Voice and Silence in Autobiographical Narratives
by Robyn Fivush

Who we are is informed by what we say about ourselves. Through telling the stories of our lives to others and to ourselves, we begin to construct a life narrative that forms the basis of our understanding of self. What happens, though, in the case of experiences of which we cannot speak? How does what we can and cannot say shape our life and our self? As Jeanne Braham (1995) has argued, "We see the past . . . in something of the same way we see a Henry Moore sculpture. The 'holes' define the 'shape.' What is left repressed, or what cannot be uttered, is often as significant to the whole shape of the life as what is said."

Here, I present a model for understanding the development of a life narrative through the constructs of "voice" and "silence." Arguing from both feminist and developmental psychological perspectives, I illustrate the ways in which silencing of experience in childhood has profound implications for the kinds of lives individuals are able to construct. I first define voice and silence and relate these constructs to a model of autobiographical memory. This model highlights the role of language in privileging some experiences over others in the construction of a life story. I then illustrate the heuristic utility of this model using two data sets—mothers reminiscing with their preschool children and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Through these narratives, I show the implications of voice and silence in shaping a life narrative and a coherent sense of self.

Voice and silence

The way in which voice and silence are conceptualized emerge from the feminist concepts of place and power (Belenky, Clinchey, Goldberg, and Tarule,1986; Gilligan, 1982). Although there are multiple feminist theories (see Rosser and Miller, 2000), all share the common core assumption that place and power are critical in understanding human culture (Yoder and Kahn, 1992). In order to explicate these concepts, I focus on feminist standpoint theory (Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993) because this theory emerged from and critiques specific aspects of the scientific method used within the social sciences (Fivush, 2000). Feminist standpoint theory endorses the scientific method and the role of experimentally derived empirical data but argues for placing empirical data in a more contextualized framework of knowledge and objectivity. In contrast to assumptions underlying logical positivism, feminist theories focus on the interrelated and contextual basis of knowledge (Longino, 1993; L. H. Nelson, 1993). Knowledge is embedded in the way in which social activity is structured and it emerges from social interactions. Knowledge must be considered in terms of who knows, in what situations, and for what purposes. Since knowledge cannot be extricated from social-cultural structures, the observer never can be completely unbiased. An observer is always, by definition, observing from a specific place or perspective. Such is the "standpoint" in feminist standpoint theory, and it is defined historically, culturally, individually, and situationally.

Historically and culturally, we are all positioned in a particular time and place, socialized within the specific belief systems of our historical and cultural milieu. To say so is not to assert that we never can see beyond these socialized lenses; however, doing so is difficult and never completely successful. Individually, we are each a member of a specific gender, race, and class and thus are defined

historically and culturally as a particular kind of person. This definition allows us access to certain ways of knowing and denies us access to other ways of knowing. For example, being male or female will provide the individual access to particular kinds of activities (e.g., Batman versus Barbie birthday parties, fraternity initiations versus sorority teas), and these activities lead to the development of specific kinds of skills over others. Thus, as individuals engage in culturally prescribed activities, they learn to perform in ways appropriate to their "place" in the social structure (Fivush, 1998). Obviously, these kinds of activities change historically (and perhaps even radically as the racial and gender discrimination of the last three decades have diminished), but they are always present.[1]

Finally, all behaviors are influenced by the specific situation in which the individual is embedded. Behavior is constructed with other people in particular situations in which multiple goals are negotiated and achieved. Place, then, is a dynamic concept; one's historical, cultural, individual, and situational position in an ongoing stream of human activity is always evolving, although each of these levels of place evolve at different rates.[2] The concept of place changes our understanding of the scientific method. Although scientists are trained to provide more systematic and objective observation, even scientists remain embedded in a particular historical and cultural context that never can be completely overridden. Therefore, scientists must seriously consider the standpoint from which they are observing and how this position might affect their observations. Further, behavior must be conceptualized as dynamic and fluid, not reducible to independent cause-and-effect relations. Finally, knowledge is not in an individual's head but in the relationship between the individual and the environment.[3] Rather than defining objectivity as an unbiased perspective (the view from nowhere), feminist standpoint theory defines objectivity as the coordination of multiple perspectives; objectivity emerges from diverse perspectives (the view from everywhere) (Bordo, 1990; Code, 1993; Harding, 1993). The ultimate goal of psychology is not to deduce context-free universal principles of behavior but rather to specify the conditions under which different individuals will display specific kinds of behaviors.

Due to the way in which society has come to define specific roles in the social structure, some standpoints are imbued with more authority or power than others. Views from more culturally accepted standpoints are considered the center, whereas views from less accepted standpoints are at the margins. The view from the center is given "voice." It is the accepted version of our shared, socially constructed reality, whereas views from the margins are "silenced." These stories are either not heard or these perspectives are not validated. In this sense, power gives voice.

From a feminist perspective, Griscom (1992) argues that power is more than coercion or dominance; power can be power over other people, but it also can be power with others, or power over oneself, in the sense of empowerment. It is important to note that having power over is not always bad and power with uniformly good. There are times within particular relationships or contexts when dominance is appropriate and other times when power should be shared relationally. Dominance and empowerment overlap in complex ways; the appropriate balance between them will evolve over time within relationships and contexts. Power can be something that individuals dictate, abdicate, share, or own. Thus, power is always relational. Power exists between people and emerges from relationships; power is a process that occurs over time. Finally, power must be conceptualized as an intersection of the individual and society; individuals exist within societal power structures, and societal power structures simultaneously are created by individuals.

