To tell a narrative is to be moral. Whether a narrative is told to share information about one’s day, about one’s life, or simply to entertain, narratives always have a point (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), and that point carries moral weight (Crossley, 2003; Freeman, 2007, Sclater, 2003). As Bruner (1990) has argued, humans understand their experiences through narratives, and narratives, by definition, integrate the landscape of action, what happens in the world, and the landscape of consciousness, what happens in the mind. The inclusion of thoughts, desires, and motivations turn a narrative into a morality tale about how human intentions lead to actions that have consequences, whether good or bad, for self and other. Importantly, narratives are social. Even when told by an individual, narratives are formed through socially and culturally mediated ways of understanding the world and how it works (Fivush, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Narratives situate individual knowledge within social networks that describe and define the self in relation to others, providing models for understanding how and why we behave as we do. In a very real sense, our core sense of what it means to be moral is carried in how we tell narratives about our everyday life in which we mark our own and others’ commitments to, and violations of, particular ways of interacting in the world.

In this chapter, we explicate the narrative construction of moral agency using feminist and socio-cultural theories of knowing. We integrate these theoretical approaches to provide an understanding of moral agency as emerging from the development of narrative voice and power. To forewarn, we argue that individuals allowed to voice their own experiences from a position of empowerment present themselves as responsible and accountable for their own actions. Within these narratives, the voices of self and others are expressed and validated to provide an integrated socially
situated moral understanding. In contrast, when voice is imposed, individuals lack power over their own actions and therefore do not take responsibility. Thus a validated narrative voice expresses moral agency whereas an imposed narrative voice does not. We emphasize that this is an explicitly developmental argument, both in the broad sense and in the narrow sense. Broadly, we argue that, across development, children learn to voice moral agency within parentally scaffolded narratives about personal experiences that both elaborate and validate the construction of personal accountability for one’s actions (Fivush, 2004; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). Early parentally scaffolded narratives of moral accountability are internalized, such that adolescents’ ability to voice moral agency in their own personal narratives reflect this developmental history. It is also developmental in the narrow sense, in that we argue that, through narrating personal experiences, the individual is reflecting, evaluating, and interpreting their experiences in ways that change their understanding of morality. It is in this sense that narratives are both the process and product of moral understanding.

We emphasize that the development of voice is not limited to narratives of explicitly moral experiences, but rather that morality underlies all experiences in which the individual takes responsibility for their own actions in consideration of others’ unique thoughts and feelings. That is, moral agency is an integral part of telling any narrative in which the narrator expresses choice, responsibility, and accountability for his or her actions and their effect on others (Bandura, 2006; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Tappan, 1991). We focus on the narrative construction of moral agency during adolescence and emerging adulthood, because this is a critical developmental period during which multiple cognitive and social skills converge in ways that allow the individual to construct reflective and intentional narratives (Fivush et al., 2011; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In the first part of this chapter, we explicate our theoretical framework. In the second part, we use narratives collected from adolescents and emerging adults to illustrate how voice and power can be used to more fully understand the development of moral agency. To foreshadow, we draw from narratives told both about the self and about the parent’s experiences growing up, what we call intergenerational narratives, in order to argue that moral agency is constructed both from our own experiences and from others’.

Defining moral agency through narratives: A feminist theory approach

Whereas the development of moral reasoning has a long history within psychology (see Gibbs, 2003; Haidt & Joseph, 2007, for reviews), the
The concept of moral agency has been introduced into the psychological literature more recently (Bandura, 2001). Early psychological research on moral reasoning focused on the cognitive processes and principled reasoning underlying decisions about moral issues, usually focusing on hypothetical moral dilemmas. In 1982, Gilligan challenged some of the extant ideas about moral reasoning, at least partly because this research did not include how people think about their everyday lives in terms of moral choices. In accord with feminist theories of knowing (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Belenky et al., 1986; Rosser & Miller, 2000), Gilligan introduced ideas about the morality of care, which explicitly considered how one’s own behaviors impacted on a nexus of social networks, rather than a morality of justice based on de-contextualized principles. More specifically, feminist analyses of morality attended to the idea that knowledge is always situated (Code, 1993; Longino, 1993), and thus morality flows from embedded social interactions rather than from abstract knowledge. Moral reasoning is fundamentally about how one behaves within social interactions that express care and concern for others. Although initially introduced as a gendered approach to moral reasoning, subsequent research confirmed that both males and females engage in moral reasoning based on a mixture of care and justice depending on the particular dilemma they are facing (see Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Jaffee & Hyde, 2000, for reviews).

Although Gilligan’s (1982) initial ideas about morality as gendered were not supported by subsequent research, this theoretical approach has been integrated into the psychological literature on moral understanding. Moral reasoning about caring for others complicates arguments about morality by suggesting that all social interactions have a dimension of morality, in that every interaction implicitly carries information about how our actions impact others. This transforms thinking about morality as purely epistemological in origin, focusing on the content of moral concepts, to ontological, with morality being defined as a way of being in the world (Code, 2002; Somers, 1994). Thus, current psychological approaches to morality include ideas of moral agency.

The concept of moral agency brings narrative into the forefront of how morality is constructed. Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) argue that it is in the process of understanding our personal experiences that we come to construct a sense of morality. Being able to remember and create personal meaning from past experiences through narratives enables a person to draw moral lessons about the self and behavior in the world. Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) have described the process of using narrative to come to an understanding of morally relevant personal experiences as constructing moral agency, the sense of self as making choices that carry moral implications. Narratives are critical in describing and defining how
one is in the world, and by extension, how one should be (Fivush, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Ricoeur, 1991). Narratives both individualize morality, by particularizing specific actions within specific contexts, but paradoxically, narratives simultaneously generalize from the particular to the normative. This is how one behaved in this instance because this is how one should generally behave (see Code, 2002; and Somers, 1994, for related arguments). Personal narratives rely on socially and culturally mediated narratives of what is right and what is good, which define morality across individuals (Crossley, 2003; Fivush, 2008; Freeman, 2007; Sclater, 2003). It is through narratives that individuals express their own agency in understanding, upholding, or violating appropriate moral behaviors that are socially and culturally defined. Thus narratives unite the ontological approach of being in the world with the epistemological approach of constructing knowledge.

