Identifying the aspects of parenting that lead to moral behavior has been a priority among scholars interested in children’s moral development. Researchers have examined both broad relational qualities (such as warmth and security) and more specific relational processes (such as discipline) with regards to moral development (Laible & Thompson, 2007). In general, research has supported the idea that the quality of the relationship between parents and children relates to children’s moral development. More specifically, research has demonstrated that parental warmth, parental responsiveness, and attachment security are all related to children’s moral development, including moral affect and moral cognition (Carlo et al., 2011; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Panfile & Laible, 2012; Zhou et al., 2002). Within the context of warmth and security, children develop a sense of trust in the caregivers’ intentions, and as a result, are more willing to embrace the caregivers’ values (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Laible & Thompson, 2007). Likewise, parents who are responsive and comforting to children’s signals of distress (and who thus promote feelings of attachment security) also provide good models of empathy and compassion (Davidov & Grusec, 2006).

Most of the work that has focused on more specific relational processes has examined the role of discipline in fostering children’s moral affect and cognition (e.g., see Grusec, 2006; Hoffman, 1963; Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006). Hoffman (2000), in particular, emphasized that discipline that involves induction, i.e., discussing the effects of the child’s actions on others, is the most effective strategy for evoking both empathy and guilt in children, thereby ensuring that children internalize parental values. In contrast, power assertive discipline is presumed to undermine conscience; these methods evoke too much negative affect to allow the child to attend to and process parental moral messages, or lead to children complying out of fear of punishment rather than because they internalize values (Hoffman, 2000; Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). In
general, then, research implies that reasoning and induction are effective discipline strategies for fostering multiple aspects of conscience development in childhood and adolescence, including higher levels of moral affect and cognition (see Grusec, 2006, for a review).

By focusing solely on the reasoning and inductions that occur in the context of discipline encounters, researchers may have missed an important arena in which moral lessons are socialized. Specifically, reminiscing conversations, especially those that center on issues of the child’s compliance, cooperation, harmful behavior, and emotional experiences, are likely to provide fruitful avenues through which children learn about emotions, relationships, and morality (see Laible & Panfile, 2009; Laible & Thompson, 2007; Thompson, 2006). Moreover, by discussing moral issues outside of the context of the discipline encounter, young children may be more likely to process and appropriate parental messages, because their cognitive resources are less preoccupied with managing the distress inherent in discipline encounters or negotiating with parents (Laible & Thompson, 2000; Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006). As a result, there are good reasons to believe that reminiscing conversations that include a focus on humanistic concerns, such as emotions, helping, and harming others, are important catalysts for children’s construction of moral and emotional understandings.

The goal of this chapter is to outline the work that has been done on parent–child reminiscing and to consider the potential links that it might have with the development of moral understanding. We start by discussing background information on reminiscing and provide arguments and examples that suggest that reminiscing is one important avenue through which moral values are socialized. We then turn to a discussion of individual differences in the quality of mother–child reminiscing and discuss how these differences might have consequences for children’s socio-moral understanding. We will also consider a host of factors that likely influence the quality of moral reminiscing between mothers and children, including relational quality and characteristics of the child and parent. Finally, we end with suggestions for future research.

**Reminiscing as a context for moral socialization**

Researchers focused on reminiscing embraced the ideas of Vygotsky and his followers (see e.g., Fivush, 1994; Rogoff, 1990). Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory posited that developmental skills are the result of interactions between parents (or other skilled individuals) and children. Thus, it is through children’s participation in social activities (mediated through culture) that children acquire the developmental skills they need.
to be successful in a given culture. Language, in particular, is important in this process, because language provides the child with a way to represent, reflect upon, and partake in social experiences. Moreover, because these early conversations happen in the context of emotionally significant relationships, children likely reflect upon and internalize many of the messages and meanings that are co-constructed in the context of discourse (Laible & Thompson, 2007). This process is dialectical in nature, in that both caregivers and children mutually influence and accommodate each other through discourse and interaction (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). Children, thus, are active participants in discourse, and meanings are ultimately co-constructed by the dyad.

Reminiscing, or sharing stories of our past experiences, is an important part of our social lives (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006) and begins early in development, almost as soon as children are capable of producing language (see Hudson, 1990; Nelson, 1988). Moreover, research suggests that it is a frequent part of conversational discourse between parents and children, occurring as often as five to seven times an hour (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Miller, 1994). Early in development, parents provide most of the structure and content of these reminiscing conversations, but by the end of the preschool years, children have internalized the narrative structure necessary to be active participants in these discussions (Eisenberg, 1985; Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush, 2007; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Moreover, researchers have argued these early reminiscing conversations have multiple functions, including creating bonds between people, helping children organize, evaluate, and find meaning in their past experiences, and shaping autobiographical memories and self-concept (Fivush & Haden, 2005; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Nelson, 1996).

