AUDIENCE TAILORING:
IMPLICATIONS FOR NARRATIVE IDENTITY FORMATION

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The past several decades has witnessed a significant amount of productive research around narrative identity – the idea that individuals form an identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized and evolving story of the self. The topic informs nearly all of the sub-disciplines of psychology. Numerous studies have explored the role that parents and peers play in the social construction of these identities; however, little attention has been paid to the kinds of changes to their stories that individuals make for these different audiences.

That we adjust both the selection of our stories and the editing we do to them for different audiences seems well established. Previous studies have explored the influences that mothers and friends employ in the social construction of these identities; however, little attention has been paid to the specific kinds of changes that individuals make for these different audiences. When telling the same story to different audiences, the tailoring may be the kinds and character of the edits made by the narrator. This may be additional information added, information deleted, or in the interpretive connections that are made within the story. These self-event connections are revelatory of the kind of self a speaker is attempting to present to the listener, and thus is a form of identity management.

While several studies have tracked how narratives of significant life events change over subsequent disclosures, and a small set of primarily qualitative projects have addressed how narratives of similar events are differently told to different audiences, I am unaware of any that have examined intentional changes of those stories with an audience in mind.

In this study, participants were first asked to write narratives of four types of life events: a nadir (low) point, a transgression, a turning point, and a high point using standard prompts from the narrative literature. Then, from the original narrative, they were asked to edit the stories as they would for their mother and for a friend, and I tracked their changes using the editing functions of Microsoft Word. This study design allows me to examine whether participants engaged in more or different editing of their narratives for mothers, as compared to friends. In addition, I was able to examine whether there were gender differences in the extent or nature of edits of narratives.

Narratives were coded for type (insertion, deletion, replacement, minor, other) and effect on the narrative (more factual, more interpretive, other). In general, participants made more edits for mothers than friends, and the types of edits suggest that they are more elaborative with friends. Gender differences were also explored, with results suggesting that males make fewer edits for all audiences than females. Implications for narrative identity formation are discussed.