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# Narrative Skills Predict Peer Adjustment across Elementary School Years

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Narrative Skills Predict Peer Adjustment across Elementary School Years

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### **Abstract**

The importance of peer adjustment in middle childhood coincides with developing social cognitive and discursive skills that include the ability to make personal narrative accounts. Authoring personal stories promotes attention to the sequence of events, the causal connections between events, the moral significance of what has happened, and the motives that drive human action: these skills may be critical for the establishment and maintenance of satisfying peer relationships during elementary school. The present study extended previous research by considering whether narrative skills in written stories about peer interactions predicted peer adjustment. As part of an ongoing longitudinal study, 92 children wrote narratives about peer experiences and completed surveys on measures of peer adjustment for two school years. Cross-lagged panel models indicated that chronological and thematic coherence and reports of moral concerns in narratives in the first year of the study contributed to lower peer disliking in the subsequent academic year. Reports of motives in Year 1 narratives contributed to lower levels of loneliness and peer victimization in Year 2. Writing personal narratives that are coherent and attentive to moral concerns and motives may be especially beneficial for children who have difficulty connecting with peers. We discuss implications for classroom practices.

*Keywords:* narrative, peer adjustment, middle childhood

### Narrative Skills Predict Peer Adjustment across Elementary School Years

Two notable developments mark a transition from early to middle childhood. The first is an increase in the time children spend with peers and a corresponding increase in the role of peer relationships in well-being (Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953; Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015). The second development is a less-often recognized increase in the discursive and narrative skills that allow children to make coherent accounts of their own experiences (Reese, Haden, Baker-Ward, Bauer, Fivush, & Ornstein, 2011). We argue in this paper that these two developments are importantly linked. We present a conceptual model, grounded in Bruner's theory of the role of narrative in the transmission of culture, that shows why the growing ability to make narrative accounts of one's own experience may facilitate social relationships in the elementary school years. This ability may be especially important for children who are experiencing difficulty in establishing satisfying peer relationships.

#### **Peer Adjustment in Elementary School**

Research over the past four decades has made clear that a key development during middle childhood is social competence with age-mates, which includes acceptance from, positive interactions with, and feelings of connection to peers (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rubin et al., 2015). As children enter school, peer adjustment plays an important role in social and cognitive development (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Patee, 1993). Peers provide children with companionship, support, a sense of belonging, respect, and evaluative feedback regarding their social and academic behaviors that is unique from that provided by adults (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Kuryluk, Cohen, R., & Audley-Piotrowski, 2011; Gest, Rulison, Davidson, & Welsh, 2008). It is no wonder that the establishment of positive peer relations is important for

elementary school children's well-being or that it is related to the development of social cognitive skills (Rubin et al., 2015).

Previous research suggests three critical markers of peer adjustment problems in elementary school: disliking by peers, victimization by peers, and a sense of loneliness. First, many factors appear to influence the failure of some children to find acceptance among peers. Research has shown that peer disliking is associated with a host of negative behavioral antecedents such as deficits in social information processing and inappropriate social approaches to peers, and aggressive behavior (Bierman, 2004; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1983). Disliking is linked to perceptions of loneliness, to self-, peer-, and teacher assessments of being left out or excluded by others, and to declining classroom participation and school avoidance (Betts & Stiller, 2014; Bierman, 2004; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Serdiouk, Rodkin, Madill, Logis, & Gest, 2015); thus, the impact of peer disliking is far reaching.

Second, children who are not successful in establishing positive ties with peers, and especially those children who are disliked by their classmates, are at risk for peer victimization (Bierman, 2004; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald-Brown, 2010; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; DeRosier & Thomas, 2003; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005; Sentse, Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015). Peer victimization refers to the experience of being a target of aggression by age-mates, and it includes being picked on, teased, or actively excluded (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Lopez & Dubois, 2005). This is a substantial problem for many school-aged children and in recent years it has gathered much attention from developmental researchers (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2003; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Salmivalli, 2010). In a meta-analytic review of predictors of bullying and victimization in research spanning 40 years, victimization was associated with a wide range of negative cognitive and social indicators, including

internalizing symptoms, externalizing behavior, poor social skills and social problem-solving abilities, and negative self-related cognitions (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Furthermore, victims were more likely to experience negative familial, school and community environments and they were conspicuously rejected and isolated by peers. Peer disliking may increase children's vulnerability to victimization because disliked children are more likely to be alone and, thus, become available and salient as targets for aggressors, and because they are less likely to have other peers directly intervening on their behalf or expressing disapproval of the victimization (Hodges et al., 1997; Hodges & Perry, 1999). Given previous findings of bidirectional associations between peer disliking and victimization over time (Sentse et al., 2015), it may also be the case that victimization increases peer disliking because children may not want to associate with their peers who are victimized and of lower social status. Peer disliking and victimization are clearly related problems that threaten children's adjustment and well-being during middle childhood.

Finally, a related, yet distinct feature of adjustment with peers is children's personal feelings of isolation and loneliness (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011; Parker & Asher, 1993; Zhang et al., 2014). Loneliness is a subjective experience that is related in complex ways to children's developing social cognitive skills, and to how children interpret their place within the peer context. Loneliness has been shown to be distressingly stable for some children during middle childhood (Renshaw & Brown, 1993), yet recent trajectory studies indicate that the pattern of loneliness over time is not uniform nor is it always linear (Harris, Qualter, & Robinson, 2013). In one such study, Jobe-Shields et al. (2011) identified three groups of children using a latent profile analysis: those who increased, decreased, or remained stable (and low) in their self reported loneliness between 3rd and 5th grades.

Membership in these groups was related to a number of other peer adjustment variables.