Reminiscing may also serve an important function with regards to helping young children understand their past experiences, especially those experiences that are difficult and challenging, such as transgressions or experiences with negative affect. Through reminiscing conversations, parents can provide psychological insight for the child into what others were thinking, feeling, and intending in the situation, concepts that are often difficult for children to grasp on their own (Laible & Thompson, 2000). Moreover, it also seems likely that within these conversations, parents morally evaluate children’s behavior and make attributions about causality and culpability. Consider the following conversation between a three-year-old boy and his mother about pushing his cousin (taken from Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2012):

MOTHER: Why did you push him down?
CHILD: ’Cause I didn’t know the words.
MOTHER: Because you didn’t know what?
CHILD: The words
MOTHER: The words?
CHILD: [nods]
MOTHER: What does that have to do with pushing Owen?
CHILD: I don’t know.
MOTHER: Was that nice to Owen?
CHILD: [shakes head no]
MOTHER: How do you think that made Owen feel?
CHILD: Sad.
MOTHER: How do you think it made Aunt Tess feel when you pushed Owen?
CHILD: Sad?
MOTHER: Yeah. And then what did you need to say to Owen afterwards?
CHILD: Sorry.
MOTHER: Yeah.
CHILD: Did I not?
MOTHER: No, I think you did say sorry.
CHILD: I said sorry to Aunt Tess.
MOTHER: Yeah, and did you say sorry to Owen too?
CHILD: Yeah, I said sorry to Owen too.
MOTHER: Yeah, because what did you do that was not very nice?
CHILD: Pushed him.
MOTHER: Yeah. And why is that bad?
CHILD: ‘Cause it hurts people.
MOTHER: Yeah, because he is littler than you and he can fall and hurt himself. He could’ve gotten really hurt.

In this example, the mother scaffolds the child’s psychological understanding of his past transgression. The mother highlights the importance of both the victim’s and the bystander’s (Aunt Tess) feelings. By highlighting the emotional consequences of the child’s actions on others (the cousin and aunt felt sad), the mother is also drawing on inductive techniques that have been linked with higher levels of empathy, guilt, and values internalization in children (Hoffman, 2000; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996). This mother also provides a clear moral evaluation of the child’s behavior (“what did you do that was not very nice?”) and gives him information on why the behavior was morally unacceptable (“He could have gotten really hurt”). Finally, the mother also makes clear the consequences of such behavior (i.e., it requires an apology). Young children often have trouble reflecting upon psychological aspects of the harm that they do to others (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010), and by openly discussing the child’s past experiences with harming others, as this mother does, parents can give children the tools that they need to reflect upon and evaluate their own transgressions.

Ultimately, there are good reasons to believe that these types of conversations are catalysts for moral understanding. First, they encourage direct discussions of the child’s transgressions (outside of the negative...
emotion that is inherent in the situation) and provide opportunities for parents to scaffold children’s understanding of moral experiences and to discuss why particular behaviors are morally unacceptable (Laible & Thompson, 2000). As demonstrated in the previous conversational excerpt, these conversations also provide a key context in which mothers can use the type of inductive techniques that Hoffman (1963, 2000) argued are important in promoting guilt and empathy, which leads to values internalization. In addition, these reminiscing conversations about the child’s moral/immoral behavior provide important avenues through which parents can convey their disapproval or approval of the child’s behavior. Although parents’ approval/disapproval are likely to also occur in the context of a discipline encounter, in the context of reminiscing the parent’s and child’s negative affect are likely to have dissipated enough to allow for a more sophisticated discussion. Researchers have argued that gaining the parent’s approval is one important incentive for children to do the right thing (Laible & Thompson, 2007).

Moreover, researchers have offered evidence for the idea that reminiscing is closely linked with children’s autobiographical memory, i.e., their memory for personal experiences (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Hudson, 1990; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). As a result, it seems likely that reminiscing during the preschool years (and potentially beyond) shapes children’s developing self-concept (Fivush, 2007). Shared conversations about past events provide children with information about which events and experiences are important and noteworthy (Bird & Reese, 2006), which in turn helps children integrate them into a meaningful life narrative and self-concept (Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush & Haden, 2003). Moreover, reminiscing also gives children a framework for evaluating and reflecting upon their past experiences (Fivush, 1993, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Welch-Ross, 2001), including their past experiences with emotion and morality (Laible & Panfile, 2009). As a result, reminiscing conversations give children the evaluative tools to reflect upon their past harmful behavior and link such behavior to their self-definitions.

In the end, parents who choose to discuss the child’s past transgressions and helpful behaviors highlight the importance of moral behavior for the child’s developing autobiographical life story (Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007) and self-concept. Thus, through reminiscing about transgressions and helpful behaviors, moral experiences become a defining part of children’s autobiographical life story, which may lead children to see moral values as central to their self-definition (and eventually to moral identity). By contrast, parents who avoid raising moral issues in reminiscing may be more likely to have children who see moral values as
less influential in shaping their past experiences. Ultimately, by discussing their past experiences with moral issues, children may begin to connect discrete incidents of transgression and helping into a more coherent understanding of what it means to be a “morally good person.”

Although much of the theorizing has focused on the discussion of the child’s transgressions, it is also feasible that discussions about the child’s past helping and morally good behavior contribute to a child’s developing moral self-concept, although little empirical work has examined this possibility. By emphasizing the child’s cooperative behavior, parents also have the ability to highlight the relevance of these attributes for the child’s autobiographical memories and self-concept. The following is an example of a conversation about helping between a mother and a three-year-old boy (taken from Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2012):

**MOTHER:** Remember when baby Reed was sad? You did something nice. What did you do Reed?

**CHILD:** [distracted by toy in the room]

**MOTHER:** Yeah, I see the fire truck. Okay let’s listen to Mommy. I have something to say about baby Reed. Remember when Reed was crying? And what did you do to make him laugh?

**CHILD:** Ummm.

**MOTHER:** Do you remember what you were doing?

**CHILD:** What?

**MOTHER:** You were dancing.

**CHILD:** Yeah.

**MOTHER:** Yeah. And what did he do?

**CHILD:** Ummm.

**MOTHER:** Umm. I don’t know.

**MOTHER:** You don’t know?

**CHILD:** He was dancing?

**MOTHER:** Was he dancing?

**CHILD:** Yeah?

**MOTHER:** No was he laughing?

**CHILD:** Yeah.

**MOTHER:** Yeah. And he would look for you, right?

**CHILD:** Yeah.

**MOTHER:** So when he was sad, that was nice, because you made him get happy, right?

**CHILD:** Yeah.

Just as with the previous conversation about a transgression, the mother in this conversation provides a clear moral evaluation of the child’s behavior (i.e., “that was nice”) and provides psychological insight into the baby brother’s experience, by making it clear that the boy’s actions (i.e., dancing) made his brother happy. By doing so, the mother is highlighting an emotion cause. Researchers have shown that the discussion of emotion
causes is important in fostering emotional understanding (Brown & Dunn, 1996; Denham, Zoller, & Couchard, 1994; Garner et al., 1997) inasmuch as it helps promote children’s understanding of the effects of their actions on others’ emotional states. In addition, in this causal talk the mother also highlights the positive consequences of the child’s prosocial behavior on the brother (“you made him get happy”) and, through her enthusiasm and positive affect, communicates her approval of his behavior. Mothers who praise the child’s past prosocial behavior are likely to encourage children’s adoption of values associated with helping and kindness (Carlo et al., 2007).

Discussions about the child’s past experiences with emotion, particularly negative emotion, might also be influential in encouraging moral sensibility through the relational and emotional understanding that such conversations promote. Research has suggested that emotional themes are frequent in parent–child reminiscing (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002). Moreover, researchers have speculated that talk about negative affect during reminiscing, in particular, might be more frequent and more sophisticated than parent–child talk about positive affect, because parents might be especially concerned about helping children make sense of these problematic emotions (e.g., Fivush et al., 2003; Laible & Panfile, 2009). In discussing children’s past experiences with negative emotion, in particular, mothers are helping children to resolve and cope with their previous negative emotions and perhaps behave more appropriately when high levels of negative affect are aroused (Fivush et al., 2003; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003). Finally, research suggests that mothers are also concerned with making sure that children understand the causes and consequences of their own negative emotions and those of others (Fivush et al., 2003; Laible & Panfile, 2009). Thus, reminiscing conversations might also promote children’s emotional perspective taking and their understanding of how to cope with and regulate negative emotion (Laible, 2011; Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2013a; Laible & Panfile, 2009), skills that are closely tied with children’s empathy, moral, and prosocial development (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Thompson, 2006; Zahn-Waxler, 2000).