Voice and silence emerge from place and power. From the feminist concept of place, voice and silence must be seen as dynamic and relational. Voice and silence will emerge within individuals as a function of their historical and cultural place and individual history of specific interactions with others. The ways in which individuals develop voice or silence will have important implications for the development of an autobiographical life story. Experiences that are voiced provide a sense of validation; experiences are accepted as real, and the individual's perspective on the experience is viewed as appropriate. Experiences that are silenced lead to a sense of existential despair; experiences are not heard or the individual's perspective on the experi-

ence is not accepted as appropriate.

From the feminist concept of power, how voice emerges over time within specific relationships and whether voice is cooperative or coerced raises additional questions about authority. Who has the authority to author the autobiography? Are individuals allowed their own voice or are particular ways of telling the story imposed on them? And, alternately, do individuals choose not to report certain information or are they simply not heard by those they tell? Thus, power may be expressed as voice or as silence depending on who has the authority to give voice or to silence.

This conceptualization of place and power culminates in a two-dimensional model of autobiographical memory, with voice and silence as one dimension and self and other as the second dimension. The two dimensions can be crossed, yielding the four quadrants. Clearly, voice and silence imply language, at least metaphorically, in that what is voiced is said and heard, whereas what is silenced is either not told or not heard. Hence, it is important to examine the role of language in the development of autobiographical memory.

Language and autobiographical memory

The concepts of voice and silence point to the critical role that language plays in modulating consciousness (see Damasio, 1999; Donald, 1991; and Nelson, 1996; for further theoretical arguments). More specifically, in terms of autobiographical memory, language allows for new ways of organizing and evaluating personal experience (Fivush, 1998, 2001; Nelson and Fivush, 2002). Language is critical for two interrelated reasons. First, it is through language that we are able to share our past experiences with others. In the process of reminiscing, listeners provide feedback about appropriate and inappropriate communications; through the joint focus on particular aspects of experience and the concomitant neglect of other aspects of experiences, we reinterpret and reevaluate the events of our lives. Moreover, early in development, children need help from adults to create coherent narratives of past events. In the absence of adult-guided reminiscing, young children may have difficulty creating and maintaining coherent memories of what occurred (Fivush, Pipe, Murachver, and Reese, 1997). Language, however, is a two-edged sword. In creating meaningful narratives, by definition some aspects of experience will be foregrounded and some will be backgrounded or even neglected. In this way, what is said, what is shared, and what is jointly negotiated to be the "truth" comes to define what happened and how we feel about it. In the words of the novelist Janet Fitch (1999), "That was the thing about words, they were clear and specific —but when you talked about feelings, words were too stiff, they were this and

not that, they couldn't include all the meanings. In defining, they always left something out" (265). By focusing on specific aspects of experience and, by necessity, silencing other aspects of experience, language provides a filter through which we come to understand our lives and our selves.

Second, through talking about events with others, memories take on a canonical narrative form. Through the telling and retelling of what happened, memories become stories; and as we reinterpret and reevaluate these stories, they become stories about us. In the absence of the ability to talk about certain events, such as trauma or abuse, it may be difficult to create a meaningful account of what happened. In her memoirs of her childhood battle with cancer, Lucy Grealy (1994) writes, "It was as if the earth were without form until those words were uttered, until those sounds took on decisions, themes, motifs. . . . Language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler forms of meaning, but does that imply that language gives meanings, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things?" (43–44). In the absence of a meaningful organization through which to understand our experiences, we may not be able to integrate those experiences into our self-understanding. In turn, the result might be a fragmented sense of self, especially if this lack of meaningful organization occurs before children have a stable self-concept or are able to construct a coherent narrative of a past event without adult guidance.

A substantial body of research now demonstrates that children are learning both the canonical narrative forms and an evaluative stance on their personal past through participating in adult-guided reminiscing (see Nelson and Fivush, 2002, for a review). Parents who engage in more elaborated and

narratively coherent reminiscing with their preschool children have children who come to tell more narratively coherent, detailed stories of their own experience later in development (Haden, Haine, and Fivush, 1997; Peterson and McCabe,1992; Reese, Haden, and Fivush,1993). And parents who interpret and evaluate their own experience and encourage the same in their children facilitate their children's developing use of narrative evaluation as they grow older (Fivush,1991; Haden et al.,1997). Narrative evaluation provides a subjective perspective on the past, essentially allowing the individual to conceptualize: "This is what happened, and this is how I think and feel about it." Through reminiscing with others, children come to understand that their perspective on the event may or may not be the same as someone else's perspective. In this way, children come to understand that they have a unique perspective about what occurred. In a very real sense, it is only when we share our experiences with others that they become our own (Fivush, 2001).

The role of the other

If our personal past takes on meaning as we share it socially with others, then the ways in which others listen to, hear, and interpret our past has implications for what aspects of the past will be validated. Listeners can accept or dismiss, negotiate, cajole, or coerce particular evaluations over others (see Pasupathi, 2001, for a theoretical review). Through this jointly constructed version of what occurred and what it means, some aspects of memories are given voice whereas others are silenced. Moreover, as discussed earlier, what is voiced and what is silenced occurs at multiple levels simultaneously, including the cultural, individual, and situational.