Children who increased in loneliness in subsequent years, relative to those with low or decreasing loneliness, had fewer mutual friends, higher withdrawal, and greater victimization.

This is consistent with research showing complex and fluctuating associations between loneliness and other assessments of peer adjustment (Harris et al., 2013; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Schinka, van Dulmen, Mata, Bossarte, Swahn, 2013; Weeks & Asher, 2012). Collectively, these studies suggest that most children experience a low and stable pattern of loneliness over time, but a concerning developmental trajectory of loneliness (chronically high or increasing) experienced by a minority of students is predicted by earlier and relatively poor social cognitive skills.

Children who experience chronically high or increasing loneliness across middle childhood and adolescence also tend to exhibit worse social, emotional, physical and cognitive outcomes compared with children who experience low or moderate and stable or decreasing loneliness.

These three indicators of peer adjustment problems triangulate to provide evidence based on peer attitudes (disliking), peer behaviors (victimization), and the target child's affective responses (loneliness). Problems in these areas are related to the development of such social cognitive skills as the ability to assess others' motives and to the ability to make moral judgments about peer conflict (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Crick & Dodge, 1994, Schonert-Reichl, 1999). Theoretical and empirical work on the development of narrative skills during the elementary school years suggests that the growing ability to make narrative accounts is closely related to these developing social cognitive and moral skills (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011; Ochs & Capps, 2001). We explore, in this work, the nature of this relationship.

## **The Development of Narrative Skills: Coherence, Moral Evaluation, and Recognizing Motives**

Bruner (1990) provided a strong theoretical foundation for the argument that the development of narrative skills promotes peer adjustment. He argued convincingly that it is narrative thinking and story-sharing cultural practices that bring humans to an understanding of self and other and the cultural contexts that govern interactions between people. When they create narrative accounts of their own experiences, children focus their attention on the sequence of events, the causal connections between those events, and the moral significance of what has happened (Davidson, Walton, & Cohen, 2013; Harris & Walton, 2009; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Walton & Brewer, 2001). Creating personal narrative accounts also promotes attention to the motives that drive human action in various contexts (Bamberg, 1997; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003; Ziegler, Mitchell & Currie, 2005), and this attention may be critical to the management of peer relations (Cooney & Selman, 1978; Selman, 1981). In the upper elementary school grades, when the development of writing skills is an important aspect of children's literacy and academic performance, children's ability to write a coherent narrative in which they attribute motives to self and other and assess the moral significance of the events they recount may also be linked to their objective and subjective adjustment among peers.

At minimum, a well-formed story must communicate what happened. This may seem to be a simple and straightforward criterion but it requires two fairly sophisticated cognitive and cultural competencies, both of which require substantial perspective-taking and understanding of context. Bruner (1990) argued that stories are occasioned by a report-worthy event. The "what happened" that constitutes a string of text or discourse as a story must be something culturally unexpected. Something in need of explanation provokes a narrative account. The establishment

of the report-worthiness of an event requires an author to provide the reader with a context – a background time and place from which the noteworthy events of the story will stand out. With the establishment of context, the story-maker must recount the events of the story in a sequential order that will allow the listener to recognize causal links between events. The sequential recounting of the events that make a story, presented with relevant detail about the setting constitutes what Bruner (1990) called the landscape of action.

Bruner proposed that sophisticated narratives include a second landscape, the landscape of consciousness. Skillful narrators report about the motives and goals that fuel the behavior of the story's protagonists. Narrators, attentive to a landscape of consciousness, will make evaluative judgments about the felicity of the outcomes and about the blame or praiseworthiness of protagonists in the story. The recognition, achieved in the elementary school years, that intentionality is key to the assessment of blame and praiseworthiness, comes in the context of storytelling and account-making (Dray, Selman, & Schulz, 2009; Walton, 1985). Motives are ascribed to actors as people share stories. As children develop through middle childhood, they will make inferences or suggest interpretations about the meaning or significance of the events they recount in their own stories about their own experiences (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005).

Reese et al. (2011) developed a method for assessing coherence in narratives based on a multidimensional model that attends to chronology, context, and theme. The presentation of a clear chronology of events, and the establishment of the relevant context in which these events make sense correspond to Bruner's landscape of action. The thematic dimension in the Reese et al. model assesses the author's evaluative and interpretive work that Bruner called the landscape of consciousness. Two important constituents of the thematic component of narrative coherence

are (a) the expression of moral concerns, or the evaluation of story characters and (b) events and the ascribing of motives to self and other. In middle childhood, attention to the motives of self and others and to the moral significance of story events in written accounts of peer conflict may signal social-cognitive skills that are especially critical to the ability to find a place in the peer network.

### **The Relevance of Narrative Development for Peer Adjustment**

The features of narrative described above are plausibly related to the social and cognitive skills that facilitate peer adjustment for some children and leave others disliked, victimized, and lonely. Members of a classroom community need to be able to recognize relevant features of the context and to order events in ways that facilitate causal analysis if they are to resolve disputes and bring their own behavior into alignment with the expectations of the social setting. The ability to recognize own and others' motives and to understand the relevance of those motives to the interpretation and the moral evaluation of behaviors and events is essential for managing conflicts and for coordinating one's own behavior with those of peers.

Previous research on children's developing ability to create clear and compelling narratives of their own experience has shown that narratives enable children to process emotionally challenging events, solve problems, become part of their cultural communities, and construct a personal identity as a moral agent (Engel, 1995; Fivush, Hazzard, Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Morris, Baker-Ward, & Bauer, 2010). Preschool children's elaborations in personal narratives co-constructed with mothers were uniquely associated with their social competence in a study by Song and Wang (2013). Narrative skill has been associated with such adaptive outcomes as understanding of others, socio-emotional competence, and the developing sense of self (Bauer, 2007; Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush, Bohanek, Marin, & Duke, 2010;

McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Although this evidence suggests that narrative development should be associated with positive peer adjustment, most of this research has focused on pre-school children and on oral narratives.