**Feminist concepts of voice**

Narratives highlight the feminist concept of “voice.” By definition, narratives express a perspective, a worldview that the teller is voicing. Voice emerges from place and power (Fivush & Marin, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993). Place refers to the individual’s vantage point, or what has been labeled “standpoint” in feminist theory. At the broadest level, this can be cultural/historical, in that any given individual sees the world from the perspective of the historical time and place in which he or she lives, including the place of race, gender, and class. For example, an educated woman in the twenty-first century simply sees the world from a different place than a mid-eighteenth-century noneducated woman. Moreover, place imparts power. Power is imbued in certain positions of place over others, and through power one has voice. Some individuals in society simply have the power to tell a narrative in a certain way and not allow other tellings, as we can see historically in the changing race and gender narratives told over the past century in the industrialized Western world (Enns et al., 1995; Menard-Warwick, 2005). Importantly, power is complex in that one can have power over but also power with (Griscom, 1992; Raven, 1992; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Power can be held, abdicated, negotiated, or shared. Individuals with power can empower others. Critically, in empowering others, one is allowing them voice. Empowerment comes from others hearing and validating your story (Brison, 2002), and power is shared when multiple standpoints are brought together to create a more integrated voice (Bordo, 1990).

Importantly, place and power also exist in local social interactions, and shift dynamically from context to context. This is critical for morality.
Who has the power to tell this experience and to interpret it in particular ways? Morality comes from a place where the individual can claim higher ground, and this entails claiming power (Fivush, 2010; Tappan, 1991). True moral agency can only exist when the individual is empowered, when the narrative voice is fully one’s own. But how does one come to own a moral voice?

**Defining moral agency through narratives: A socio-cultural theory approach**

Whereas feminist theories focus on knowledge as situated in embodied interactions in everyday experience, from which voice emerges, there is little attention to how this way of knowing develops in childhood, or how it is transmitted across generations. Similar to feminist theories, socio-cultural theory also posits knowledge as situated and culturally mediated, but the focus of socio-cultural theory is developmental (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). In broad strokes, socio-cultural theory posits that cultures provide tools for human cognition. Language is the preeminent cultural tool that allows for transmission of mediated knowledge, knowledge gained through culturally structured social interactions. Essentially, adults bring children into activities that will be important to them as they become individually contributing members of society by structuring social interactions in ways that will allow children to internalize the necessary sets of skills. A good example is literacy, arguably one of the most important skills for individuals in Western industrialized cultures. Infants and young children are surrounded by the symbols of literacy, in the form of magnetic numbers and letters, alphabet blocks, picture books, and so on. Parents engage their young children in literate activities through book-reading, rhymes, and songs, bringing children into a culturally mediated world of letters and numbers that they will need to master. Early on, parents provide the structure, and as children develop and internalize these skills, children become more and more responsible for performing these activities on their own.

The ability to tell coherent narratives of one’s personal experience is also a critical cultural skill in industrialized Western cultures (McAdams, 1992; Nelson, 2003). Whether it is in a job interview, or meeting a friend or romantic partner, Western adults are expected to be able to provide a coherent account of who they are through telling stories of their personal past. Narratives are culturally mediated linguistic tools for organizing, interpreting, and evaluating human experiences (Chafe, 1990; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Ricoeur, 1991). Early in development, parents, especially mothers, scaffold this skill with their young children, and over the course of childhood, children begin to internalize the skills displayed...
in these social interactions in telling their independent personal narratives (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, and Reese, 2002, for reviews). Importantly, narrative interaction is rampant in everyday conversation, especially within families. Estimates of the frequency of narrative references to past events in everyday conversations, such as over the dinner table, indicate that a past event emerges as a shared topic of conversation approximately every five minutes (Bohanek et al., 2009; Miller, 1994). Further, there is substantial evidence that individual differences in how parents, and especially mothers, scaffold narratives of the past with their young children modulate the ways in which their children come to tell their own personal narratives later in development, indicating that children are learning how to narrate their past in early parentally scaffolded narrative co-constructions.

**Socio-cultural concepts of voice**

Socio-cultural theory posits that development proceeds within linguistically structured interactions that challenge children to learn new ways of interacting within their worlds (Gauvain, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Language is a critical tool in socialization and development because it is through language that children learn new ways of interpreting and evaluating their direct experiences (Nelson, 1996). In this sense, culturally mediated ways of knowing are voiced and made explicit through language. This idea resonates with Bakhtin’s (1986) socio-cultural approach to “voices.” As articulated by Tappan (1991), Bakhtin argues that the multiple “voices” one hears growing up (the multiple dialogues, co-constructed narratives, etc.) are culturally mediated representations that are internalized by the individual, and these internalized voices continuously engage in inner dialogues. These inner dialogues create a tension such that the individual is confronted with multiple perspectives or interpretations that must be resolved and expressed in developing his or her own individual voice. Importantly, these inner dialogues allow the individual to “try on” different perspectives, to evaluate experiences from different standpoints in the service of integration (Menard-Warwick, 2005). How these inner voices are resolved or integrated into a narrative voice will depend on the history of narrative interactions with others.

Socio-cultural concepts of voice highlight the multiplicity of voices expressed even within an individual narrative. We can see this on at least two levels. First, in telling a narrative of one’s own experiences, the integration of one’s own and others’ voices can be heard. These can be standpoints, or voices, expressed during the experiences or during subsequent retellings of the experiences with others. The narrator can voice others’
perspectives without reflecting on that standpoint, or the narrator can integrate his or her own and others’ perspectives through voicing multiple standpoints, through commenting and reflecting on how and why they have this interpretation, and ultimately by integrating across multiple voices in order to provide an agentic voice of their own. Second, given the cultural and historical bases of knowing (similar to feminist theories of place), the ways in which individuals hear the stories of others from different standpoints, or perspectives, become an integral part of developing their own voices. How the narrator expresses the protagonist’s voice in the narrative will inform how the narrator is internalizing this standpoint into their own integrated voice.