At the cultural level, cultures define a canonical life story and how to tell it (Connerton, 1989). In Western culture, a focus on the self and individual achievement is considered appropriate, whereas in Eastern culture, the focus is on one's place in the larger community and one's contribution to a moral society (Oyserman and Markus, 1993), and these differences are reflected in autobiographical memory. For example, Asian Indians from rural villages have few and sparsely detailed memories of their childhood or even their recent past (Leichtman, 2001). When asked to recount their personal experience, they respond that they do not remember, that their memories are unimportant in the context of the larger community. When reminiscing with their preschool children, Asian parents do not talk as much about the past as do caucasian parents; they do not talk in as much elaborated detail; and they do not focus on the child to the same extent as caucasian parents (see Leichtman, Wang & Pillemer, 2003, for a review). Rather, Asian parents focus on the community and moral behavior to a greater extent than do caucasian parents (Mullin and Yi, 1995). These different patterns emerge in children's later independent autobiographical narratives, with Asian children narrating shorter, less detailed, and less self-focused experiences than Caucasian children (Han, Leichtman, and Wang, 1998). Thus, the child's developing skills in recounting the past are modulated such that cultural expectations about self and autobiography shape what information is reported and not reported.

At the individual level, the specific kinds of experiences that are considered reportable and not reportable depend on where one is situated in the larger society. The kinds of activities that are deemed appropriate and the kinds of interactions in which we are expected to engage change as a function of our place in the larger culture. For example, in our culture, it is more acceptable for females to experience and express emotions than males (Basow, 1992; Fischer, 2001). As adults, women report experiencing and expressing emotions more intensely than do males (Fischer, 2001) and include more emotional information when reporting their personal past (Bauer, Stennes, and Haight, 2003; Davis, 1990). Similarly, parent-daughter reminiscing is substantially more emotion laden than parent-son reminiscing. With preschool daughters, parents talk more about emotion overall, talk about a wider variety of emotional experiences, and evaluate and validate their daughters' emotional experience to a greater extent than with sons (see Fivush and Buckner, 2001). By the end of the preschool years, girls are reporting their personal past in more emotional terms than are males (Buckner and Fivush, 1998; Reese, Haden, and Fivush, 1996). In this sense, emotions are voiced for females but silenced for males (see Fivush, forth-

coming, for a full theoretical discussion).

Finally, the specific situation in which we are recalling a past event influences what is reported. Who we are telling what story to for what purpose matters, both from the teller's perspective and the listener's perspective. From the teller's perspective, we may choose to disclose some information to certain people but not others. For example, Tenney (1989) examined the information that new parents told friends versus family about their child's birth. When talking with family, new parents focused on the infant's characteristics and vital statistics. With friends, in contrast, new parents talked about the difficulties of the labor. Thus, the teller focuses on different aspects of the event depending on the intended audience. From the listener's perspective, more attentive and concerned listeners elicit longer and more coherent narratives than do inattentive and distracted listeners (Pasupathi, Stallworth, and Murdoch, 1998). Of course, the teller and the listener are in a relationship, with each mutually influencing the other. For example, much of the literature on self-disclosure indicates that the gender of both the teller and the listener matters; females disclose to both men and women but males tend to disclose only to female listeners (Snell, Miller, Garcia-Falconi, and Hernandez-Sanchez, 1989).

Overall, then, in any given recall context, we need to consider the ways in which specific information about the past is allowed to be voiced or silenced by the culture, by the individual's place in society, and by the specific situation in which one is recalling a specific event with a specific listener. Voice and silence hence emerge within ongoing interactions in which the teller and listener negotiate or coerce a particular version of the past.

Voice and silence, self and other

As already indicated, children learn the forms and functions of talking about the past in early parent-guided reminiscing. How might voice and silence add to our understanding of the development of autobiographical memory? In order to explore the usefulness of the proposed model, I will discuss each quadrant in turn, using examples from my previous research on parent-child reminiscing (Fivush and Fromhoff, 1989; Reese et al., 1993). However, it is important to emphasize several points beforehand. First, it is obvious that parents hold power over children, although the way in which this power is expressed may vary widely both across individuals and situations. Thus, relations between power and voice and silence emerge from specific, evolving relationships, as I discuss in more detail below. Second, although I discuss each quadrant as a category for the sake of explication, the model conceptualizes voice and silence and

self and other as dimensions rather than categories. Specific autobiographical memories can be more or less voiced and this dimension can be modulated more or less by self or other. Third, any specific autobiographical memory will have elements of both voice and silence by both self and other. For purposes of exposition, I discuss specific conversations as illustrative of one side of these dimensions or another, but it should be kept in mind that memories are a complex interweaving of voice and silence by self and other. Finally, issues of voice and silence by self and other are not simply a matter of what is said and not said but the conversational process by which specific aspects and evaluations of the past are validated, imposed, negated, or avoided. It is in the process of sharing our experiences with others that each of us comes to have an individual voice or are silenced.

Self-voice

After the good times were over, as we grew older, we were to tell each other stories about the past, each adding his or her own fragments of pleasurable detail, until the joint memory became something larger than each single memory, and yet became something that each of us possessed fully, as if it were solely our own.
—Wilson, 1998, 142

In the self-voiced quadrant, individuals have power and voice over their own autobiographical experience. Although autobiographical memory is still shared in the social interaction, individuals have the authority to describe and evaluate their own experiences, which are validated by the listener, as can be seen in this conversational excerpt between a

mother and her five-year-old child in which they talk about visiting a museum of natural history. (M stands for the mother, C for the child.)