Work with written narratives has included many experimental intervention studies assessing the effectiveness of an expressive writing paradigm developed by Pennebaker and colleagues and implemented primarily with college students. This research shows that writing about difficult or traumatic experience leads to a variety of beneficial outcomes for physical, emotional, social, and academic wellbeing (reviewed in Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009). A meta-analysis of 21 experimental studies of interventions in which youth ages 10 - 18 were asked to write about difficult or troubling situations found modest positive effects for narrative writing interventions, with the 10 – 13-year-olds not different from the older teens (Travagin, Margola, & Revenson, 2015).

Only two previous studies have examined the relationship between narrative skills and peer adjustment. Children's ability to understand and negotiate intergroup and interpersonal relationships was related to coherence, form, and psychological sophistication of their fictional narratives in a study by Dray, Selman, and Schultz (2009). In a previous study we conducted (Davidson et al., 2013), a profile analysis of children's conflict management styles found that the children who showed the most positive peer adjustment were those who had a reputation for pro-social behavior and who demonstrated strong narrative skills. These two recent studies suggest that there is indeed a link between narrative skills and peer adjustment. We have presented above, the mechanisms by which narrative skill might protect children from disliking, victimization, and loneliness. It is also possible that these peer adjustment problems might limit children's opportunity to develop the narrative skills we have enumerated above. In the present

study we investigated these possibilities by examining the cross-lagged effects of contextual, chronological, and thematic coherence, reported motives, and moral concerns in children's written narratives about personal experiences with peer conflict on peer adjustment in the form of disliking, victimization, and loneliness across two school years.

### **The Present Study**

The present study examined whether narrative coherence, motives, and moral concerns in stories about peer conflict predicted peer adjustment, as measured by commonly used self-report and peer nomination questionnaires, across two elementary school years, controlling for previous levels of peer adjustment in cross-lagged panel models. Narrative theory and the research reviewed above led us to predict that the more coherent children's narratives were in year 1 the less they would experience peer disliking, victimization, and loneliness in year 2. In addition, we expected two specific qualities of narrative accounting, reports of motives and moral concerns to predict higher levels of peer adjustment across school years.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Ninety-two children attending a university-affiliated public school in Tennessee in 2009-10 and 2010-2011 participated in the present study. The school is highly research-focused, and parents consented at enrollment to allow their children to participate in a wide range of studies. We used data from two years of an ongoing longitudinal study (Comprehensive Analysis of Children's Peer Relations, see MacDonald, & Cohen, 1995), and we were able to add the collection of narratives to the measures that are assessed each year. In accordance with IRB approved procedures, information about the study was mailed to parents of all 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> graders in 2009 and six parents of 204 potential participants declined to allow their child to participate. For

the present study, a total of 100 3<sup>rd</sup> (53) and 4<sup>th</sup> (47) graders participated in the study in year 1 (In the second year of the study, 6<sup>th</sup> grade was moved to a middle school, thus, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders from Year 1 no longer attended the school). Eight of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade children in Year 1 did not return to the school for the 2010-2011 academic year. The school served predominantly middle-class children (less than 20% eligible for free or reduced lunches), from mostly non-Hispanic white (63.6%) and African American (26.8%) families. Classes were divided approximately equally by gender (47 female, 51%).

### **Procedure**

On two occasions in November of each school year, children participating in the Comprehensive Analysis of Children's Peer Relations longitudinal study gathered in the school library where they completed self-report and peer nomination surveys. At the beginning of each data collection session, children were informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and about their right to refuse or discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. A peer nomination procedure was based on the Revised Class Play Method, developed by Masten, Morrison, and Pelligrinni (1985). We gave children classroom rosters and asked them to circle the names of classmates who could be cast for particular roles in a play. We allowed unlimited nominations for each role, and standardized the sum of behavior nominations received by each child to control for differences in class sizes. Peer nomination data were available for all 92 participants. Two participants did not complete the self-report data in Year 1 and 10 participants had missing self-report data in Year 2.

In January, February, and March of the first school year, children were invited to write for half an hour in response to three prompts (one story each time): a story about "*a conflict with a classmate that really happened to you,*" "*something that happened on the playground,*" and "*a*

*time when a friend did not act like a friend.*” Four children were absent or declined to write all three prompts. In March of the second school year, children again wrote in response to the conflict prompt, with 23 children absent or declining to contribute a story. (Because of concerns for the use of children’s class-time, we did not obtain permission to collect the two additional stories in the second year.)

### Measures

**Peer nomination measures.** In order to assess *disliking* by classmates, we gave students a class roster and asked them to circle the names of classmates they liked least. We standardized the number of nominations each child received to account for differences in class size.

We assessed children’s judgments about their classmates’ *peer victimization* using three items from the class play procedure described above. Four items drawn from Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988) were combined to create a measure of *peer-nominated victimization* ( $\alpha = .89$  in Year 1 and  $.87$  in Year 2): “someone who gets picked on by other kids,” “a person who gets called names by other kids,” “a person kids make fun of,” and “someone who gets picked on by others.”

**Self-report measure.** We assessed self-reported loneliness by averaging responses on a 16-item *Loneliness questionnaire* (e.g., “I don’t have anyone to play with at school;” Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984). Children responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not true at all*; 5 = *always true*;) and this formed an internally consistent scale ( $\alpha = .92$  in Year 1 and  $.93$  in Year 2).