Although much of the work on mother–child reminiscing has focused on maternal contributions to reminiscing, it is also important to realize that children are active participants in shaping the content, tone, and style of these early conversations. Children shape these conversations by their willingness to participate (especially when discussing potentially threatening issues), by switching topics or introducing new material about the topic at hand, by their emotional demeanor, by ignoring maternal
requests for information, and by challenging the parent’s interpretations of events. Consider the following excerpt of a reminiscing conversation between a mother and a four-year-old girl, who were asked to discuss a recent positive event (Laible & Thompson, 2007):

**Mother:** So when we went to Washington, did you have a good time?

**Child:** Yeah.

**Mother:** Yeah? Good?

**Child:** But I really wanted to play with her toys and she did not let me play with them!

**Mother:** Yeah. Sometimes it’s hard to learn to share, isn’t it? It makes some people feel bad when you don’t share.

**Child:** Sometimes I don’t share.

**Mother:** Yeah.

In this conversation, the daughter’s topic-switching transforms the nature of the conversation, including its content, focus, and emotional tone. Interestingly, the daughter is the one who raises the moral issue, although the mother picks up on the theme and facilitates the discussion of sharing. Although little research has examined children’s contributions to moral discourse, the limited work that has been done (Wright & Bartsch, 2008) does suggest that young children raise and discuss moral issues with parents and are active participants in conversations surrounding moral issues.

Overall, reminiscing is an important context in which moral values are socialized. In these early conversations about emotions and morality, parents provide most of the scaffolding and provide children with the tools that they need to understand their own and others’ emotions, intentions, and behaviors in the shared experience. In addition, in these conversations parents frequently evaluate the morality of children’s behavior and express their approval or disapproval of their children’s actions. Interestingly, when compared with other conversational contexts (such as storybook reading), reminiscing conversations have been shown to be a more potent avenue for socialization of some types of understanding (e.g., emotional understanding; Laible, 2004a; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007). Although the reasons for this are not yet fully understood, there are several possible explanations. First, reminiscing experiences are intimately related to a child’s own self-interests and involve familiar individuals, contexts, and experiences. Thus, reminiscing conversations may be more meaningful for a child than other types of conversations, and children might be more motivated to attend to and process messages conveyed in these conversations. In addition, given the links that reminiscing shares with autobiographical memory (see, for example, Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007), reminiscing is likely to be a powerful arena...
for socialization because of the effects it exerts on children’s developing self-definition, which may be closely related to children’s emotional and moral understandings (Fivush et al., 2003; Kochanska, 2002; Laible & Panfile, 2009).

**Individual differences in the quality of reminiscing**

Research has suggested that there are substantial individual differences in the quality, structure, and tone of these conversations about the child’s past experiences (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Laible, 2004a, 2004b; Laible & Song, 2006; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993) and that these differences have consequences for a child’s autobiographical memory, emotional understanding, and moral development (see, for example, Laible, 2004a, 2004b; Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2012; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). The most studied quality of reminiscing has been the amount of elaboration that mothers provide during discussions of past events (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, for a review). Highly elaborative mothers ask open-ended rich questions, provide novel background information about the event discussed (e.g., see the excerpts from the previous conversations for examples of elaborative mothers), connect and expand upon events in the narrative, and focus on the emotional and evaluative components of past events (see Fivush, 2007; Fivush & Haden, 2005). By contrast, mothers who are less elaborative tend to repeat closed-ended questions, expand and embellish little on the narrative, and elicit few pieces of new information from children, thereby creating less coherent and detailed narratives.

Research has suggested that children of elaborative mothers have advantages both in terms of autobiographical memory and socioemotional understanding. Children of elaborative mothers have more detailed memories of their past experiences than those of less elaborative mothers (Hudson, 1990; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; Reese & Fivush, 1993). It seems likely that having an elaborative mother helps a child internalize narrative structure (which facilitates memory) and form strong representations of the event (Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003). By providing elaboration, a mother not only cements the child’s memory for the event, but also increases the child’s understanding of the event (Laible & Panfile, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that maternal elaboration surrounding the child’s past emotional and moral experiences has been linked with children’s emotional understanding and early conscience development (Laible, 2004a, 2004b, 2011; Van Bergen et al., 2009). In fact, intervention research focused on training maternal elaboration confirms the causal links between maternal elaboration
and cognitive and emotional outcomes (Reese & Newcombe, 2007; Van Bergen et al., 2009).

In addition to overall individual differences in elaboration, mothers vary in their willingness to openly raise and discuss emotion, especially negative emotion, during reminiscing (Fivush et al., 2003; Laible, 2004a, 2004b), and these differences are also linked with children’s moral and emotional understandings. In these early reminiscing conversations, it is primarily the parents who seem to initiate the discussion of emotion (Laible, 2004a), and thus parents ultimately have the responsibility of giving children insight into their past emotional experiences. Parents who are willing to openly raise and discuss emotion including its causes and consequences can help to clarify the emotional experiences of the child and others involved in the shared event. In particular, by discussing the emotions of the parent or other significant individuals involved in the shared event, parents can help promote children’s affective perspective taking and empathy (Laible & Song, 2006; Thompson, Liable, & Ontai, 2003), especially when the discussion centers on the child’s past transgressions. In contrast, parents who restrict their discussion of emotion during reminiscing conversations do little to promote children’s understanding of the role emotions play in their past experiences and may miss important opportunities to socialize children about emotions. In the context of moral reminiscing, failures to discuss emotion may inhibit children’s understanding of the emotional consequences of their actions on others.