From socio-cultural theory, this is how culture is transmitted intergenerationally from parents to children, through those with power (parents) helping those without (children) to understand the world in ways that will allow them to become functioning and productive members of their culture. To illustrate this idea, we present an excerpt from a conversation between a mother and her four-year-old child about a recent conflict with a friend at school (these data are from Zaman, 2011):

**CHILD:** She pinched me.
**PARENT:** What did you do when she did that?
**CHILD:** I started crying.
**PARENT:** And then what did you do? You went and told the teacher?
**CHILD:** Yeah, I went to her.
**PARENT:** And then what happened?
**CHILD:** And then I had to go out the hallway and when the other teacher came I had to go out to the hallway with her and then Ms. X, Ms. X, she had to stay in the class with the other children and then I had to sit down in her chair with my back [inaudible]
**PARENT:** But you didn’t get hurt real bad, right? It hurt when it first happened, but it didn’t really last long, right?
**CHILD:** I didn’t – I went to [inaudible] Ms. X she told us [not] to fight and then the boys were supposed to be on this side and the girls were supposed to be in back [inaudible] the girls were supposed to be in the front of the office and then so ...
**PARENT:** But then after you got through, what happened with you and [friend]? Did you all talk again?
**CHILD:** No, she said sorry, but she had to get in trouble.
**PARENT:** She apologized, right? Did you accept her apology? Did you say okay?
**CHILD:** Yeah.
**PARENT:** You all still talk, right? You kind of made up? You’re still friends?
**CHILD:** No.
**PARENT:** No, not no more because you don’t have any school going on.

In this example, the mother helps her child to express her own account of what happened but note that the mother is focused on how the situation
was resolved, both in the moment (you told your teacher) and in the long run (she apologized). When the child starts with her emotions (I started crying), the mother moves to discussing the specific actions the child took to resolve the situation. The mother then reassures the child that she was really all right, most likely to regulate the emotional reaction to the event. And once the child tells the story, the mother moves to resolution, that the other child apologized and the apology was accepted. Even when the child does not really acknowledge this, the mother insists that the event was resolved and that they are still friends. In this way, the mother is modeling a canonical narrative of forgiveness for her child. We further note that this canonical narrative expresses the mother’s imposed voice; in the act of negotiating the narrative, parents often impose culturally canonical forms, perhaps in the service of “appropriate” socialization, modeling this canonical narrative for their children.

Socialization can thus be a form of empowerment, passing the cultural voice from one generation to the next. This process begins in early childhood, with parentally structured narratives of the child’s own experiences. As children grow older, intergenerational stories, stories children know about their parents when they were growing up, may also begin to serve this function in that parents provide role models of moral agency for their children through the stories they tell about themselves. When children and adolescents tell stories about their parents, they are expressing if and how they have internalized and integrated their parents’ voice with their own, or whether their parents’ voice remains as other, different from the self.

Voice, power, and moral agency

Both feminist and socio-cultural theories posit knowledge as relational, as emerging within local social interactions that are bounded by larger socio-cultural frames that privilege certain ways of knowing. Further, both feminist and socio-cultural theories underscore that language and voice are critical in how knowledge is constructed within social interaction and within the individual. The ways in which an individual comes to internalize the frameworks and evaluations appropriate to their cultural worldview provides a narrative voice.

Integrating socio-cultural and feminist theories, Fivush (2000, 2004) postulated a model of the development of autobiographical narratives based on voice and power. More specifically, children learn how to “own” their experience through narrative interactions that allow them voice. Through parentally guided narrative interactions in which parents seek out and validate their children’s recollections and interpretations of shared
past experiences, children come to understand and evaluate their experiences for themselves. In this way, they become the authors of their own autobiographies. In contrast, parents who structure narrative interaction in ways that impose particular forms and interpretations of past events do not allow their children to develop an independent voice that allows them to truly own their experience. These children may tell narratives but not from a position of authority; they do not own these experiences for themselves, but report these experiences as formulated by others.

Fivush presented a model with four quadrants dissected by two dimensions, self/other and voice/silence. From this perspective, narratives always include voices of self and other to differing extents. If one’s own perspective is heard and validated, one will develop a validated voice, one that acknowledges multiple perspectives but articulates ownership of one’s own perspective in an agentic way. This is the core of moral agency. As stated by Tappan, “When an individual claims authority and responsibility for his moral actions, that is, when he achieves authorship, he does not do so on his own, ‘standing alone’. Rather he does so in the context of an ongoing dialogic relation with others – specific others and generalized others – on whose authority he draws to define and author himself and his own thoughts, feelings and actions” (1991, p. 13).

A validated voice would be seen in the narrative ability to take multiple perspectives, yet still take responsibility and be accountable for one’s own perspective, to own one’s agency. This would be evidenced by either the ability to clearly voice multiple perspectives and argue for one’s own, or by the ability to integrate across multiple voices to create an integrated narrative account.

In contrast, they are is not allowed voice, if a particular interpretation is imposed by another, then the individual will not own their own story. They may have voice but it is imposed. They do not take responsibility for what happened and in this sense they do not have moral agency. This would be evidenced in narrative by presentation of multiple voices, multiple viewpoints, but no integration across standpoints, or no ability to argue for one perspective over another. Thus voice can be imposed by those in power, or it can be shared, thus empowering the individual to develop a validated voice that accepts responsibility for one’s actions. The latter allows for the construction of moral agency.

Clearly, this formulation draws on notions of power. Moral agency comes from a place of power, in that those with power are allowed voice to tell and interpret what happened. They are allowed to “own” the story. In a very real sense, it is the moral responsibility of those with power in a culture to provide frameworks and models for understanding what it is to lead a moral and productive life. Whereas cultures provide master
narratives and moral exemplars and role models (Frimer et al., 2011; Nasir & Kirshner, 2002), it is often within the family context that the transmission of moral values occurs, and one of the main ways in which this is done is through family stories (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008; Pratt et al., 1999). Within families, stories of both shared experiences, experiences of the child within the family, as well as intergenerational stories, stories of the parents and their parents before them, provide narrative models of how the world works and how it should be understood. In the telling and retelling of one’s own stories and the stories of others, children internalize both the power of storytelling to carry truth, and the ability to own their story as a moral agent of their own life.

