to have the child respond directly to the specific narrative reported by the parent. This way, the narrative could be analyzed according to the parent's own wording and not the retelling by the child, and the response of the child could be analyzed in relation to the specific narrative. Therefore, the parent would write a story about himself or herself dealing with an issue he or she would know his or her child is experiencing. The child would respond to a questionnaire referring to his or her current behavior, upon completion of the survey would read the narrative the parent had written, and then re-take the survey. This would be a better way to test cognitive dissonance, since cognitive dissonance is tested with pre- and post-surveys. However, that type of study would require identification and matching of a parent and teen surveys, which has the potential to cause some conflict between the parent and the teen and hinder the openness and honesty of the responses. The collection process for this type of study would be intricate and detailed, but the outcome would be of value as

the research would further the current study by digging deeper to influence development of theories, field of family communication, and practical profession of child-rearing.

Several other communication theories can affect parental narratives' influence on cognitive dissonance in children and could be studied in the future. Self-disclosure theory may be a factor. As parents share more about themselves it is likely that the self-disclosure would promote self-disclosure on the child's part, possibly resulting in a closer relationship between parent and child. Even though there are risks to self-disclosure, disclosure is a vital part of any relationship as the sharing of information builds trust and relationship bonds between two people. When parents tell their children their own personal stories, they are demonstrating that they trust their children and are willing to share personal information and emotions with their children; therefore, the relationship between parents and children could increase. Hence, a future study could consider the increase or decrease in the closeness of a parent/child relationship due to the amount of personal narratives the parent shares with the child.

Expectancy theories could also be another theoretical approach if the child was not expecting his or her parent to have participated in a behavior that the parent ended up reporting. The expectancy violation might cause cognitive dissonance within the child and have an impact on his or her behavior in some form. Therefore, a study could be completed that questions the child's expectations for his or her parent before and after the parent self-discloses about a particular behavior.

Theories dealing with different parenting styles could also be taken into consideration when studying parental narratives. A good research question would be what type of parenting style would involve more parental narratives: authoritarian,

authoritative, or lassie-faire. Each parenting style has been researched in other areas, so it would be of some value to the family communication field by showing which type tells more parental narratives and how the parental narrative influences the child's behavior.

Parental narratives can be tied to various theories dealing with interpersonal relationships and family communication, but the narratives would also need to be studied in relation to the communication context of the family communication. More studies could look directly at how the culture of a family influences the amount of parental narratives told to children. Perhaps parents in different religious or ethnic cultures tell more or fewer personal stories to their children in order to instruct or discipline them. A study could be conducted by having participants of different religious and ethnic backgrounds complete a questionnaire concerning the frequency of parental narratives being told, as well as, the effects the stories had on the children written along the same lines as the present study.

Elements that should also be focused on more when dealing with parental narratives and cognitive dissonance are areas concerning who told the narrative, how often that parent tells stories about themselves, how strong is the child's position on his or her thinking and behavior before the parental narrative is told, and the genders of the parents and the children. Each of these elements would influence the amount of cognitive dissonance created in a child when hearing a parental narrative. If the child is used to hearing stories from a parent, the child is perhaps more likely to dismiss what the parent is telling him or her because he or she would have the attitude of "I've heard all that before" and cognitive dissonance would not be created as strongly. However, if a parent rarely tells his or her child personal stories, then maybe that child would

experience more cognitive dissonance because it is a new way of instruction or discipline for him/her. The genders of the parent and the child may also affect the cognitive dissonance due differences in male and female communication. Hence, individual studies could choose to focus on one of the issues for further study into the influence of parental narratives on cognitive dissonance.

Regardless of the avenue in communication studies, parental narratives and cognitive dissonance should be researched more. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, creating dissonance is a powerful tool to influence a behavior or thinking change. Based on the narrative paradigm, one purpose of telling stories is that it produces good logic and helps a person form his or her identity by challenging beliefs. Narratives are most influential when they have coherence and fidelity.

This study has researched three questions: What are the common themes in parental narratives that young adults remember in relation to instruction or discipline? How does the narrative structure demonstrate narrative coherence and fidelity? What do young adults self-report about the impact of the parental narrative on their cognitive dissonance? The questions were researched through analyzing eighty surveys asking young adult participants to retell in detail a story their parents told them about themselves in order to instruct or discipline them and by asking if the narrative created mental discomfort and how they dealt with the discomfort.

The study determined common themes dealing with drinking alcohol, relationships, working hard/have a disciplined life, driving carefully, obedience, discipline methods, and facing consequences, with less frequently mentioned themes concerning issues with false accusations, being kind to animals, communicating properly,

use of drugs, not complaining, treatment of siblings, and money management. The reported narratives were analyzed through the use of William Labov's six elements of a narrative, and the evaluation element was used to demonstrate the parental narrative's fidelity and coherence. Over half of the participants reported feeling uncomfortable when hearing the story with seventy-one percent (71%) reporting that they changed their thinking or behavior after hearing the parental narrative. Therefore, the study of narratives' being used to stimulate cognitive dissonance in order to produce a behavior or thinking change has been shown as an important study and can be studied and researched further in the communication realm as parents utilize their own experiences to instruct and discipline their children with the power of "when I was your age."

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Appendix A – Preliminary Study 1, Survey

**Parental Narratives Survey**

A narrative or story is a written or oral composition that reveals and describes someone's experiences.

Male\_\_\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Growing up, I had a good relationship with my parents.

- Strongly Disagree\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree\_\_\_\_\_ Neutral\_\_\_\_\_ Agree\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree\_\_\_\_\_

My parents told me their own personal stories to instruct or discipline me. (ex. When I was your age...)

- Never\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes\_\_\_\_\_ Usually\_\_\_\_\_ Always\_\_\_\_\_

Describe, in detail, a narrative/story that you remember your parents using to instruct or discipline you:

What type of impact did your parents' personal stories have on you?

Appendix B – Preliminary Study 2, Focus Group Outline

**Focus Group Outline**

- I. Introductions of participants
- II. Orientate audience to subject of parental narratives
- III. Lead Discussion
  - A. Describe stories that your parents told you about themselves.
  - B. How did you respond to those stories when you first heard them and how do you respond to them now?
  - C. Why did or did not you appreciate the stories?
  - D. Did the stories help you feel more uncomfortable about your behavior or more comfortable and why?
  - E. How did the stories impact your behavior then and now?

## Appendix C – Pilot Study Survey

## Survey

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**How often did your parents tell you stories about their own personal experiences to discipline you?** \_\_\_Always \_\_\_Often \_\_\_Sometimes \_\_\_Seldom \_\_\_Never

**Please retell, in detail, a story your parents told you about themselves in order to discipline you:**

**When my parents told me the above story/experience to discipline me, it made me feel uncomfortable about my behavior.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing their story I thought about it and changed my behavior.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing their story I defended and rationalized my experience/behavior and dismissed what they said.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing their story I looked for more information that supported my position/behavior.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

## Appendix D – Current Study Survey

**Survey**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please retell, in detail, a story your parents told you about themselves in order to instruct or discipline you:****The above story was told for the purpose of (please circle one):** Instruction      Discipline**When my parents told me the above story/experience to discipline me, it made me feel uncomfortable about my behavior or thoughts on the issue.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing the story I thought about it and changed my thinking/behavior.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing the story I defended and rationalized my thinking/behavior and dismissed what they said.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**After hearing the story I looked for more information that supported my thinking/behavior.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Undecided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree