The Stories of Our Families: How Much Do We Truly Know?

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Do you know how your parents met?

Do you know where your mother grew up?

Do you know where your father grew up?

Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?

Do you know the source of your name?

Do you know which person in the family you act most like?

Do you know some of the things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?

Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?

These are a sample of the 20 questions that comprise the "Do You Know?" scale (DYK) developed by Drs. Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush, psychologists on the faculty of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. The full list of 20 questions may be found in a blog written by Duke for *The Huffington Post* titled "The Stories that Bind Us: What Are the Twenty Questions?" The link to the blog is: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marshall-p-duke/the-stories-that-bind-us-_b_2918975.html.

Duke and Fivush's research prompted me to reflect upon my clinical work with families as well as my own family history. I became aware of their research when an educator sent me an article from the November, 2013 issue of *New Jersey Family* authored by Judy Grover. Prominently cited in the article was the work of Duke who in addition to his role as a professor of psychology was recognized as a "core faculty member of the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life (MARIAL)."

Duke has focused his attention on the theme of resilience, defining that concept as "the ability to weather the inevitable storms of life, and to come out all right." Grover adds, "Raising resilient kids means doing what we can to equip them with the inherent sense of internal strength and character in the face of everything from bullying and

feelings of isolation to more traumatic stresses such as the death of a parent or loved one."

The Family Narrative and Resilience

How best to accomplish this task of nurturing resilience in children? My colleague and close friend Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have attempted to answer this question in our books and other writings about resilience. We have emphasized the importance in a child's life of what the late psychologist Dr. Julius Segal called a "charismatic adult," that is, an adult from whom a child gathers strength. Examining the question of how to help children to become more resilient, Duke, in his recent research with Fivush, examined whether family members sharing stories about their lives might serve to reinforce familial bonds and in the process help children to become more resilient. To apply the framework outlined by Sam and myself, I would ask the question in the following way:

When we share stories with children about their families, can they gather strength from these stories so that we assume the role of a charismatic adult?

An observation offered by Duke indicates an affirmative answer to this question. He states:

> There are heroes in these stories, there are people who faced the worse and made it through. And this sense of continuity and relatedness to heroes seems to serve the purpose in kids of making them more resilient. Ordinary families can be special because they each have a history no other family has. They all have Uncle So and So, they all have Aunt So and So. They all have a brother who went off and did this adventure, and everyone has a story that no one else has. So if you know that, it makes you special. It's a fingerprint.

Grover's article led me to a piece written by Bruce Feiler that appeared in the *New York Times* on March 13, 2013. Feiler is a *Times* columnist and also the author of *The Secrets of Happy Families: How to Improve Your Morning, Rethink Family Dinner, Fight Smart, Go Out and Play, and Much More*. In preparing to write this book and answer the question, "What are the ingredients that make some families effective,

resilient, happy?" Feiler spent several years doing research, interviewing "families, scholars, and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game designers to Warren Buffett's bankers."

The "Do You Know?" Scale

In the *Times* article, Feiler arrived at what might be considered a startling conclusion to the question of family resilience and happiness. Based on his interviews and noting that he first heard the idea from Marshall Duke, he writes, "The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative."

Feiler's summary of his interviews with Duke is thought-provoking. He mentions that Duke's wife Sara, a psychologist who works with children with learning disabilities, became aware of a dynamic that existed with these students. She said, "The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges." Duke was intrigued by his wife's observation and with Fivush decided to study this further, leading to the development of the "Do You Know?" scale.

Duke and Fivush's research included interviewing dozens of families and taping dinner table discussions. They then examined these interviews with a battery of psychological tests administered to the children and, as noted by Feiler, arrived at the following conclusion: "The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The 'Do You Know?' scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness."

Feiler's words resonated with me, especially since the dynamics of a stronger sense of control over their lives and higher self-esteem are prominent features of what Sam Goldstein and I term a "resilient mindset."

Interestingly, Duke and Fivush's original research was undertaken two months prior to September 11, 2001. Although they emphasize that the families in their study had not been directly impacted by the events of 9/11, "all of the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time." These researchers went back and reassessed

the children to determine what, if any, effects 9/11 had on them. Duke found, "The ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress."

Feiler asks, "Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?" Duke's response is "the answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family."

Personal Reflections about Family Narratives

Duke and Fivush's studies capture the benefit of sharing stories of our family histories with our children. Although my wife Marilyn and I have told many family stories to our sons Rich and Doug, I think there were opportunities to share even more. I vividly remember Doug interviewing my father for a class assignment in high school. The interview focused on my father emigrating from Europe to the United States when he was 16 years old. As close as I was to my father, in listening to Doug's interview I learned new information about his first experiences in this country. After Doug completed his interview, I took the microphone and asked my father several more questions. In a similar vein, I remember Rich interviewing my in-laws and my discovering more about their relationship, including their first dates. Both Rich and Doug were interested in my father-in-law's experiences as a police captain in New York City.