M: What other kinds of dinosaurs were in there?
C: Uh, Tyrannosaurus Rex. The first thing we came in, rrraarr!
M: (laughing) That's right. And he was huge, wasn't he?
C: Huge, very huge. They take it, they dug up the bones. You know why?
M: . . . They figured out how big the real ones were and then they made these.
C: Nuh uh, they didn't make those.
M: They didn't?
C: Those were real bones.
M: It was?
C: They figured out how to put 'em out, up together
M: They did? . . . and they made 'em move, didn't they? Didn't they move?
C: No.
M: They did too move (laughing).
C: No, he did not. It did not have his skin on.
M: Oh, that's right, one of 'em was just bones.
C: That was Tyrannosaurus Rex.
M: Tyrannosaurus Rex was just his bones. Okay.

Several things are notable in this conversation. First, both the mother and child are fully engaged, each responding to the other's comments. Neither the mother nor child leads the conversation, but each responds to the other and then introduces a new aspect of the event to which the other again responds. The experience is fully coconstructed. Moreover, even though it is clearly not the case that each always agrees with the other, there is a real sense of listening and responding to the other. When there is disagreement, the other is not ignored. Rather, disagreements are negotiated until agreement is reached. Most important, the child feels comfortable challenging the mother's version ("No, he did not"), and the mother accepts and validates her child's version of the event ("Oh, that's right"). It is not just the child's version of the facts of the event that are validated in these conversations; the child's emotional reaction and evaluation are confirmed as well, as shown in this excerpt between a mother and her five-year-old child talking about a visit to the lake during which the child and her sister fell into the water.

C: I remember Lauren, me falling, going into the water.
M: . . . I do too. That was upsetting, wasn't it?
C: (Makes crying noise.)

M: That's what you did. It kind of scared you, didn't it?
C: I don't like that!
M: I don't blame you!

When the child recalls the upsetting incident, the mother immediately confirms the memory as shared ("I do too") and then provides an evaluation of the event to which the child assents. As the child emphatically elaborates on her perspective of what occurred ("I don't like that!"), the mother completely validates this perspective ("I don't blame you!"). Conversations in which children are given voice include maternal affirmation and validation of what occurred and how the child felt about it. When there is disagreement, the mother and child negotiate a resolution rather than the mother's imposing her version of what happened on the child. Thus, autobiographical memories falling along the self-voice dimension are validated; children learn to own their experience and to have authority in the construction of their life story.

Other voice

It is our parents . . . who not only teach us our family history but who set us straight on our own childhood recollections, telling us that this cannot have happened the way we think it did, and that that, *on the other hand, did occur just as we remember it.*
—McCarthy, 1957, xx, italics in the original

In conversations falling into the other-voice quadrant, the mother tends to impose her version of what happened on the child. It is not so much that the mother disagrees with the child's memory or evaluation of what happened but simply that the mother tells the event to the child, who contributes

little to the emerging narrative, as can be seen in this excerpt between a mother and her four-year-old child about a visit to the zoo.

> M: Do you remember, we were strolling Baby around and do you remember when we went over near those ducks, what happened to Baby's binkie (pacifier)?
> C: It fell in the water with the ducks . . . (Daddy) washed it under the bridge thing.
> M: Yeah, he found it under that bridge thing. And remember the ducks tried to get Baby's binkie? And Daddy got it, but we had to wash it off first, didn't we? We couldn't give it to the baby when it had been in that yucky water, could we? And do you remember when we went in that building and Uncle Bob put you on his shoulder and we watched those penguins? And that lady was feeding the penguins? Do you remember that? I remember that. Do you remember when we went to eat, do you remember the special kind of french fries we had? What kind were they?
> C: (unintelligible)
> M: But do you remember the shape, what kind of shape those french fries were in? Those french fries were in little animal shapes, remember? We had those animal shape french fries? They were neat.

In this conversation, the mother essentially tells the child what happened, including what specific aspects were interesting and why ("But do you remember the shape? . . . They were neat."). The child is an engaged listener but not contributor. In this way, autobiographical memories falling along the other-voice dimensions are imposed; children are not the authors of their own story but have their stories told for them and about them.

Other silence

It didn't seem like the kind of story that would gather with time, but instead would retract, condense, and turn into one of those things that nobody talked about, and in a year or so it would all be forgotten.
—Proulx, 1992, 21

In conversations that fall into the other-silence quadrant, children's versions of what happened are silenced by the mother. In contrast to self-voiced memories, when children disagree with their parents, the child's version of what occurred is dismissed. In contrast to other-voiced memories, it is not that the mother tells the story for the child but that the child's perspective is negated, as seen in this example of a mother discussing a trip to American Adventures, an amusement park, with her six-year-old child.

> M: That was our first time there, and I thought you had . . .

> C: (interrupting) No, I don't, no, it wasn't my first time there.
> M: Yes, it was.
> C: You don't remember. Mom, remember when we went to it, umm, not at Chad's birthday and not when we met Lauren, some other time.
> M: Oh, that was when we went to that place in Florida.
> C: No.
> M: With the rugs?
> C: No.
> M: Okay, well, that's enough about American Adventures. I want to talk about something else.

The mother is sure that this visit was the child's first one to this amusement park, but the child is convinced that he had been there before. In fact, the child is quite insistent, providing several challenges and specific information to cue the mother's memory of the other visit. First, the mother simply denies the child's memory, then she assumes it was a different memory ("that place in Florida"). Then when the child again insists, the mother simply refuses to continue the discussion. Clearly, this child's autobiographical memory is negated; it simply did not happen. Further, just as self-voiced memories can validate the child's evaluation, other-silenced memories can silence evaluations as well as actual facts, as seen in this conversation between a mother and her four-year-old child about a visit to an amusement park.

> M: Was that fun to go on the ferris wheel?
> C: No.
> M: It wasn't fun? You said it was fun. Was it scary?
> C: Yeah. I didn't like the swings.
> M: I know you like to swing. But you just sat there.