Moreover, mothers also seem to vary in the emotional tone in which they discuss children’s past experiences, although little work has directly examined this issue (see Laible & Song, 2006, for an exception). Nonetheless, it seems plausible that emotional and moral understandings are enhanced when reminiscing occurs in the context of shared positivity (Laible & Song, 2006). Children’s willingness to participate in reminiscing with parents and to internalize parental messages may be enhanced in an atmosphere that is imbued with warmth and affection. In contrast, the mother’s expression of negative affect, especially hostility, in the context of reminiscing is likely to interfere with a child’s construction of understanding and his/her internalization of the parental message. Moreover, children might be likely to reject parental messages if they are conveyed in the context of negative affectivity (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). This is consistent with Hoffman’s ideas (1963, 2000) that internalization is not enhanced in discipline encounters in which the child’s affect is too arousing to allow him/her to process the message being conveyed by the parent. It seems likely that Hoffman’s ideas, however, are relevant outside of the context of discipline encounters, and that parents
who are “power assertive” or who evoke too much negative affect in the context of discourse tend to inhibit the construction of moral understanding (Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003).

Finally, parent–child dyads seem to differ in their ability to have collaborative and coherent discussions about the child’s past experience, particularly with negative emotion, and this too seems to have consequences for children’s socio-moral development. In a recent study, the level of intersubjectivity between mothers and children when discussing children’s past experiences with negative emotion was associated with children’s subsequent empathy, positive representations, and moral self (Laible et al., 2013a). Given the challenge of negative emotions for young children (and their parents), the ability of the parent–child dyad to co-create meaning out of the child’s past experiences with negative emotions likely has important consequences for a child’s socio-moral development (Fivush et al., 2003; Laible & Panfile, 2009). Open, coherent, and collaborative discussions about the child’s past negatively charged emotional experiences are likely to promote feelings of trust and security in the child and, in turn, enhance children’s feelings of self-worth and positive representations of themselves and others. Moreover, such an understanding of their own past experiences with negative emotion is likely to create insight into the negative emotional experiences of others and enhance children’s responsiveness to other’s distress, as well as a sense of moral responsibility.

In sum, there are important individual differences in the style, content, and emotional tone of reminiscing, which have consequences for children’s early moral development. Parents who are elaborative, who discuss the emotional effects of the child’s actions on others, and who express warmth in the context of reminiscing with children tend to have children who internalize parental messages and who have a more in-depth understanding of their moral experiences. Similarly, the ability of the parent–child dyad to co-create meaning of the child’s past moral and emotional experiences might also have consequences for children’s moral development.

Factors that predict the quality of reminiscing

Relational quality

Reminiscing conversations about the child's past transgressions and past kind and helpful behaviors occur within the context of a broader emotional relationship. We argue that the quality of this relationship significantly influences the nature and impact of reminiscing. Warm, supportive, and responsive relationships likely pave the way for conversations
about difficult issues, including negative emotions and transgressions. Relationships imbued with more hostility and negative affect tend to inhibit the discussion of such threatening topics (see Laible & Panfile, 2009, for a review). Most of the work that has examined the influence of relational quality on mother–child reminiscing has focused on children’s attachment security (Farrar, Fasig, & Welch-Ross, 1997; Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible, 2004a, 2011).

Attachment theory was originally designed as a normative developmental theory to explain the intense emotional bond between caregivers and children, but it has evolved into a theory that explains individual differences in socio-emotional development. One of its basic premises is that children’s experiences with the sensitivity and availability of the caregiver (primarily during stressful situations) influence their feelings of security and trust in others (Bowlby, 1980). As a result of their experiences with either sensitive or insensitive responsiveness from caregivers, children construct internal working models of themselves and others, which guide their subsequent interactions in close relationships (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1990). Children who have sensitive and responsive caregivers construct internal working models of themselves as worthy and loveable, and models of others as trustworthy; those with insensitive caregivers construct internal working models of themselves as unworthy and others as untrustworthy. Ultimately, internal working models become interpretative filters that guide children’s understandings of caregivers and other close relational partners (Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003) and influence a child’s willingness and ability to engage in affective communication with caregivers (Cassidy, 1990; Laible & Panfile, 2009).