**Gaining voice and power**

Our theoretical analysis provides a framework for understanding the development of moral agency that is undergirded by concepts of voice and power. The ability to use multiple voices, to internalize multiple standpoints, and integrate them into a validated voice that narrates experiences agentically, with a sense of efficacy, responsibility, and accountability for one’s actions, is the core of moral agency. Moral voice comes from a position of power, but intriguingly, that very power comes from being empowered by others who allow the individual their own voice. In contrast, an imposed voice, telling narratives from the perspectives of only others or the lack of ability to integrate across multiple standpoints, indicates a lack of control over one’s own experiences and thus both a lack of power and a lack of moral agency. One is not responsible for oneself or one’s actions.

To illustrate these constructs, we use narratives collected as part of two larger studies. One is the Family Narratives Project (see Fivush, Bohanek, & Zaman, 2011, for an overview). Briefly, 65 broadly middle-class, racially diverse two-parent families with an adolescent between the ages of 13- and 16-years-old, were interviewed at home, and asked to relate many narratives, both personal narratives and narratives adolescents knew about their parents growing up. The second is the Emerging Identity Project (see Fivush, Zaman, Waters, & Merrill, 2012, and Merrill, 2012, for details), in which 94 racially and ethnically diverse college students between the ages of 18- and 21-years-old were asked to write narratives about themselves and stories they knew about their parents around multiple themes, including experiences of pride and transgression.

In both studies, many of the narratives were about a form of conflict. In the Family Narratives Project, personal narratives of conflict with the parent were explicitly elicited, but conflict narratives emerged spontaneously
in both studies when eliciting personal and intergenerational narratives using other prompts. Conflicts were broadly conceptualized to include anything from an argument the adolescent had with a parent, to stories of conflicts between the adolescent’s parents and their parents when they were growing up, to conflicts with peers in which the narrator was a perpetrator, a victim, or even a witness. We focus on conflict narratives because, by definition, conflicts arise when there are differing perspectives on an event, and therefore constructing narratives about conflict situations may be especially productive for adolescents to begin to understand their own perspective, or voice, in relation to others (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Conflicts are also about power. Thus the way in which adolescents express their own and others’ voices as validated or imposed provides a window into their emerging sense of voice and power.

To provide a developmental context for the adolescent and emerging adult narratives, we first examine reminiscing of experiences of conflict between young children and their parents, drawn from data collected by Zaman (2011). In these co-constructed narratives, parents provide conversational guidance for their young children, and parents wield most of the power in the conversation. In contrast, in the adolescents’ conflict narratives, adolescents are beginning to assert their own voice and power in having a legitimate position in the conflict. They must be able to do this through taking the perspective of the parent; that is, adolescents can voice multiple standpoints and own their voice in the resolution. Thus adolescent–parent conflict narratives provide a unique, fertile ground for gaining voice and power.

Adolescent–parent conflicts are also an everyday interaction. We know that, as a result of biological, cognitive, and social developments during adolescence, there is an increase in frequency and intensity in parent–adolescent conflicts from late childhood to early and middle adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 2004). The sources of parent–adolescent conflicts range from everyday issues such as bedtime, homework, and chores to more interpersonally situated experiences such as fighting with siblings (Allison & Schultz, 2004; Dekovic, 1999). Although Smetana (1989) argues that parent–adolescent conflicts are less often about moral issues per se, and more often about mundane issues, these conflicts raise issues such as rule violations and expectations, responsibilities, fairness, and appropriate behavior, which certainly have a moral component. As further argued by Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010), the development of moral agency must include both moral and nonmoral experiences. Nonmoral experiences such as parent–child conflicts about everyday matters are a context in which adolescents connect their beliefs and goals with the differing beliefs and goals of someone who has power and authority.
Moreover, adolescents and their parents often see the conflict as arising from very different sources (Smetana, 1989). When adolescents were asked to justify recent conflicts with their parents, they provided reasons that concerned autonomy and personal jurisdiction, what could be considered an issue of agency. Yet when asked to reason about the counter-argument, adolescents were more likely to view their parent’s perspective as moral, conventional, and pragmatic (Smetana, 1989), which acknowledges the parent’s power to impose culturally sanctioned perspectives.

Although we underscore the importance of adolescents’ conflict narratives here, we emphasize that this process begins early in development, as parents and preschoolers negotiate the inevitable conflicts that arise in everyday life. For example, in this excerpt (from Zaman, 2011), a father and his four-year-old child discuss a time the father yelled at the son:

**PARENT:** Oh, okay, so when was the last time you got upset with me?
**CHILD:** When you yelled at me?
**PARENT:** I yelled at you? What happened? When did I yell at you?
**CHILD:** A long time ago.
**PARENT:** A long time ago? Do you remember what happened?
**CHILD:** I was – I was [inaudible] remember when you were trying to fix the grill.
**PARENT:** Yeah, I do remember trying to fix the grill.
**CHILD:** Yeah, do you remember when you yelled at me when I spilled some water.
**PARENT:** Yeah, did I yell at you?
**CHILD:** Yeah, you made me cry.
**PARENT:** I made you cry? What did I say – what did I yell at you?
**CHILD:** [inaudible]
**PARENT:** Is that when I was asking you to hold your cup up? Did you pay attention to what you were doing?
**CHILD:** Yeah.
**PARENT:** Yeah? And then what happened? Then what happened?
**CHILD:** Then I cleaned it up and X helped me.
**PARENT:** Did I help you?
**CHILD:** No, you were working on fixing the grill.
**PARENT:** I didn’t help you at all?
**CHILD:** Yes!
**PARENT:** Well, I’m sorry to make you cry. Did I apologize to you for that?
**CHILD:** Uh, yeah.
**PARENT:** Okay, do you remember why I got upset with you?
**CHILD:** Because I didn’t do what you tell me to do.
**PARENT:** You didn’t listen to me, right?… Is there anything else you want to say about this?
**CHILD:** No.
**PARENT:** Did I say I love you?
**CHILD:** No.
Here we see that the father allows the child to voice his account of what occurred through elaboratively questioning and scaffolding the child’s unfolding narrative. Although the father maintains that the child misbehaved, the father further acknowledges that he may not have reacted in the best possible way (“I’m sorry to make you cry”), thus further validating the child’s experiences. In a very deft way, this father allows his child voice but still maintains the moral upper hand by establishing that the child is supposed to listen to the parent. Interestingly, the father ends by trying to reestablish the emotional bond (“Did I say I love you”), which the child does not acknowledge, perhaps expressing the child’s own bid for power. Still, overall, this father and son co-construct a narrative that allows expression and acknowledgment of both perspectives. Contrast this with the following excerpt of a father and his four-year-old child having a conflict over the child’s refusal to get dressed:

