

Teens tell different tales about themselves depending on gender

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During adolescence, the stories young people tell about themselves reflects their development of a personal identity and sense of self, and those autobiographical narratives vary depending on the teens' gender, according to a University of Missouri psychologist and her colleagues. Parents can use this knowledge of how teens talk about themselves to help understand the tumultuous transitions of their children into adults.

"Autobiographical stories tell us details about adolescent psychology that [questionnaires](#) and observations of behavior cannot," said Jennifer Bohanek, assistant professor of [psychological sciences](#) in the College of Arts and Science. "Narratives provide information about how adolescents interpret memories as well as how they come to know themselves. Other people then come to know the teens by the stories they tell about themselves. The differences between [study participants'](#) stories suggest there may be differences in the way male and female teens understand themselves and present themselves to the world."

Bohanek and her colleagues found that females tended to tell longer, more coherent stories. Females' stories were also generally more detailed and contained more descriptions of their own internal emotional states. Males' stories tended to be more matter-of-fact and showed less self-reflection. These differences were consistent in both positive and negative stories. The researchers suggested that the [gender differences](#) may indicate females have a greater inclination to reflect on past experiences and use their memories to give personal meaning to past events.

To conduct her study, Bohanek and her colleagues asked 65 adolescents between 13 and 16 years of age to narrate two positive and two negative stories. The teens came from racially and economically diverse backgrounds. The study was conducted in the teens' homes by one or two female research assistants. The teens' stories were then analyzed for [coherence](#), theme, narrative development and self-reflection.

"Our study filled an important gap in the research on autobiographical narratives," said Bohanek. "Previous studies looked at gender differences in children's and adults' storytelling. Other research has found there are differences in the ways parents tell stories to male and female children as well as differences in how emotional content was explained. Other studies found that families talked about past events every five minutes on average, so reflecting on the past seems to have an important influence on family relationships. Our study suggests that these interactions may affect [adolescents](#) as they develop their own definition of themselves."

More information: The study, "Gender Differences in Adolescents' Autobiographical Narratives," was published in the *Journal of Cognition and Development*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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