**Narrative measures.** We transcribed and segmented stories into subject-predicate units, with all identifying information removed. All narrative measures in Year 1 were independently assessed by two undergraduate coders, who trained with narratives collected from another

corpus. They achieved reliability with the authors and with each other using a random sample of 20% of the stories. Inter-rater reliabilities, ranged from  $r = .84$  to  $.98$ . The authors, who had previously achieved reliability with one another and with the student researchers, coded all the stories in Year 2.

*Narrative coherence* was reliably assessed using the *Narrative Coherence Coding Scheme* (Baker-Ward, Bauer, Fivush, Haden, Ornstein, & Reese, 2007). We scored each story on a scale from 0 to 3 on three subscales. *Context* ratings assessed the author's orientation of the listener to time and place of the events described in the story. *Chronology* ratings were based on the ordering of the actions reported in the story. Ratings of *theme* assessed the meaning-making aspect of the narrative, including elaborations, evaluations, causal linkages and resolutions.

Reports of *motives* comprised the number of subject predicate-units that included at least one report of a protagonist's goals, reasons, or desired outcomes. For example, "I tried to walk away but I wanted to get my ball back" included two motives, one in each clause.

*Moral concerns* were coded as the number of subject-predicate units containing any evaluative comments or explicit moral assertions). This included deontic auxiliaries (e.g., should, ought), explicit statements of rules (e.g., "no running in the hallway"), use of moral evaluative terms (e.g., guilty, proud), or explicitly moral expressions (e.g., "teaching him a lesson").

## Results

In the present study, we explored associations between narrative skills and peer adjustment across two school years. Preliminary analyses revealed no main effects for prompt type on any of our narrative measures and only a few interactions between prompt type, sex of author, and grade; therefore, we averaged measures over the three stories for Year 1. We report

descriptive data in Table 1, including means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for the 5 measures of narrative skill (context, chronology, theme, motives, and moral concerns) and 3 measures of peer adjustment (peer disliking, peer-nominated victimization, and self-reported loneliness) in Year 1 and Year 2. Correlations from Year 1 to Year 2 for each measure of peer adjustment revealed moderate stability for victimization ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ) and loneliness ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ), and stronger stability for disliking ( $r = .74, p < .001$ ).

### **Cross-Lagged Panel Models<sup>1</sup>**

To test our hypothesis that narrative skills would predict peer adjustment across two school years, we utilized Amos 23 to run a series of two-wave cross-lagged panel models. Cross-lagged analysis uses longitudinal data to infer underlying processes of reciprocal causality among the constructs of interest (Kenny, 1975). For each of the three aspects of peer adjustment, we estimated separate models that included each measure of narrative skill ( $X =$  measure of peer adjustment;  $Y =$  measure of narrative skill). Cross-lagged models estimate different relational paths (Selig & Little, 2012): Synchronous correlations are non-directional associations assessed in the same time frame (e.g., peer-nominated victimization and motives in Year 1). Temporal stability, or autoregressive associations, describes the effect of a construct on itself at a later time (e.g., peer-nominated victimization in Year 1 predicting peer-nominated victimization in Year 2). Finally, cross-lagged paths estimate the effect of one construct on a distinct construct at a later occasion, controlling for the prior level of the construct being predicted (e.g., the effect of motives in Year 1 on peer-nominated victimization in Year 2, controlling for Year 1 victimization). As noted by Selig and Little (2012), accounting for the autoregressive effects

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<sup>1</sup> Our sample was too small to test for grade or gender effects, but we did conduct analyses separately for girl and boy authors, and separately for third-to-fourth grade children and fourth-to-fifth grade children. Although some of the effects became non-significant with the smaller sample, the patterns of results were very similar.

means that the variance in  $Y_2$  (e.g., Year 2 victimization) that can be predicted by  $X_1$  (e.g., Year 1 motives) is residual variance controlling for levels of  $Y_1$  (e.g., Year 1 victimization) at the previous time point. This allows the researcher to rule out the possibility that a cross-lagged effect is due to the fact that  $X$  and  $Y$  were correlated at time 1.

Consistent with the goals of the present study, we were most interested in evaluating the cross-lagged effects of narrative skills in Year 1 on peer adjustment in Year 2, expecting these to be stronger than the lagged effects of adjustment on narrative skills, controlling for all other paths. Accordingly, we tested a fully saturated model, which estimates all possible path combinations between the Year 1 and Year 2 variables, for each two-wave panel model of interest. Because saturated models contain zero degrees of freedom, we evaluated the standardized regression path coefficients as indicators of model fit. We used full information maximum likelihood estimation to make use of all available data for the small sample ( $N = 92$ ).

First, we examined a series of five cross-lagged panel models for peer disliking and each measure of narrative skill. After controlling for the synchronous and autoregressive associations, the lagged effect of Year 1 chronological coherence predicted Year 2 peer disliking ( $\beta = -.16, p = .019$ ), and the lagged effect of Year 1 peer disliking on Year 2 chronology was not statistically significant ( $\beta = -.06, p = .606$ ; See Figure 1). In a separate model, only the lagged effect of Year 1 thematic coherence on Year 2 disliking was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.22, p = .001$ ) after controlling for other paths in the model (See Figure 2). In our final disliking model, only the lagged effect of Year 1 moral concerns on Year 2 peer disliking was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.18, p = .009$ ; See Figure 3). The models testing reports of motives and contextual coherence did not reach statistical significance. Collectively, these models indicated that stronger narrative skills (moral concerns, and chronological and thematic coherence) in Year 1 contributed to lower

disliking in the subsequent academic year.