A number of researchers have argued that one hallmark of a secure relationship is open communication between caregivers and children, especially surrounding topics that involve negative emotion (such as the child’s past transgressions) (see Laible & Panfile, 2009, for a review). Research has generally supported the idea that communication outside the context of reminiscing is more open and fluent in a secure than insecure relationship (Etzion-Carasso & Oppenheim, 2000; Main, 1995; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Research on reminiscing has found similar effects. Mothers of secure children are more elaborative with their children during reminiscing across multiple topics than are mothers of insecure children (see Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible, 2004a; Reese, 2002). The links between attachment security and maternal elaboration are especially strong for those reminiscing conversations that center on negative affect (see Laible, 2011). This is significant because it suggests that attachment security is especially influential in promoting more elaborative conversations between mothers and children surrounding threatening topics (i.e., negative affect), and suggests that conversations about moral issues might
also be more elaborative between secure than insecure dyads (see Laible, 2004b, for preliminary empirical support of this idea).

In addition, research also suggests that secure dyads explore emotional themes in more depth and with more frequency than insecure dyads – a difference that has important implications for children’s development of socio-moral understanding. In particular, mothers of secure children appear to discuss negative emotions more frequently with their children, as compared to mothers of insecure children both in reminiscing conversations surrounding emotional themes and when discussing the child’s past transgressions and moral behavior (Laible, 2004a, 2011; Laible & Thompson, 2000). Not only do mothers of securely attached children use more emotion labels than mothers of insecure children, but they also seem to discuss negative emotion in more sophisticated ways (see Laible, 2011). Mothers of secure children have been found to discuss the causes of negative emotion more frequently with their children during reminiscing and to be more likely to confirm the child’s experiences with negative emotion (e.g., “yes, you were angry”). Confirming children’s emotional experiences seems especially important when discussing the child’s past moral and emotional experiences, because it is likely to keep the child engaged and willing to discuss otherwise threatening issues (Laible & Panfile, 2009).

Overall, research demonstrates that the quality of the relationship between mothers and children is associated with the quality of reminiscing between mothers and children. Many important questions, however, remain unexamined. Other relational qualities, such as warmth and responsiveness, have not been investigated with respect to the quality of reminiscing but seem like important constructs to explore. In the context of warm, responsive relationships, a mutually responsive orientation develops, in which both partners are fully committed to each other (see Kochanska, 1995, 2002; Maccoby, 1984). A mutually responsive orientation is likely to facilitate the discussion of moral issues in reminiscing (and other challenging topics), partially because of the trust that both partners have in the relationship. As a result, topics of a threatening nature, such as the child’s past transgressions, are not off-limits, because both partners expect the other to be responsive to their attempts to discuss the incident. Moreover, a mutually responsive orientation likely enhances child engagement in such reminiscing conversations and increases the willingness of children to attend to and embrace parental messages (see Laible & Thompson, 2007). Thus, it also seems likely that the quality of the relationship might moderate the impact of reminiscing on children’s moral development, but this issue has not been empirically explored. Nevertheless, it has been argued that children in secure, responsive, and warm relationships might be more likely to attend to, reflect upon, and
accept parental messages than those in insecure, hostile, or unresponsive relationships (see Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). In the end, there are good reasons to believe that children who are part of secure and mutually responsive relationships will have more frequent, open, and sophisticated conversations about their own past moral and immoral behavior (Laible, 2004b). Children from secure and mutually responsive relationships will have trust and confidence in the caregiver’s responsiveness in the context of difficult conversations and, as a result, will be more open to exploring difficult themes (such as the harm they have caused others). In addition, parents of secure children (and who are part of these mutually responsive dyads) will be more competent conversational partners for several reasons. First, the child’s willing engagement in these conversations (as a result of the mutually responsive relationship) will facilitate the parent’s discussion of morally relevant issues. Second, the parent’s own commitment to the relationship and secure internal working models will enable the parent to openly explore the emotional consequences of the child’s actions for others (Bretherton, 1990). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that these conversations between partners in secure and responsive dyads will involve high levels of parental elaboration, more intersubjectivity, and more open discussion of the emotional themes. At least one study provides preliminary support for these ideas (Laible, 2004a). Specifically, results revealed that mothers of secure children were more likely to raise and discuss negative emotion and more likely to elaborate with children when discussing their past transgressions and good behavior than were mothers of insecure children.