PARENT: So do you ever get in an argument with Daddy? Yeah? When was the last time we had an argument?
CHILD: I wouldn’t get dressed.
PARENT: You didn’t get dressed yesterday, right?
CHILD: Uh huh.
PARENT: So what happened?
CHILD: I got in big trouble.
PARENT: What was the big trouble?
CHILD: Xxxx.
PARENT: Huh? What was big trouble?
CHILD: I don’t know.
PARENT: You don’t remember what I meant by big trouble. Daddy gets upset, right?
CHILD: Yeah.
PARENT: So what’d you do?
CHILD: I got dressed.
PARENT: [chuckles] Which made things very easy.

This father, in contrast to the first example, does not try to help his child structure a narrative account of the events, and does not elicit his child’s interpretation of what happened. Rather, he quickly moves into simply stating that the child got in big trouble. There is no sense of the father trying to help the child understand why the father was upset, and there is no attempt to take the child’s perspective, or to reestablish the relationship through apology and/or restatement of the emotional bond. In fact, the father simply states that he gets upset. It is about power, but not voice. The first excerpt allows a validated voice whereas the second excerpt is an imposed voice.

How might these early parentally scaffolded narratives become internalized over development in ways that allow adolescents to understand...
conflict? An imposed voice would lead to a “flat” narrative, one without much reference to perspective of either self or other. Perspective can be carried through referencing the thoughts, motivations, and intentions of self and other, as well as through quoted speech that explicitly presents the participants’ perspectives (see Fivush & Nelson, 2006, and Menard-Warwick, 2005, for discussion). As an example of imposed voice, here is a 13-year-old male, who when asked to describe a recent conflict with his mother, described an ongoing conflict about a violent book that he wants to read. We emphasize that, although we are presenting the adolescents’ narratives, in this and all of the following examples, it is clear that this independent narrative is structured around a parent–child conversation. In all the presented examples that follow, the adolescent expresses how the conflict was discussed with the parent at the time. Of course, these are the adolescents’ perspectives on the parent–child conversations, but nonetheless, we argue that these independent narratives reflect both the adolescents’ developmental history and the specific ways in which the narrated experiences were voiced or imposed at the time. Thus, in multiple ways, these narratives express how the adolescents have internalized parentally structured conversations.

Yeah, I’ve been asking for the last two months for a book … at the library. And I’ve been asking like every time we’ve went to the bookstore, but she still will not let me buy it ’cause she says it’s not appropriate for children; it’s like violent. And I’ve kept on wanting it pretty bad. So that was like … we’ve been doing it continuously every time we go to the bookstore.

In this narrative, there is no reflection on the adolescent’s position, why he thinks he should be allowed to read the book. He simply states he “wants” it. There is also no reflection on his mother’s position, but simply a flat statement (“it’s not appropriate for children”) with little elaboration or exploration of differing positions. The entire narrative is on the plane of action; there is virtually no mention of motivation, intention, or belief. His mother holds the power and he is simply not allowed to do this.

In contrast, a more validated voice in narrative would present multiple perspectives, multiple voices through explicit reference to the intentions, motivations, and consequences of multiple participants. Multiple perspectives can also be expressed through quoted speech, in which the narrator explicitly creates dialogues about contrasting perspectives. Again, an example of a 14-year-old male telling about a conflict regarding fairness of punishment within the family:

Well, mom told Leonard [brother] that since the kitchen wasn’t clean he couldn’t watch TV. So now Leonard went into mom’s room and flipped on the TV and
Melinda [sister] tattled on Leonard and I said, “Mom, why aren’t … why aren’t you gonna punish Leonard for going in your room?” She said, “Well David, Leonard’s a sixteen-year-old teenager and they don’t exactly think straight.” And I said, “So just because his neurons aren’t connecting the right way he gets out of a punishment?” “Yes. We’ll show partiality to you when you’re sixteen.” That’s what she said.

In this narrative, in contrast to the previous one, the adolescent clearly presents multiple voices, and argues rather forcefully for his own perspective, providing the logic driving his perspective on this issue. Yet there is still the sense of lack of power, an imposed voice in that the parent has the final word and there is no compromise, resolution, or coming to an understanding. In a fully validated voice, narratives also explicitly express multiple perspectives, but end with a forceful argument for the narrator’s own perspective, as we see in this narrative of a 14-year-old female about an argument with her mother:

Um well last night my mom was looking through the food that she had just bought and she noticed a box of cookies were missing. So she asked my dad and he didn’t eat ’em. So she asked my sister and she didn’t eat them. So she said, “Well, it must have been you because I didn’t eat ’em.” And I said, “I didn’t eat the cookies.” So I went back to where she kept ’em and I looked in a different box and there were the cookies. I said, “I think you owe me an apology.” So she says, “Okay.” And I said, “Wait I want you to say … I wanna hear you say it in front of dad and Laura.” Because she normally she just says, “Yeah …” … she has no idea that she’s ever said it …