The cross-lagged model for victimization and motives revealed that, after controlling for other paths, Year 1 motives significantly predicted Year 2 victimization ( $\beta = -.19, p = .041$ ), and the lagged effect of Year 1 victimization on Year 2 motives did not reach statistical significance ( $\beta = -.17, p = .149$ ; See Figure 4). This indicated that reports of motives contributed to lower peer perceptions of victimization across academic years. Estimated lagged effects for the other four panel models for victimization and narrative skills did not reach statistical significance.

Finally, we tested the five cross-lagged panel models for loneliness and measures of narrative skill. After controlling for all other paths, the lagged effect of Year 1 motives on Year 2 loneliness was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.22, p = .019$ ), and the effect of Year 1 loneliness on Year 2 motives was not ( $\beta = -.09, p = .480$ ; See Figure 5). This finding indicated that reports of motives in Year 1 contributed to lower perceptions of loneliness in Year 2. Estimated lagged effects for the other panel models for loneliness and narrative skills did not reach statistical significance.

### **Discussion**

During middle childhood children focus much attention on peer relationships. At the same time, they develop skills in constructing personal narratives to share with others. The present research addressed, longitudinally, the association between these two prominent developments. Findings support the contention that these developments may be related to each other in important ways. We found that attention to motives in Year 1 stories predicted less victimization and less loneliness in Year 2, even after accounting for the tendency of victimization and loneliness to be stable across school years, and for the association between motives and the peer adjustment constructs in Year 1. It was not the case that victimization or

loneliness in year 1 predicted an improvement in attention to motives in Year 2, so the direction of effects appeared to be clear. Improvement in this narrative skill facilitated peer adjustment.

These findings encourage further exploration of the possibility that narrative practice might improve peer adjustment for victimized and lonely children. In order to establish and maintain satisfying relationships with peers, children must find ways to coordinate their own desires and needs with those of classmates, noticing mutual or compatible goals, and negotiating solutions when goals clash. Accomplishing this coordination and this negotiation requires attention to the “whys?” of human behavior. Unawareness of one’s own motivations and a lack of consideration for the motivations of others –the intentions, desires, and goals that drive behavior – may be an important piece of the puzzle of why some elementary school children feel isolated and disconnected from peers. If Bruner (1990) was correct in arguing that narrative directs our attention to the culturally understandable reasons that help us explain why people do the things they do, then we can expect that the practice of creating narratives attunes children to what motivates their own behavior and the behavior of their peers. To the extent that this can help them coordinate their own goals with those of their classmates, it could help them avoid victimization and establish relationships that ameliorate feelings of loneliness.

Consistent with previous research, we found that peer difficulties tended to be fairly stable from one school year to the next (Browning, Cohen, & Warman, 2003; Cillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2011). Peer disliking showed considerably more stability over time than the victimization or loneliness measures. Nevertheless, we found three measures of narrative skill that predicted improvements in our disliking measure of peer adjustment over two school years. Children who wrote stories with a clear chronology, with thematic coherence, and with attention to moral concerns in Year 1 of our

study were less likely to be disliked by peers in the following school year, even after controlling for their disliking scores in the first year, and for the association between the three narrative skills and disliking in Year 1. It was not the case that disliking in year 1 predicted an improvement in any measure of narrative skill in Year 2, so the direction of effects again appeared to be clear. Improvement in narrative skills facilitated peer adjustment.

However difficult it may be to intervene on behalf of children who are victimized by peers, the strong stability of liked-least nominations indicates that disliking is a much more stubborn problem. Nevertheless, three of our five narrative assessments (chronology, theme, and moral concerns) negatively predicted Year 2 disliking. Those children who learned to write a good story in year 1 were able to find a place among their classmates in the following year. The sharing of narrative accounts is a common part of social life in many contexts (Kyratzis, 1999; Ochs & Capps, 2001). The ability to ‘tell your side of the story’ is important to conflict resolution (Davidson et al., 2013; Walton, Harris, & Davidson, 2009; Burrell, Zirbel, & Allen, 2003), and good story tellers are just fun to be around. But the children who participated in our study *wrote* their stories, and we did not assess their ability or inclination to share them. We believe that writing personal narrative accounts may be especially beneficial for children who have difficulty making connections with their peers. When they write about their experience, children can organize their thoughts about the series of events, elaborate on the significance of those events, and do the moral evaluative work that narrative form encourages – all without the interruption or evaluative gaze of interlocutors. Even though written narratives may be limited by literacy skills, they may be easier to produce than ‘live’ narratives for children whose social or communication skills are challenged. We speculate that the writing of personal narratives may serve as practice that disliked children especially need.

Our thinking is informed by research by Pennebaker and colleagues, which showed that adults and high school students benefited in many ways from opportunities to write about stressful or difficult experiences (Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009). The mechanism by which this ‘expressive writing’ paradigm produces enhanced mental and physical health and better academic outcomes appears to be related to a critical feature of narrative: when we make a narrative account of our experience, we attempt to make sense of that experience and this meaning-making is a crucial feature of healthy coping (Daiute & Bateau, 2002). Several researchers have urged caution in implementing Pennebaker’s expressive writing paradigm with children who may not yet have the narrative meaning-making skills needed to make the practice beneficial (Fivush, Marin, Crawford, Reynolds, & Brewin, 2007; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). Despite this concern, a recent meta-analysis found modest positive effects for interventions in which youth were asked to write about difficult situations, with the 10 – 13-year-olds not different from the older teens (Travagin et al., 2015). Recognizing the possibilities that children may tell stories about experiences they are not able to process on their own, we suggest that schools establish collaborations between teachers and guidance counselors to produce ‘safe spaces,’ where children who have especially difficult stories to tell can be given the assistance of a qualified adult.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Our efforts to explore the relationships between narrative skill and peer adjustment focused on a relatively small sample of children in a single university-affiliated public school. Future studies should examine whether these associations are found in other school contexts as well.