*Child temperament*

Research has suggested that children’s temperament may also influence the nature of these conversations, although almost all of this work has focused exclusively on differences in maternal elaboration. Mothers have been shown to be more elaborative with children whom they perceive to be high in effortful control (Laible, 2004a; Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2013b), more sociable (Lewis, 1999), more persistent (Bauer & Burch, 2004), and higher in negative reactivity (Laible, 2004a). These findings suggest that mothers are likely to adapt their reminiscing style based upon child qualities and to elaborate more if they view their child as able to maintain a more involved conversation or as more outgoing. Mothers may also elaborate more with children who are highly reactive because they perceive them to need more coaching in how to handle negative emotion (Laible, 2004a). Higher levels of effortful control have also been linked with higher levels of collaboration between mother and child and more creation of meaning.
(i.e., intersubjectivity) during reminiscing conversations about the child’s past negative affect (Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2013b).

Overall, the findings with temperament suggest that children with more positively inclined temperaments (especially those higher in effortful control) may have more sophisticated reminiscing conversations with parents surrounding moral issues (see Laible, 2004b, for empirical support). In part, it appears that mothers are sensitive to the fact that their children are high in effortful control, and therefore elaborate more in reminiscing with these children. In addition, it seems that the higher levels of child engagement that result from well-regulated temperaments tend to evoke more maternal elaboration. In the end, the frequent and sophisticated reminiscing conversations that result from a child’s high level of effortful control might be one explanation for why children high in effortful control show more advanced moral development (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Panfile & Laible, 2012).

**Gender of the child**

The style and content of these moral reminiscing conversations might also vary based upon the gender of the child. Parents subtly adapt their parenting behavior to foster behaviors that they consider appropriate for each gender (Zahn-Waxler, 2000). Cultural stereotypes suggest that females are more likely than males to be empathic, nurturing, and compassionate (Surrey, 1991), which suggests that girls might be socialized by parents to be more empathic. Although direct work examining gender differences in the socialization of empathy is rare, work does suggest that girls are socialized to be more attuned to the emotions of others (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987). In addition, some theorists have argued that girls are socialized to include the needs of others when considering moral dilemmas (see Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1991).

Research has supported the idea that the style and content of reminiscing does vary based upon the gender of the child. Specifically, parents have been found to elaborate more with girls than with boys during reminiscing conversations (Adams et al., 1995; Fivush et al., 2003; Kuebl & Fivush, 1992; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996). In addition, parents have been found to label emotions more and to use a greater variety of emotion terms with daughters than with sons in reminiscing (Fivush, 2007). Finally, parents may emphasize social contexts with girls more than with boys (see Buckner & Fivush, 2000) when discussing the child’s past experiences with emotions. Overall, the work on reminiscing supports the idea that parents in this context socialize girls more than boys to attend to the emotional experiences of themselves and others. Such differences are likely to have important consequences for the development of emotional...
understanding, empathy, and morality, and may be partially responsible for why girls score higher than boys on emotional perspective taking and related constructs (Brown & Dunn, 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006).

Unfortunately, work directly examining links between gender and reminiscing about the children’s moral behavior has been limited (see Laible, 2004b and Laible & Thompson, 2000 for exceptions). Nonetheless, based on the work done on emotion reminiscing, it seems feasible to expect gender differences in moral reminiscing. With girls, parents might be more likely to emphasize the emotional consequences of their past moral behavior (e.g., “that hurt your brother”) and to discuss the emotional reactions of others. With boys, parents may focus more on the physical consequences of their actions, rather than the emotional aspects (e.g., “you were punished for hitting your brother”). In addition, parents might discuss different types of moral issues with sons than with daughters. For example, given cultural beliefs that girls are more helpful, compassionate, and kind, parents might be more likely to emphasize and discuss these traits with girls than boys. However, it is important to point out that the small amount of work on moral reminiscing between parents and young children has not found gender differences (e.g., Laible, 2004b; Laible & Thompson, 2000). The past work, however, has been limited in focus, and has only explored two aspects of reminiscing (maternal elaboration and maternal emotion references). Most of the work that did find gender differences in reminiscing has focused on how emotion is discussed (e.g., in the number and types of emotions; Fivush, 2007), and this early work did not make such fine distinctions.

Characteristics of the parent

It also seems likely that characteristics of the parent are influential in shaping moral reminiscing, but these have not been well explored by researchers. One preliminary study found links between the mother’s security of attachment, as assessed in the Adult Attachment Interview, and maternal elaboration during reminiscing (Reese, 2008). Furthermore, research suggests that maternal personality characteristics and mothers’ representations of their children were related longitudinally to the quality of emotional reminiscing surrounding a negative event (Laible, Murphy, & Augustine, 2013b). Whereas maternal personality and temperament mostly predicted concurrent reminiscing quality, it was primarily maternal positive and coherent representations of their children that led to more quality reminiscing across time. We speculate that other parental characteristics may also have a role in shaping the quality of moral reminiscing between parents and children, including the parents’ own moral
identity, beliefs, and values, as well as the parents’ socialization goals. For example, it is likely that parents who see moral values as central to their self-concept and as important socialization goals might raise and discuss their children’s past moral transgressions with them more frequently and elaboratively.