Here, we see the narrator fully owns her voice, in making a clear argument that she has the moral high ground and that her mother must publicly acknowledge it. In this narrative, we see the adolescent claiming both voice and power. But it is a form of power over, in that the adolescent “wins” the moral argument with her mother. Fully voiced narratives need not be adversarial. An integrated voice can also be expressed through coming to understand the other’s perspective in a new way, as in this example of a 13-year-old male recounting an argument about buying new clothes with his mother:

Um it was about like clothes ’cause I only had one pair of shorts, well, three total, but yeah one pair of like khaki shorts to wear and I thought I needed more. So she said, “You could just do laundry.” And I was all like mad. And she said she bought me a lot of stuff and I didn’t think so. So we recently decided on $40 a month for like a clothing allowance and to buy my shoes, like all my clothes and stuff for like football and stuff, like cleats. And that helped me realize that they actually do spend a lot like [intervening comments about specific clothing purchase] … and she … she thinks that it’d be better to have more things like not as good, but I like less things that are better. So she thought … I thought that we should have a clothing allowance so I could like save up like and not get stuff that often, but get better
stuff that I’ll keep for longer. So we decided on that and I didn’t actually think she would agree to it, like $40 a month and I was like, “I’m just going to say that … I’ll know they’ll say no.” But they actually said yes. So …

In this narrative, we clearly see reflection on both the adolescent’s own perspective and his mother’s perspective. The adolescent comes to accept part of his parent’s perspective (“that helped me realize that they actually do spend a lot”), but there is also a clear negotiation between parent and adolescent leading to an integrated resolution that allows the adolescent more autonomy. Further the adolescent understands that his mother has a different perspective on purchases than he does (“she thinks that it’d be better to have more things … but I like less things that are better”), thus the resolution is not accepting the mother’s perspective, but understanding that the parent and adolescent can reach an equitable compromise and still maintain different perspectives. The narrative ends with the adolescent’s voice clearly validated, in that the adolescent claims to have proposed the resolution that the parents accepted.

As these narratives illustrate, the ways in which adolescents make sense of their conflicts with their parents provide a reflection of how they are coming to own their experiences as autonomous agents. Adolescents can abdicate power and accept the imposed voice of their parents as the authority, or they can begin to reflect on multiple perspectives, or standpoints, to begin to internalize ways in which their voice relates to others. Adolescents who begin to more fully voice parental conflicts, by elaborating on both their own and their parents’ perspectives, show a more nuanced understanding of multiple perspectives. And those who are able to assert power in these situations, either by claiming the moral high ground or by integrating across differing perspectives, display a more subtle understanding of how self and other negotiate power such that the adolescent has a validated voice as an autonomous agent.

**Empowering voice**

Narratives of conflict put the adolescent and parent at odds, and therefore create tension between perspectives in a bid for power. But as just discussed, power does not always have to be conceptualized as power over. It can also be power with, and through this, it can lead to empowerment. Stemming from socio-cultural theory, a critical site for empowerment is through the intergenerational transmission of culture, and much of this is done through stories (Fung, Miller, & Lin, 2004; Miller et al., 2001; Pratt & Fiese, 2004). Culturally mediated stories fully implicate cultural frameworks for defining appropriate behaviors, especially moral behaviors and transgressions (Nasir & Kirshner, 2002). Indeed, most
“morality tales” involve a character who engages in a transgression and suffers the consequences.

In narratives about the self, transgressions are particularly difficult to process as they, by definition, put the self in conflict. One acts in ways that are culturally “good” in that they enhance one’s own and others’ well-being in the world. In contrast, when one acts in ways that harm others, one is in a conflicted position (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010). Thus, transgression narratives, narratives of doing harm to another, present a challenge to the individual. In transgression narratives, the storyteller must juggle conflicting goals of providing an accurate account that portrays verisimilitude while presenting the self in the best light (Shütz & Baumeister, 1999). If one believes one is a good person, then telling the facts of what happened when one has engaged in a transgression threatens this characteristic. Indeed, as demonstrated through the work of Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Shütz & Baumeister, 1999), narratives of transgression often include details beyond the bare facts of what happened in order to explain motivations leading up to wrongful actions, as well as appropriate responses following the event. For example, narrators spend more time on the introductory information and self-focused emotion for transgression stories than for positive stories, and these longer introductions allow for greater explanations of their actions, such as the external and internal motivations and causes for the behaviors. Thus transgression narratives include more voicing of one’s own standpoint, perhaps in a bid to mitigate harm done to another.

Because narratives of one’s own transgression are challenging, stories about the transgression of others may be especially important for socializing morality. How others take responsibility and resolve transgression experiences may provide moral models for the listener (Frimer et al., 2011; Nasir & Kirshner, 2002). For adolescents and emerging adults, parents are critical moral models. Thus we explore the ways in which adolescents and emerging adults tell narratives about their parents’ experiences of conflict and transgression to gain a better understanding of how adolescents are using their parents as a framework for owning their own moral voice. To parallel the discussion of parent–adolescent conflict narratives above, we first present narratives in which the participant related a conflict their parent had with their own parents. For example, in this narrative, a 19-year-old male describes a conflict his mother had with her mother when she was an adolescent:

My mother came in and was upset. My grandmother was making dinner and asked my mother to help. My mother refused and went to her room. My grandmother then went into my mother’s room and with a strong tone to her something
along the lines that she needed to get her act together. So my mom then went down and helped my grandmother.