I also recall when Rich and Doug watched the television show "Happy Days" in the 1970s and wondered if when I was a teenager I had been "cool" like the Fonz. I had fun telling them that the only similarity was that I also plastered my hair with Vasoline (it was amazing how many combs I went through).

In recounting family stories I attempted not to fall into a lecture mode (Rich and Doug might disagree) and regale my sons with a message such as: "When I was your age I walked many miles to school" (not really true) or some similar tale.

Duke and Fivush's research triggered many memories of therapy sessions I had conducted. For instance, I thought of an anxious 18-year-old boy soon to leave for the same college his father had attended. During our meeting, this teenager was surprised to

learn how anxious his father had been when he first left home for college. The father was surprised that his son wanted to hear more about his experiences many years earlier. As the son asked questions, the father was eager to share his memories, including how father's own parents had not accompanied him when he was moving into his dorm.

This father noted, "I don't think my parents realized how anxious I was and I never told them. I said goodbye to them at the train station and really missed having them there when I arrived at the college. I was envious of the other freshmen whose parents were with them."

The son said, "I'm glad that you and mom are coming down with me," adding, "In a funny way, it's reassuring to hear that you were also scared leaving home for the first time."

A stronger bond between this teenager and his parents was forged during this dialogue.

A Cautionary Perspective

Obviously there are questions about what parts of our family history to share with our children. While most, if not all, families have skeletons in the closet, I have been impressed by how many children have a sense of these skeletons even though their parents are not aware that their children possess this knowledge. Of course, some family histories may not be suitable for youngsters to hear especially while they are very young. There are families whose histories are filled with distrust, anger, and trauma. However, even with these families, telling children about these unpleasant events at the appropriate time can be used to teach them about the importance of such qualities as resilience, forgiveness, responsibility, and compassion.

Duke cautions about the "Do You Know?" scale by emphasizing that providing children with answers to the questions on the scale in a rote manner will not necessarily lead to positive outcomes. Instead, in an article co-authored by Duke, Fivush, and Amber Lazarus published in the journal *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training* in 2008, they elaborate on the "something else" that is necessary:

> If simply knowing family history could make for better states of well-being, some might propose (confusing correlation with causation) that we simply teach

> children various facts about their families and they will become stronger. Clearly, this approach would not work! Rather, it is our belief that knowledge of family history reflects certain processes that exist in families whose members know their histories. One such process is the communication of family information across generations; important questions about this process would include "Who is passing this information?" and "When is this information transmitted?"

These are essential questions to consider so that family stories told to children do not resemble a history class that emphasizes the memorization of dates but one in which students feel little connection to the actual events being described. Duke, Lazarus, and Fivush identify more fully the conditions under which the transmitting of family stories takes on greater meaning and relevance:

> In our study of family stories at the Emory University Family Narratives Project funded by the Sloan Foundation, we found that family stories seem to be transferred by mothers and grandmothers more often than not and that the information was typically passed during family dinners, family vacations, family holidays, and the like. Other data indicated that these very same regular family dinners, yearly vacations, and holiday celebrations occur more frequently in families that have high levels of cohesiveness and that they contribute to the development of a strong sense of what we have called the intergenerational self. It is this intergenerational self and the personal strength and moral guidance that seem to derive from it that are associated with increased resilience, better adjustment, and improved chances of good clinical and educational outcomes.

A Sense of Connectedness and Belonging

There are numerous questions about how best to understand and apply Duke and Fivush's intriguing research. From the previous paragraph, one can assume that families who are already emotionally secure and close are more likely to engage in the telling of family history, which further enriches the relationships in the family. A positive cycle continues to operate and grow under these conditions. However, this perspective should not discourage families who lack some of these positive qualities from considering how best to use the information gathered by Duke and Fivush to improve their family's life.

As a clinician who has seen many alienated, disconnected children and adults in his practice, I know that for some there is a disquieting feeling of discontinuity together with a desire to achieve a sense of belonging and connectedness. Family histories are an important vehicle through which to create this feeling of connectedness and an "intergenerational self." While the process of expressing family histories should not be limited to a particular time of year, a holiday season in which many families get together may provide an opportunity to begin to share a family narrative. The development of this narrative has the potential to serve as the scaffolding for adding meaning to the life of each family member.

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