We examined only written narratives, and this may have confounded literacy skills with the ability to form a coherent and compelling narrative. Important questions remain to be answered about the relationship between the skills children exhibit when they write narratives about their own experience, and the skills they use as they share narratives orally in every-day interactions. There are two major approaches to the study of narrative. We can understand narrative, as William James (1890) did, as a fundamental way of organizing thought – as a cognitive structure; or we can see narrative, as Michail Bakhtin (1981) did, as a fundamental way of organizing human interactions – as a discursive practice. If we take the James approach, then we expect that practice in writing narratives will facilitate the development of moral thinking and of perspective-taking, and either of these could facilitate the development of healthy peer relationships. If we take the Bakhtin approach, we expect that practice in telling stories to others will facilitate the child's ability to negotiate resolutions to conflicts and to participate in forms of play that are critical to integration in a classroom community. Our study has established that narrative skill facilitates healthy peer relations, but much work remains to be done to illuminate the mechanisms by which it does so.

### **Implications for Classroom Practice**

Our emphasis on the importance of narrative practices in schools is consistent with considerable evidence that the most effective anti-bullying and victimization programs focus on changing the school (and classroom) culture and climate (Elias & Zins, 2003; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Efforts to intervene when children are disliked by their peers have been less prevalent than programs focused on bystander intervention (Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015), and our data suggest that the former may be a more stubborn problem. Interventions at the class level or interventions with the perpetrator or the victim might

successfully reduce the likelihood that a child will be victimized, but ensuring that the child will be *liked* is quite another challenge (Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, & Rodkin, 2014). Still, by encouraging all children to share personal narrative accounts, teachers invite those on the margins and those in the center of the peer network to evaluate and challenge existing peer norms, values and behaviors. As they do so, they will practice the narrative thinking that has been shown to support memory, problem solving, and reasoning skills that are critical to most academic pursuits (Bauer, 2007). These skills may translate to more socially effective interaction tools for children who are disliked by peers. At the same time, a classroom story-sharing practice will provide opportunities for children who are *not disliked* to reflect on the perspectives and experiences of their classmates who are disliked. This addition to classroom practice need not add to the vast responsibilities held by teachers as they strive to educate their students in an era of high-stakes testing because teachers can use narrative exercises to teach such academic skills as punctuation, spelling, and reading (Walton & Davidson, in press). Teachers can encourage children to write and then share stories orally in pairs or small groups in order to evaluate and improve children's language skills.

In addition to the improvements to children's narrative skills that may result from the incorporation of such classroom practices, inviting children into a shared narrative practice in which they consider and reflect on their own and others' thoughts and feelings may be particularly important in heterogeneous classrooms. Specifically, the expectation and practice of taking another person's perspective likely fosters an inclusive classroom climate, especially among a culturally diverse group of children (Lee & Quintana, 2005). Furthermore, by sharing narrative accounts, children become more full-fledged participants in their classroom and in the larger school contexts (Hammack, 2010).

**Conclusions**

Development is enhanced when children are liked by others, are treated with respect and feel like they belong (Buhs et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2015). Sadly, some children do not easily find their way into satisfying peer relationships, but our study suggests that the opportunity to author personal experiences and to reflect on the inner worlds of themselves and others may enhance peer adjustment for these children.

Encouraging children to develop narrative skill and to share personal accounts of their experiences on a regular basis may foster attentiveness to the moral relevance of behavior and to the motives of themselves and others. This may allow children to manage peer relationships more successfully. This approach refrains from focusing specifically on individual children who are on the margins of the peer network, but draws all children into the moral realm of the classroom. In doing so, it opens the door for greater recognition of multiple interpretations of conflict-threatening events and it increases children's opportunity for interpersonal and social-cognitive development.

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Table 1

*Inter-correlations for Narrative Skills and Peer Adjustment in Year 1 and Year 2 (N = 92)*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	M	SD
1. Context (Y1)	1																.53	.49
2. Chronology (Y1)	.32***	1															1.59	.93
3. Theme (Y1)	.26*	.58***	1														1.21	.69
4. Motives (Y1)	.14	.42***	.60***	1													.33	.34
5. Moral Concerns (Y1)	.19	.23*	.60***	.43***	1												1.47	1.68
6. Disliking (Y1)	-.12	-.22*	-.19	-.11	-.03	1											-.05	.97
7. Victimization (Y1)	-.11	-.24*	-.14	-.10	.18	.71***	1										-.01	.97
8. Loneliness (Y1)	-.03	-.18	-.23*	-.21*	.01	.29**	.32**	1									2.03	.88
9. Context (Y2)	.22	.10	.28*	.16	.12	-.09	.00	-.10	1								.22	.54
10. Chronology (Y2)	.13	.33**	.37**	.10	.24*	-.12	-.04	-.05	.19	1							1.75	.96
11. Theme (Y2)	.25*	.30*	.43***	.33**	.33**	-.18	-.15	-.08	.32**	.66***	1						1.06	.58
12. Motives (Y2)	.11	.13	.16	.08	-.01	-.05	-.17	-.05	.37**	.29*	.26*	1					1.63	1.57
13. Moral Concerns (Y2)	.23	.16	.30*	.37**	.18	-.05	-.08	-.12	.40**	.19	.51***	.29*	1				2.04	1.95
14. Disliking (Y2)	-.16	-.33**	-.36***	-.21*	-.17	.74***	.59***	.17	-.09	-.38**	-.26*	-.15	-.02	1			-.05	.92
15. Victimization (Y2)	-.16	-.25*	-.19	-.23*	.01	.42***	.41***	.12	.03	-.17	-.16	.02	.03	.46***	1		-.03	.95
16. Loneliness (Y2)	.08	-.13	-.14	-.32**	-.05	.09	.03	.54***	-.04	.01	-.08	.10	-.04	.11	.10	1	1.84	.74

Note: Y1 = Year 1; Y2 = Year 2; Context, Chronology, Theme, Motives, and Moral Concerns = Narrative Skills; Disliking, Victimization, & Loneliness = Peer Adjustment.