Although there is a reference to how people were feeling (“my mother … was upset”), there is no clear link between the emotion and the behavior. Further, the grandmother imposes her perspective on the mother (“with a strong tone”) and the mother simply complies. There is no reflection on why people behaved as they did or what it ultimately means for the individual or the relationship. The mother has an imposed voice in this narrative. Compare this to an 18-year-old female narrating about her mother and her mother’s parents having a conflict about studying:

When my mom was young, she was one little good kid. As my mother puts it and my grandmother semi-unwillingly nods to her claim. However, because a human-being can’t possibly be perfect, my mom encountered some trouble as well. It happened about a year before she entered college in Korea. Because parents in Korea are experts at pressuring their kids with studying, my mom couldn’t be more stressed out at this point. Plus, unlike the US one is capable of applying to only one college, meaning if she didn’t make it, she had another year of death waiting in front of her. At the most sensitive stage of her life, my grandfather’s extra scolding was not the best solution for my mom. After studying for about four hours in a row, she was taking a short break of talking to her friend on the phone. And of course, her dad walked in and started yelling at her. After a while, my mom couldn’t take it anymore so she just ran out with nothing but her jacket. On a one cold night, she was wandering around without any sense of direction. She couldn’t bear the coldness anymore, so she had no other choice but to go back in. She quietly crawled back into her room, where she found her father sitting on her desk. My mom started crying and all my grandfather did was to hug her. He mentioned that he wasn’t aware of the stress that she was getting from this whole college process and that all he wanted was what she wanted. [Interviewer asks, “Why do you think you were told this story?”] She told me this while I was going through my college process. I think she meant to say she has faith in me, so I should do my best and pick what’s right for me on my own and that she’s always supporting me.

This narrative is clearly more elaborative than the previous one, but the particular ways in which the narrator elaborates center on perspective. The narrator not only provides more background to place this event in a larger moral context (“she was one little good kid”), but the narrator clearly provides information about the motivations and intentions of both her mother and her mother’s parents. The narrative ends with the mother’s parents understanding the mother’s perspective, thus validating the mother’s voice. Although not explicit in the narrative, when asked why she thought her mother told her this story, the narrator immediately creates a link to her own experience, and how her mother is validating the adolescent as having legitimate voice and autonomy.
Many of the intergenerational narratives moved beyond parent–child conflicts to explicitly include moral rules and regulations embedded in larger socio-cultural structures. These narratives provide an avenue for the narrator to express a more overarching moral voice in positioning their parent as a moral agent with choice and responsibility. Some of these narratives present the parent in a highly positive light, standing up to another’s transgression, such as in this example of a 16-year-old male telling a story he knows about his mother, when his mother was about his age:

I just remember there’s two things. Like one of them where she said uh this one kid was getting made fun of and she like uh stood up for him instead. And she was like, “Stop making fun of this kid.” And it ended up the bully like punched her in the nose and now it’s broken and you can see like a little bump where she got punched and stuff. Well, she was telling me that they were by the bus stop one day and this kid had been made fun of a lot and that she just didn’t want … like she was kinda tired of it and so she just said, “Why don’t you just stop making fun of this kid …?” and stuff. And it ended up that the bully … I’m pretty sure it was at a bus stop … but he punched her in the nose. It was just so weird because, first of all, like you don’t usually hit a girl. I mean just … I don’t know; people just say that, but, when you think about it, I don’t know … But he just … he didn’t even know her and he just punched her in the nose and she actually had to go to the hospital and stuff. And so it just seems like a pretty mean thing to do for the bully and just a really courageous thing to do for my mom, just to stand up for some kid and get her nose broken. [Interviewer asks “And did you learn anything from that story?”] Well, I learned that I guess you should stick up for people even though like … Like she didn’t know she was gonna get her nose broken, but she did and it ended up that … I don’t know if the kid stopped making fun of ‘im or anything. It was just really courageous I guess. So you need to stick up for people like that.

In this narrative, the mother witnesses the transgression of another and steps in to help. Thus the parent does not have to deal with complex issues of being a perpetrator harming another, but starts out able to claim the moral high ground in standing up for a victim. In this way the moral lesson is about care for others and one’s responsibility to step in when others are being harmed, even at risk to self. The adolescent, in retelling this story, takes on the voice of the parent, using quoted speech as a device to own the parent’s words to the bully. The adolescent also places this event in explicitly moral terms throughout, beginning with the mother taking a moral stance (“she ... stood up for him”), to referencing social regulations (“you don’t usually hit a girl”), to explicitly generalizing this particular action to a moral characteristic of the mother (“It was just really courageous”), and ending with an implicit owning of the moral principle (“So you need to stick up for people like that”). What we see
in this relatively brief narrative is that the adolescent places the mother’s experience in a larger moral world in which individuals stick up for each other even at their own risk. In the following example, a 14-year-old female also talks about her mother taking a moral stance. Here it is more nuanced, in that the mother initially stands up for another child but then fails to stand up for herself:

Um I think she was in sixth or seventh grade. Yeah, it was middle school, and she was going to class and she saw these two twins that had always, always been picked on and some boys and girls I think were just crowded around them and calling them names and everything. And, actually, it was just one of the twins. And she was just sitting there crying and she couldn’t do anything. And my mom felt so bad, she went up and she grabbed the girl and she said, “Come with me now.” And she stormed off and just took ’er up to the office and she said, “This girl needs some help. Will you please help her?” And then she ran to her class, but she was late and um so my mom’s teacher got really, really angry ’cause she didn’t have a pass or anything and so she gave her a detention I think. And my mom just didn’t have the courage just to fight back because it was a big scary teacher. So she just didn’t fight back and um so she told me that I think when I didn’t have the courage to stand up to a teacher or tell a teacher that I was struggling in the class or something. So she just told me that story and said, you know, I shouldn’t … she said that I should have written the teacher a letter because verbally speaking is really, really difficult. So she said, “I wish that I had, you know, sat down later that night and written my teacher a letter and stuck it in her mailbox. And then maybe the teacher would have realized what I had been doing and that it was a good thing and that I was trying to help someone out.” So um I mean I’ve written teachers letters now and it helps me to actually understand and for the teacher to understand too …