In this brief excerpt, the mother twice denies her daughter's evaluation of the event. First, the mother states that the child had fun even when the child denies it; and then when the child says that she does not like to swing, the mother directly contradicts her. Autobiographical memories that fall on the other-silenced dimensions are negated; either the event or the child's perspective on the event is simply ignored. When this sort of exchange takes place, children are not given the authority to tell their own story. Things did not happen the way they thought they did; they did not feel what they thought they felt. In essence, they do not know who they are.

Self-silence

One benefit, which I have lost, of a life where many things go unsaid, is that you didn't have to remember things about yourself that are too bizarre to imagine. What was never given utterance eventually becomes too nebulous to recall.
—Smiley, 1992, 305

Finally, there are some memories that are too painful, such that the individual simply chooses not to remember. Even very young children consciously can make this decision, as seen in this conversation between a mother and her five-year-old child talking about going to the wake when the child's preschool teacher died.

M: And what was the wake like?
C: Well, it had sadly music and it was really sad to talk about. So I don't want to talk about it.
M: Well, let's talk about it right now and if you don't want to ever talk about it again, that's fine.
C: I didn't want to talk about it at the wake (very softly).
(several intervening questions and answers)
C: But I don't want to talk about this cause you're almost gonna make me cry.
M: Okay, I won't. We won't talk about it anymore.

Obviously, the child found this event difficult and does not want to bring these emotions back to mind by remembering. Rather then trying to resolve these difficult feelings, the child chooses to silence herself, to avoid thinking about or talking about this event. Whereas emotionally difficult experiences are the most likely candidates for self-silencing, especially early in development, there are other reasons to self-silence as well, such as impression management for both self and other. In silencing oneself, one loses some of the richness of autobiographical memory. Whether it is whole events, or particular perspectives (e.g., specific kinds of emotional reactions), the child loses part of her past through self-silencing.

Thus far, I have discussed the ways in which voice and silence influence the development of an autobiographical life narrative more generally and have argued that aspects of all experiences are both voiced and silenced by self and other. What of entire events that are not allowed to be spoken of? In our culture, trauma is one such category of events. Consider, for instance, the victims of childhood sexual abuse. Until the 1970s it was assumed that childhood sexual abuse, and especially familial abuse, was extremely rare. Yet more recent surveys have confirmed that as many as 20 to 25 percent of females experience sexual abuse during childhood and as many as 10 percent experience abuse by a family member (Edwards, Fivush, Anda, Felitti, and Nordenberg, 2001; Finklehor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith, 1990). This category of event is silenced in the most basic terms. Not only are individual stories not heard but the culture as a whole also has conspired to erase these kinds of experiences from our cultural landscape of possible experiences. How do adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse come to remember or forget these experiences and what implications does this have for their self-concept?

Silencing of childhood sexual abuse

With the political changes accompanying the second wave of the women's movement, sexual abuse against women has come into national focus (Enns, McNeilly, Corkery, and Gilbert, 1995). In addition to documenting the extent of these experiences, researchers have turned to examining more basic questions about the long-term effects of experiencing abuse. Here I focus on two aspects of this question: what can women voice about their abusive experiences and how might voice and silence effect

their self-concept?

Memory of childhood sexual abuse has become quite controversial, especially surrounding the issue of recovered memories (see Conway, 1997, and Pezdak and Banks, 1996, for full discussions). Whereas many clinicians have described the subjective experiences of their clients who suddenly recall years of abuse after a period of amnesia, many researchers have argued that this kind of forgetting and recovery of memory is not cognitively possible. The nuances of this controversy are well beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice it to say that there is increasing evidence for the occurrence of recovered memories (Schooler, 2001) and that recovered memories are just as likely to be accurate as continuous memories of abuse (e.g., Brewin and Andrews, 1998). Moreover, there is growing evidence of specific cognitive mechanisms that easily can be demonstrated in a controlled laboratory setting which might explain the cognitive underpinnings of this phenomenon (Anderson and Green, 2001). Regardless of the ultimate fate of this controversy, what is clear is that the subjective experience of recovering memories is very real at least for some proportion of women who were sexually abused in childhood.

In order to explore the phenomenon of memory for childhood sexual abuse and relations to self-concept in more depth, Valerie Edwards and I (Fivush and Edwards, forthcoming) conducted an interview study with twelve women ranging in age from twenty-one to seventy-two who had been severely sexually abused by a family member during their childhood. We were interested in exploring several questions. First, how do women describe their subjective experience of remembering and forgetting abuse over time? Second, how do women actually narrate their experiences of abuse? Third, how do women describe their experiences of self and how does this relate to their memory of their abusive experiences?

As previously noted, traumatic events—especially abuse—may be silenced both by others and by the self as too dangerous even to think about. For children experiencing abuse by a loved and trusted adult, trying to integrate the abusive experience with attachment and relationship needs may lead to a deep sense of emotional betrayal, and this betrayal may create an untenable psychological state (Freyd, 1996). Thus, an adaptive response may very well be to push these experiences from mind, simply not to think about them, and in this way to silence oneself. Even when children try to tell about their abusive experiences to other trusted adults, they often are not believed (Butler, 1999); indeed, they often are accused of lying for their own purposes. This kind of reaction to disclosure certainly would fall into the category of silencing. In this way, both the women themselves and those they may have disclosed to often conspire to silence these experiences.