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

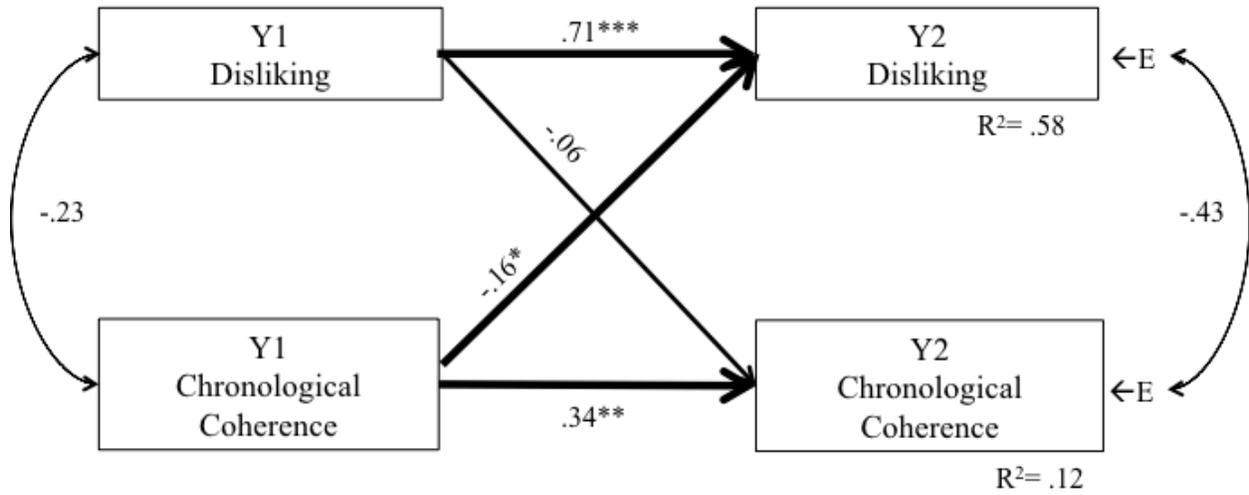


Figure. 1. Cross-lagged model of disliking and chronological coherence. Standardized coefficients are presented. E = error.  $R^2$  = total variance explained on the outcome.

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

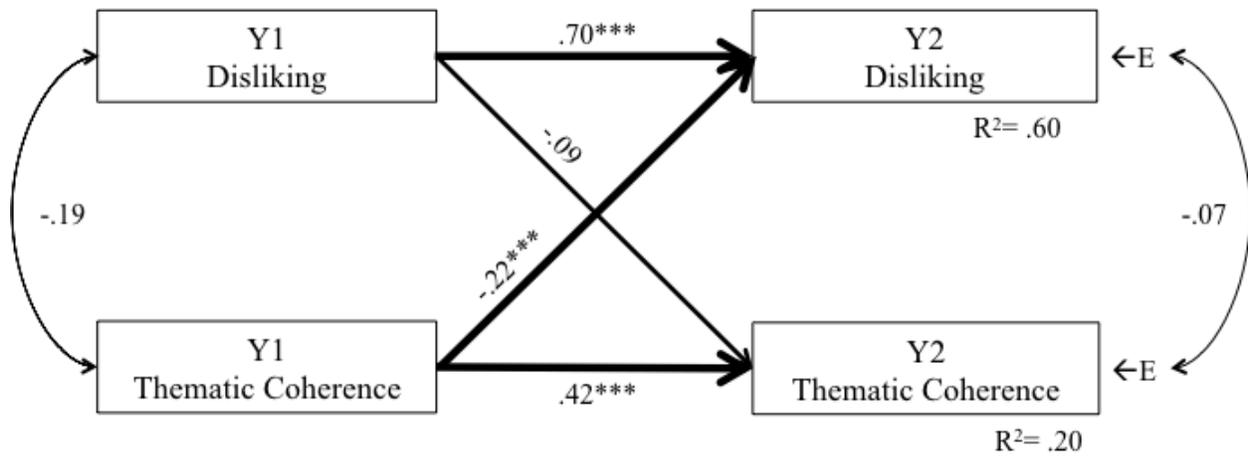


Figure. 2. Cross-lagged model of disliking and thematic coherence. Standardized coefficients are presented. E = error. R<sup>2</sup> = total variance explained on the outcome.