In this very complex narrative, the adolescent again explicitly takes on her mother’s voice through quoted speech, as well as through explicit references to her mother’s thoughts (e.g., she “felt so bad” – which references a moral reaction). Here, however, unlike the previous narrative, the mother’s moral intervention costs her not just physically, but gets her in trouble at school. At this point, the narrative turns to the present, with the mother telling the adolescent that from her current perspective in life, she wishes she had had the courage to stand up for herself. This becomes an empowering narrative for the adolescent, who internalizes this and uses it to stand up to her own teachers who have treated her unfairly. The adolescent ends the narrative by bringing it into the present and expanding it so that her mother’s story resonates with how the adolescent understands both herself and others in the present (“it helps me to actually understand and for the teacher to understand too …”). Thus this mother’s story clearly provides a moral model for the adolescent.
Another, perhaps more complex, type of transgression narrative that adolescents knew about their parents growing up is when the parents themselves transgressed. As discussed by Thorne, McLean, and Dasbach (2004), parents give a lot of thought as to whether and how to tell their adolescents stories about their own transgressions, as these stories present the parents in a vulnerable light, and may undermine their authority or power. However, it may also be that by sharing these kinds of stories with their adolescents, parents are providing their adolescents with moral models of how to understand transgressions, and are in this way empowering their children. For example, from a 19-year-old male:

Once when my mother was twelve years old, she was caught cheating in school. The teacher and principal [or headmaster] came to her house to tell her parents of the incident, as they knew my grandparents quite well. They informed them that she had copied the work of another student during an exam. Upon hearing the story my mother’s parents were very upset. My grandfather told her she wasn’t allowed out of the house for about two months and she was to complete all of the house chores alone for those two months. Though this punishment was very severe, she felt especially bad for disappointing her mother, who was speechless after hearing the incident. She was very disappointed in my mother and just said she expected better from her. My mother still recalls this incident as she promised herself that day, that she never disappoint her mother like that again. [The interviewer asks, “Why do you think you were told this story?”] She told me this story in response to me telling her how I almost cheated on a test in school, at the age of 9.

As in the previous narratives, this adolescent also provides her mother’s voice in this narrative, although here it is a voice of shame. But it is through this shame that the mother empowers herself (“she promised herself that day, that she never disappoint her mother like that again”). Still, in this narrative the mother does not take full responsibility for the actual transgression (cheating) but only expresses being upset about disappointing her mother, and the adolescent narrator does not take on this lesson as her own until prompted. Although there is acknowledgment and acceptance of responsibility at some level, it is not as fully voiced as in this narrative told by a 19-year-old male about his father:

A story my father has told me many times is about the first time he smoked a cigarette. His parents were both cigar smokers and my father was in middle school when this happened. He took a cigar [from] one of his father’s packs and went around out back behind the house to try it out. He always laughs it off about how he just hated how it felt/tasted and as soon as he went back inside the house his mother asked him, “Well, how was it?” To this day, he always tells me he has no idea how she knew he even tried one. Here, however, he knew he did something wrong and felt badly because, [being] young, he knew it was not time for him to try smoking yet and he knew his parents would think poorly of him if
they found out – and they did. Now, however, he laughs about these events and has learned well from his mistakes; which is a very positive thing to take away from this experience that he viewed as a transgression.

Here we see clear acknowledgment of intention and awareness of doing something wrong, as well as the expression of multiple perspectives, both the father’s and his mother. There is also the explicit reference to the father’s acknowledgment of wrongdoing (“he knew he did something wrong”) and how this impacted his sense of self (“he knew his parents would think poorly of him”). What makes this narrative especially wonderful is that the father and adolescent are able to retell it as a funny story that still carries moral weight. Thus there is clearly acceptance and resolution of the moral transgression but the lesson to be carried is not a burden.

These examples provide evidence that intergenerational stories are an important source for empowering adolescents and emerging adults with moral agency. Through telling stories about conflicts and transgressions within their own families of origin, parents are providing narrative models of taking responsibility and learning from one's mistakes. Many adolescents and emerging adults retell these stories in ways that reflect voice and power in constructing a sense of self as a moral agent. Especially intriguing in many of the intergenerational stories is the explicit internalization of the parent’s moral experiences as the adolescent’s own sense of voice and power. Adolescents and emerging adults are using their parents’ stories to guide their own moral behavior in the world.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we presented theoretical arguments and narratives illustrating the constructs of voice and power in constructing moral agency. By complicating the discussion of moral reasoning through a consideration of how individuals accept responsibility for their actions, moral agency conceptualizes all human activity as essentially moral. Every action has consequences for self and other. Moral agency pushes concepts of morality beyond categorical understanding of morals to an understanding based on being a moral person acting in the world, essentially an ontological narrative process. Narratives are the process by which individuals construct a sense of self as an autonomous agent that acts intentionally and accepts responsibility for those actions. Constructing moral agency involves understanding one’s actions from multiple standpoints, or perspectives, in order to gain a better understanding of how self and other are mutually engaged in acting in the world in ways that have specific consequences. Integration of multiple standpoints leads to a validated
narrative voice that is empowered, in the sense that the individual owns their experience, whereas lack of perspective or integration reflects an imposed voice, an abdication of power.

This process begins early in development, as parents and children co-construct narratives of personally experienced events, especially those around conflict. Stemming from socio-cultural theory, we argue that the ways in which parents scaffold these early narratives facilitate children’s developing understanding of narrative form and content, in ways that provide models and frameworks for understanding perspective and accountability. Stemming from feminist theory, the ways in which children’s experiences are validated, or the extent to which the parents’ perspective is imposed, in these narratives, set the stage for the development of an internalized moral voice. Using narratives collected from parents and preschoolers, and from adolescents and emerging adults, we illustrated how voice and power may or may not be expressed in narratives of conflict and transgression. We further illustrated that adolescents use not only their own experiences in constructing moral agency, but they use stories about their parents’ experiences as moral models as well.

Although the ideas presented here are speculative, feminist and socio-cultural theories change the way we think about moral agency. If meaning is deeply situated within linguistically structured social interactions, then moral agency is not an enduring characteristic of the individual, but a process by which the individual takes responsibility in specific situations. This approach necessitates a more qualitative examination of moral agency as emerging within specific social interactions in which one constructs a sense of self as having a standpoint and the power to voice it. In a deep sense, being a moral agent in the world remains always a process of engagement rather than an endpoint.

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