In terms of memory and self, we assumed that women who had continuous memories of their abusive experiences would be able to narrate these experiences more coherently and in more detail than women who had recovered memories of abuse. We further speculated that women who had continuous memories of abuse would have a more integrated self-concept than women with recovered memories. Given that recovered memories are associated with dissociative tendencies, we reasoned that recovered memories also would be associated with a more fragmented sense of self.

All the women in our sample were abused by a family member: three by a father, one by a stepfather, three by a grandparent, three by a brother, and two by an uncle. The beginning of the abuse ranged from preschool to preteen; all the women experienced penetration; and all but two experienced abuse during a period of several years. Nine women also had experienced physical abuse during childhood and seven had experienced additional sexual assault as an adult. None of the women had recovered memories of abuse while in therapy, although all of the women had been in therapy at some point during their lives.

The women were interviewed individually and asked to recall their abusive experiences. In addition, they responded to a series of questions about their remembering and forgetting these experiences in the course of time. Although there was a standard set of questions, these interviews were relatively open ended. The interviewer allowed each woman to discuss her experiences as she chose to, for as long as she chose, and followed up on what each woman disclosed in conversationally appropri-

ate ways. Interviews lasted between one and two hours.

We first examined the women's subjective experiences of remembering and forgetting the abuse. Half of the women claimed that they had never forgotten their experiences. Three of these women claimed that they recalled the abuse in clear and consistent detail all their lives, while three claimed they always had remembered the events but the details came and went with the passage of time. Illustrative statements from the interviews are shown in Table 1; as can be seen from their statements, these women believed that they had continuous memories of their abusive experiences. In contrast, six women claimed that there was a period when they did not recall their abuse at all. As shown in Table 1, these women have the experience of a time when they totally forgot that they had been abused and then subsequently recalled these experiences.

However, the subjective experience of forgetting and recovery is much more complex. Although these six women clearly claimed that they had forgotten their abuse and subsequently remembered it, at other points in the interview, they expressed more confusion. For example, participant number twelve reports "I would totally forget about it" and "I forgot about it for quite a while." However, later in the interview she says, "It was never totally forgotten." Similarly, participant number three describes a flashback experience in which she suddenly remembered having been abused as a child. Later, though, she says, "I don't think I ever forgot it." In some very real sense, these women express remembering and not remembering, forgetting and not forgetting simultaneously.

Women's subjective experience of remembering and forgetting abuse was related to their ability to narrate their abusive experiences. All the women were able to provide many details of what happened to them, but there were substantial differences in their ability to construct a coherent account of what occurred. Women were classified as providing a coherent or an incoherent narrative of their abuse. For example, one woman began her narrative as follows:

My earliest memory that I can really identify as a specific instance was when I was about six, six or seven. And, uh, my family had gone to the Boy Scout Camp that my father was a Boy Scout executive and he had actually been the kingpin in getting this camp built. And at the end of the camping season, the Boy Scout leaders and their families had a little scouting experience, camping experience to use up all the staples and close the camp and so forth. And one day we took, there were a large group of us, a large group of parents and children that took a hike out in the shrub, umm, scrub brush. You don't get a lot of forest or anything in that part of the state that I was, uh, and, uh, the others went one way and my dad and I went another. And I remember we ended up lying down in the

dirt. Actually I was afraid the ants would get on me, while he, uh, fondled me and had me fondle him. And I don't know whether that was the first incident but I remember that I think, because of the peculiar circumstances that surrounded it, the fact that we were out in brush country, and, uh, but from then on I can remember several things specifically.

This woman begins her narrative by placing the event in time and place, how old she was, where the incident took place, and why they were there. She reports quite specific details about what occurred, what she was thinking at the time, and so on. She then goes on to narrate several more incidents in this very coherent manner. Contrast this account with the following narrative of another woman, who also was abused by her father, also beginning at about age six (although she is not very clear about the age at which the abuse started):

Well, I'm forty-eight now and probably when I was about forty-six, something like that, umm, and stuff I've been going through, umm, up until I was about forty-six, I remembered, umm, my dad, uh, when my mom was gone and all the other kids were gone, had me sleep in his room and wanted me to, I guess you'd say give him a hand job, or, sounds so funny. Um, anyways, so I was at that time, I was, I would take a wild guess, I don't know. Maybe five or six years old. And then, after I've been going through this stuff, it's like, uh, remembering all this stuff that was there that you just, I think you're lucky to block it out a lot of times but, uh, just as a baby, baby, I mean very small, I remember my dad, you know, molesting me. Uh, having intercourse with me and I was, I don't know, as far as I can remember, I get pieces that might have been earlier, but, uh, I don't know, as young as like two to three years old. So I'm not

even sure if I've got all the pieces yet.

This excerpt is very hard to follow. It is not set in a specific time and place; the narrator moves back and forth in time and presents specific events in a confused and confusing fashion. Although the listener has the overall sense of what happened, it is simply not a coherent presentation.

Six of the women were able to provide a coherent account of their abusive experiences and six were not. It was intriguing that five of the women with continuous memories gave coherent narratives and one gave an incoherent narrative, while five of the women with recovered memories gave an incoherent narrative and one gave a coherent narrative. A close relation therefore exists between the subjective experience of continuously remembering abusive experiences through time and being able to narrate these experiences coherently. Women who had the subjective experience of forgetting and remembering their experiences, on the other hand, generally were not able to provide a coherent narrative.