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

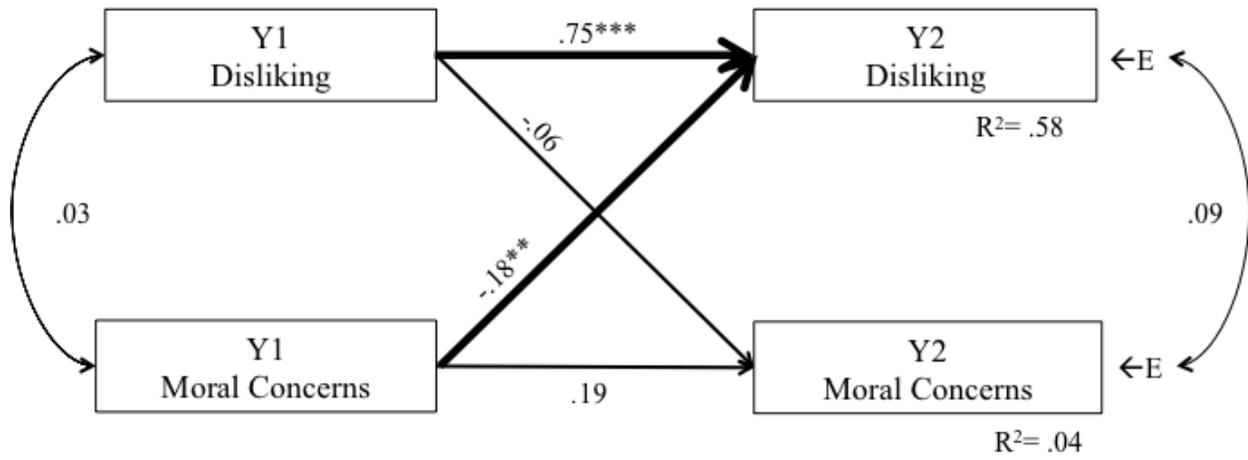


Figure. 3. Cross-lagged model of disliking and moral concerns. Standardized coefficients are presented. E = error. R<sup>2</sup> = total variance explained on the outcome.

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

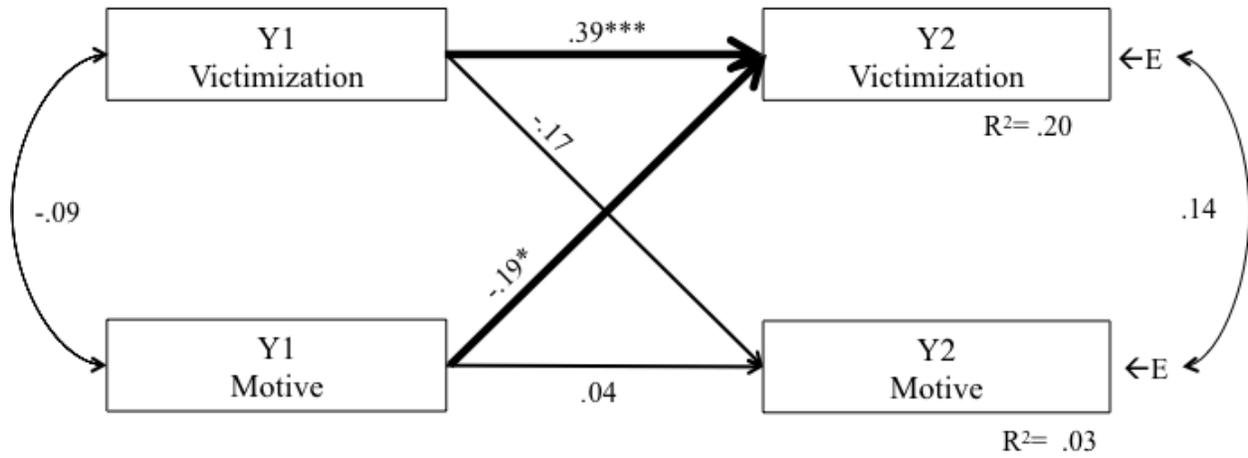


Figure. 4. Cross-lagged model of victimization and motives. Standardized coefficients are presented. E = error.  $R^2$  = total variance explained on the outcome.

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

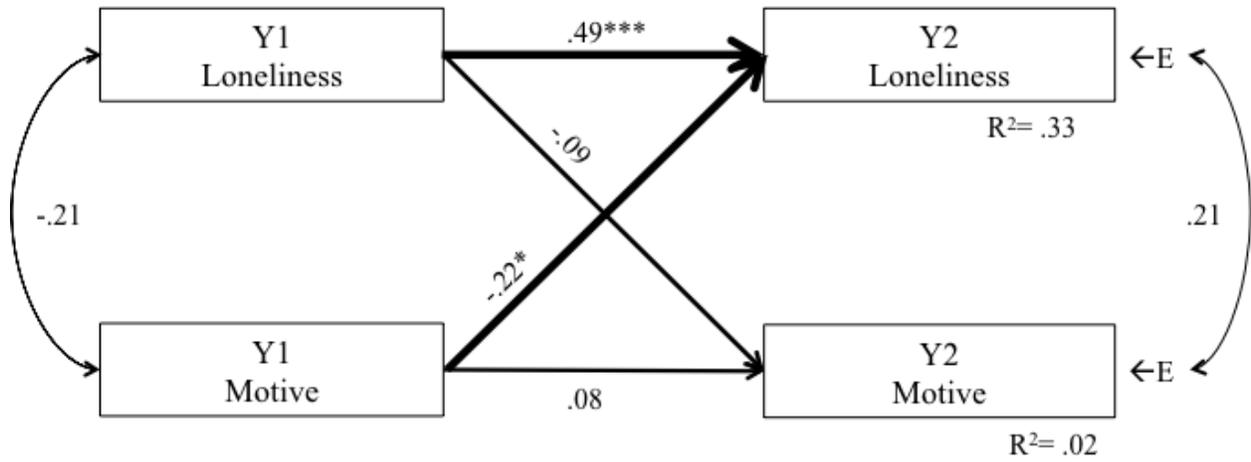


Figure 5. Cross-lagged model of loneliness and motives. Standardized coefficients are presented. E = error.  $R^2$  = total variance explained on the outcome.

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