**Future directions**

Despite the likely importance of reminiscing for fostering moral development, research examining how these conversations influence moral development is in its infancy. Thus, there are many avenues for potential future research, and we highlight some of these below. First, much of the work on parent–child reminiscing has focused on maternal elaboration and the discussion of emotion. We have suggested that other facets of reminiscing may also be important with regards to fostering moral understanding. For example, although researchers have examined inductive discipline techniques in the context of discipline encounters (Hoffman, 2000; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996), researchers have not examined whether parents are using these techniques in conversations about the child’s misbehavior after the fact, although our anecdotal evidence suggests that they are. Research is needed to confirm our beliefs and to examine whether inductions in the context of reminiscing are equally influential (if not more so) in promoting values internalization than those used in discipline encounters. In addition, parental evaluations of the child’s behavior and parental attributions about the child’s intentions are also likely to influence the child’s appropriation of values, but these too have not been explored in the context of reminiscing.

Another important, unexplored area in the research on parent–child reminiscing is the degree to which children contribute to these conversations. All too often researchers have focused upon what the mother (or father) is doing in the context of the reminiscing and have ignored the contribution of the child (see, for example, Laible, 2004a, 2004b). Early in development, it is clear that parents take responsibility for initiating and structuring these conversations (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Fivush, 2007; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993), especially with regards to discussions of complex phenomena such as emotions and morality. Yet, ultimately, the child’s willingness to engage in these conversations must shape the ability of the parent to openly discuss and elaborate on important themes, especially in conversations involving threatening topics (such as the child’s past harm to others). Children who are uninterested in exploring their past misbehavior (or past helping behavior) may constrain the parents’ ability to have such discussions. Although many factors might influence the child’s willingness to engage in these types of conversations (e.g., his/her negative reactivity),
the child’s trust in the parent (perhaps as a function of their relationship quality) seems like one potentially important factor to explore.

Second, most of the work on parent–child reminiscing has been done in early childhood. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that reminiscing conversations provide an important avenue for moral socialization throughout the life span. We speculate that reminiscing conversations with parents (as well as with peers) might provide particularly important avenues through which moral values are wrestled with and integrated into self-concept during middle childhood and through adolescence. In fact, it might be particularly important to examine the nature of these conversations during adolescence, when moral identity is forming (Hart, 2005). Although empirical studies examining how moral reminiscing in middle childhood and adolescence influences moral development are lacking, preliminary research on emotional reminiscing between parents and adolescents does suggest that reminiscing is influential in promoting adolescent emotional well-being and adjustment (Bohanek, Marin, & Fivush, 2008).

Finally, another important and unexplored question is how facets of the parent–child relationship, characteristics of the child and parent, and the broader context in which these conversations occur interact with the content and style of discourse to enhance or inhibit the child’s appropriation of parental values. Based upon previous research and theorizing, there is reason to expect these dimensions might interact to influence moral development. For example, researchers have discovered that gentle discipline is effective in conscience development for highly fearful children, but unrelated to such development for those children who are fearless (Kochanska, 1995). In other words, for children already prone toward anxiety, gentle discipline is arousing enough to foster internalization; for those who are low in fear, a secure relationship is more influential in promoting conscience (Kochanska, 1995). In a similar vein, children who are prone toward anxiety might become easily overaroused when discussing their past transgressions and may require more elaboration, positive affect, and support during moral reminiscing in order to foster conscience development (Laible, 2004a, 2004b). In contrast, children who are less prone to anxiety may require more intense inductions to arouse feelings of guilt and to promote moral development. Altogether, therefore, it is reasonable to expect that relational qualities (such as warmth or hostility) might enhance or inhibit the effect of moral reminiscing (as discussed earlier).

Overall, we have demonstrated that studying the effects of parent–child reminiscing on children’s early moral development is a worthy avenue of research. Young children are often quite interested in discussing moral issues, both within and outside of the context of reminiscing (Wright & Bartsch, 2008). Thus, these conversations constitute a very important
part of children’s daily lives; a detailed examination of the effects of these conversations on moral development across the life span is therefore of paramount importance. Moreover, training parents to reminisce with children in ways that are more elaborative and emotionally open is a key avenue for intervention, inasmuch as our goal is to improve children’s moral and emotional understandings.

REFERENCES