Although women were not directly asked about their experiences of self, all the women spontaneously discussed how the abuse affected their self-concept. Based on their statements, women could be categorized as expressing an integrated self-concept or a dissociated self-concept. Women who expressed a dissociated self-concept talked about splitting their mind from their body or splitting their memories of the abuse off from other memories of the self. Table 2 gives examples of statements from the five women who expressed this dissociated sense of self. These women describe a sense of self as separate from their abusive experiences, as split off from themselves. The seven women who expressed an integrated self-concept not only never expressed any dissociative tendencies during their interviews, they actively talked about how they were defined by their experiences, as victims or survivors. Although not all these women expressed a positive sense of self (in fact, three of them express a relatively negative sense of self as an angry or a bad person), it is still the case that they have not split themselves off from their abuse history.

Five of the seven women who expressed an integrated sense of self also claimed to have continuous memories, whereas two women with an integrated sense of self had recovered memories. On the other hand, four of the women who expressed a dissociated sense of self claimed recovered memories, while one claimed continuous memories. Again, there seems to be a relation between having an integrated sense of self and continuous memories of abuse.

Clearly, we need to be extremely cautious in drawing any conclusions from these interviews. It was a very small and targeted population. Moreover, we did not gather any independent evidence of these women's abuse histories or of their memories of the abuse over time. We relied totally on what the women told us. We were interested more in describing what the subjective sense of remembering and forgetting abuse was for these women than whether their reports of remembering and forgetting in the course of time were "accurate." Further, we did not have any independent measure of their self-concepts beyond the way in which they spontaneously described themselves in these interviews.

Still, the results are provocative. It seems that there are multiple outcomes for women experiencing horrendous abuse. Some of these women always recalled what happened, were able to tell coherent narratives about these events, and seemed able to integrate their abusive experiences into their larger understanding of self. Other women seemed to have coped with their abuse by dissociating these memories from their other memories. This act led to the sense of forgetting the abuse with the passage of time and to a more dissociated sense of self as adults.

The pattern suggests that when traumatic experiences are silenced by being forced out of consciousness, there may be long-lasting effects on the ability to construct a coherent life story that contributes to an integrated sense of self. Women who cope with childhood abuse through mechanisms of denial and dissociation seem to suffer greater threats to an integrated self-concept than women who do not use these coping strategies. At this point, it is unclear how to account for these individual differences in coping. One possibility suggested in the clini-

cal literature is that children abused earlier in development, who have not yet had the opportunity to develop a more stable self-concept, will be more likely to use dissociation as a coping mechanism than older children (Enns et al., 1995). In our sample, four of the five women who evidenced dissociation were five or younger when their abuse began, while only two of the seven women who did not dissociate were this young. Developmental considerations are critical in evaluating emerging links between autobiographical memory and self-concept; and this pattern, while merely suggestive, affirms that this dimension is an important one for further study.

Conclusions and implications

In this article, I provided a theoretical framework for understanding the development of autobiographical memory from the feminist perspectives of place and power. These concepts led to a two-dimensional model of autobiography based on voice and silence and self and other. Although still preliminary, this model provides a useful heuristic device for understanding how children begin to construct an autobiographical life story in collaboration with their parents. Ultimately, this model provides a way of thinking about the development of autobiographical memory that focuses on authority and ownership rather than on accuracy per se. Cultural, individual, and situational factors privilege some experiences over others. Especially when considered in conjunction with the feminist concept of power, this model adds an important dimension to the social construction of autobiographical memory. Memories are not simply jointly constructed; some individuals have more power to guide the narrative in a particular direction than others. Indeed, power can be exerted either locally within specific interactions, or culturally, in the silencing of whole classes of experiences such as abuse.

For obvious reasons, most of what we know about the structure and content of autobiographical memory relies on what is voiced. The challenge for future research is to develop methodologies that allow for an analysis of what is silenced. To understand the relation between autobiographical memory and self-concept, we must move beyond an analysis of what is spoken and begin to integrate the ways in which self is also shaped by what must be left unsaid.
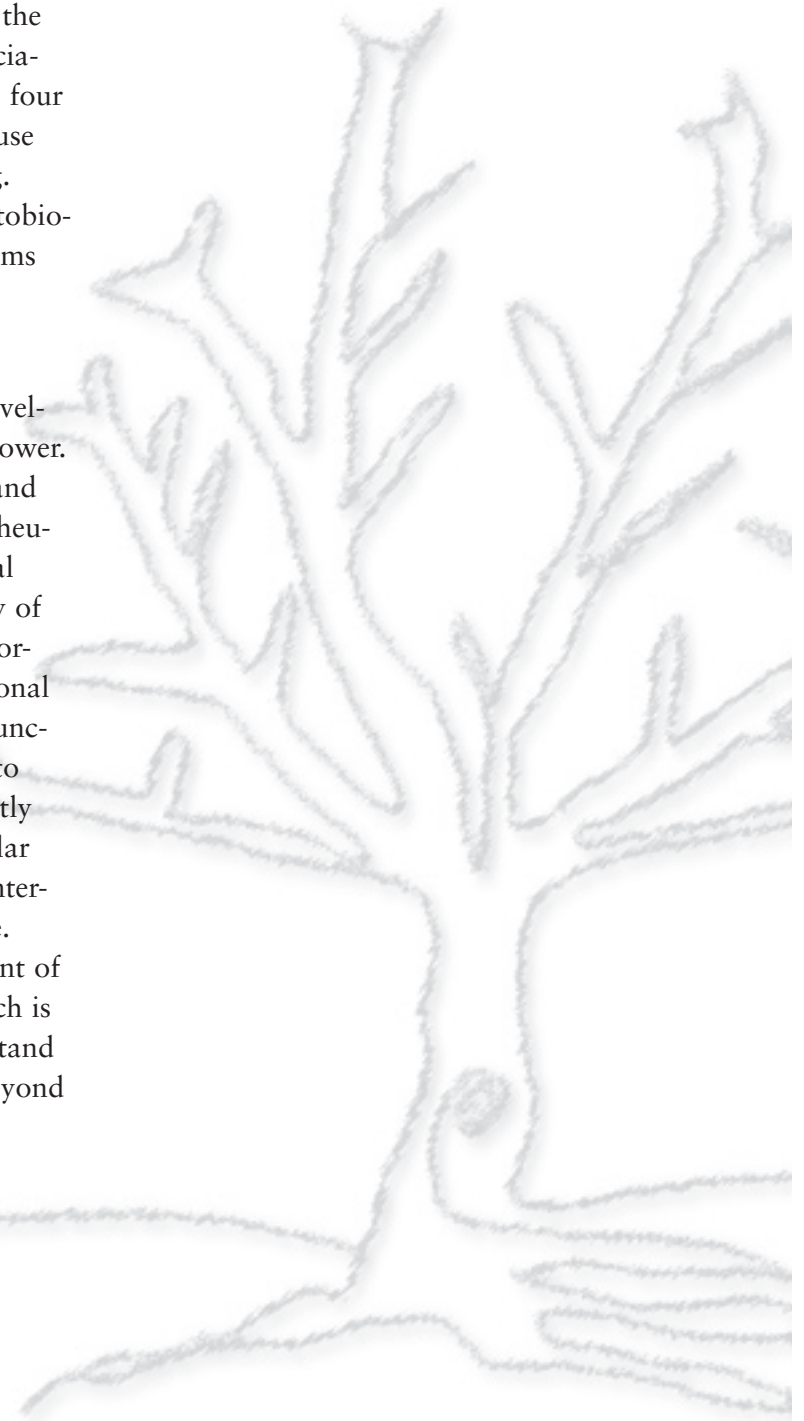
Notes

[1] Although feminist theories tend to view race, class, and gender as socially constructed, it is important to point out that there may be biological predispositions to engage in certain kinds of activities instead of others, especially in the case of gender (see, e.g., Maccoby, 1998, for a full exposition of the biological basis of gendered play behavior).

[2] Feminist analyses of place share much in common with Soviet activity theory in general (Gauvain, 2001) and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural developmental theory in particular. Vygotsky's theory also posits that individual mind emerges from cultural and contextual interactions. This similarity is not surprising, since both Vygotsky's theory and feminist standpoint theory emerge from the philosophical premises of Hegel's dialectics.

[3] Within psychology, this perspective has been argued most strongly by Gibson (1982), who introduced the concept of "affordances" as behaviors that are elicited by the individual-environment interaction. However, this theory focuses on the interactions between the person and the physical environment, whereas feminist theory focuses on the interaction between the person and the socially constructed human environment.

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Table 1: Subjective Memory Experiences
Participant   "Statement of Memory"

Group IA: continuous memory, same detail
1   "I certainly never forgot it."
7   "There's not a time I've ever forgotten."
11   "I remembered it all along."

Group IB: continuous memory, differing detail
1   "[A] lot of this has resurfaced."
8   "I don't remember a lot of the details . . . I fight to remember things."
10   "Since I've started talking about it, I've

remembered more."

Group II: recovered memory

2 "[W]hen it came out all of a sudden, I just started crying."

3 "Basically my [memory] was one flashback that happened twelve years ago."

4 "I had just completely forgotten."

6 "It's resurfaced twice that I know of or that I remember. . . . sometimes I wouldn't remember it for years."

9 "I lost memory . . . until I was in my twenties and it all came to me it seemed in kind of a rush."

12 "I would totally forget about it. . . . in my early twenties I became aware."

Table 2: Statements about Self-concept

Participant "Statement of Self"

Self as dissociated

2 "That was the very beginning of my learning how to take myself away from my body. I can be a watcher anytime I want to be. So they can't hurt me any-more. Nothing can hurt me anymore. It doesn't matter what happens to my body because they can't hurt me."

3 "I heard about sexual abuse but I didn't really associate I with me. . . . It was like it went in and it went out and I didn't want to approach it."

4 "It's still hard for me to accept . . . there are occasions, even, I guess it's called denial, even knowing all of it. Once in a while, I mean, it goes through my head, like, oh, you know I must be nuts or I'm making all this up. I mean, fathers, how could they do this?"

9 "I don't go to that place in my head where I'm being abused."

10 "And what I did with it was, I would totally forget about it. I mean I would internalize it and dissociate it basically. And so it was like it never happened."

Self as integrated

1 "I feel like I am getting more able to make decisions. . . . I feel like I must have some sort of survival skills."

5 "I felt so alone and isolated . . . it certainly gave me very low self-esteem. I just felt that I was a rotten person because of these things that I had done. And, uh, that made me feel hopeless."

6 "I think it's too much, you know, a part of me and who I am to ever actually forget it."

7 "Finally growing old and learning to put things in perspective and put things in the past that belong in the past. Go for the future."

8 "I had to figure out why it was so hard for me to trust. . . . And I think that's one of the things that's just part of me now."

11 "I grew up through my teenage years thinking I was bad . . . that I had this hidden badness side to me, umm, and now, you know, I don't throw it away anymore."

12 "I'm angry. I'm very angry. . . . But this is like thirty, well a little less than thirty, twenty-five years I'd say later, and you know, it's like I've gone through this and I'm trying to work it out."