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ABSTRACT

This study compared and analyzed the language capabilities of 10 school-age children raised in either single parent homes resulting from divorce or in two parent families. More specifically, it compared the context and complexity of oral personal event narratives produced by both groups of children. The study also investigated the usefulness and effect of certain topics on the personal event narratives of children. Five narratives were elicited from each child. Significant group differences were found with respect to linguistic content. Children from divorced homes produced significantly more orientative comments and appendages per T-unit than did their peers from non-divorced homes, whereas the children from non-divorced homes produced significantly more complicating actions per T-unit. No significant group differences were found with respect to the length or complexity of narratives. Each of the five narrative topics was beneficial in eliciting personal event narratives from these children. However, the pets story topic was particularly useful for eliciting lengthy narratives, the doctor visits/shots topic was useful for eliciting evaluative comments, and the accident story topic was useful in eliciting specific event details in the personal event narratives. (DB)

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Running head: AN ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL EVENT NARRATIVES

An Analysis of Personal Event Narratives Produced by School-Age Children

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### **Abstract**

Personal event narratives produced by children, ages 8-9 years, from divorced and non-divorced homes were compared and analyzed with respect to linguistic content, linguistic productivity, and syntactic complexity. Five narratives were elicited from each of the ten participants (five children from divorced homes and five children from non-divorced homes). Significant group differences were found with respect to linguistic content. Children from divorced homes produced significantly more orientative comments and appendages per T-unit than did their peers from non-divorced homes, whereas the children from non-divorced homes produced significantly more complicating actions per T-unit. No significant group differences were found with respect to the length or complexity of their narratives. Each of the five narrative topics used were found to be beneficial in eliciting personal event narratives from these children. In addition, the Pets story topic was found to be useful for eliciting lengthy narratives, the Doctor Visits/Shots topic was useful for eliciting evaluative comments, and the Accident story topic was useful in eliciting specific event details in the personal event narratives.

There has been a significant amount of research suggesting that children of divorced parents perform worse than their peers in the academic setting (Boyd & Parish, 1985; Bisnaire, Firestone, & Rynard, 1990; Beer, 1989a; Beer 1989b; Call, Beer, & Beer, 1994). It has also been suggested that these children may be less emotionally stable than their peers (Schnayer & Orr, 1989; Kurtz, 1994). However, there have been very few studies to date that have focused on the possible effect of divorce/single-parenting on children's language skills (Madden & Lawrence, 1995).

Personal event narratives are stories about the personal experiences of the narrator (Ely, 1997). Given the fact that some children from divorced homes have been found to perform more poorly in school and exhibit lower levels of self-esteem as compared to their peers from two parent homes (Boyd & Parish, 1985; Kurtz, 1994), it is possible that the content (emotional content in particular) and complexity of their personal event narratives may also be inadequate.

The primary purpose of this study was to compare and analyze the language capabilities of children raised in single parent homes resulting from divorce, as compared to children raised in two parent families. More specifically, this study was designed to compare the content and complexity of personal event narratives produced by both groups of children and to address the hypothesis that the emotional content in the personal event narratives produced by children from divorced families might occur less frequently (i.e., fewer number of occurrences of evaluative comments) than it does in the narratives produced by children from non-divorced homes. The secondary purpose of

this study was to investigate the usefulness and effect of certain topics on the personal event narratives produced by school-age children.

The specific research questions examined in this study were as follows:

- 1) Do children from divorced and non-divorced homes differ significantly with respect to the content of their personal event narratives?
- 2) Do children from divorced and non-divorced homes differ significantly with respect to the length and complexity of their personal event narratives?
- 3) Do different story topics elicit personal event narratives that are significantly different with respect to content, length, or complexity in these children?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Ten children between the ages of eight and nine years of age served as participants in this study. All of the participants were enrolled in public elementary schools in northwestern Ohio and met the following criteria: monolingual, American English speaking; “average” intellectual ability as indicated by teacher report; normal hearing and visual acuity (with or without corrective lenses); good intelligibility of speech; no history of oral motor disabilities; and no history of special education or speech/language services. Five participants were from non-divorced, two parent families,

and the other five participants resided with a single parent as the result of a divorce that occurred within the last five years.

### **Procedures**

Each child participated in one, 20-35 minute individual session at his/her school during regular school hours. A brief, warm-up activity (a five minute coloring activity in conjunction with casual conversation) was used for the purpose of establishing rapport between the investigator and the child. Subsequently, the investigator prompted each child to verbally produce several short personal event narratives by verbally presenting various age-appropriate topics that had been previously found to be effective in eliciting these types of narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). The following topics were used to elicit the narratives: trips, pets, hospitalizations, accidents (car wrecks), and doctor visits/shots. Each child was also told that she/he could earn a small toy as a prize for cooperation.

The following verbal instructions were provided to each participant at the beginning of the session:

“You are here today to help me learn more about the types of stories that children tell. It is up to you if you want to participate or not. I will ask you to tell me about things that I think you are interested in. If you don’t want to talk about a topic, just tell me and we will go on to another topic. I will be tape recording your stories, so that I can listen to them again later on. You will be able to earn a small prize for trying your best to help me. Are you willing to participate?”

Following this introduction, the investigator told her own brief personal account to introduce the child to one of the randomly selected personal event narrative topics listed above. This was followed by a related question to the child that served as a prompt for the child to produce his/her own story. The child’s narrations were facilitated by non-

specific prompts such as “uh-huh” or “okay”, a verbatim repetition of a portion of the child’s last utterance, or related comments and clarification questions.

### **Data Analysis**

Each of the participant’s narratives were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Each retelling was segmented into T-units (Hunt, 1965). A T-unit refers to an independent clause and any associated dependent clauses. Subsequently, the independent clauses were classified into categories (i.e., orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, or appendage) using high point analysis procedures (Labov, 1972). The dependent clauses were also classified as being either orientative or evaluative (see Appendix).

### **Results**

All of the data were analyzed using the SAS statistical software package. In order to compare the two groups’ narratives with respect to linguistic content, linguistic productivity, and syntactic complexity, several repeated measures, analyses of variance (RM-ANOVAs) were computed. The independent variable was group with two levels (i.e., children from divorced homes and children from non-divorced homes). The dependent variables for each narrative were as follows: number of T-units, number of dependent clauses, number of dependent clauses per T-unit, number of high point analysis categories (i.e., orientation, resolution, complicating action, appendage, and evaluation) per T-unit, number of orientations per dependent clause, number of evaluations per dependent clause, total number of orientations per total number of clauses, and total number of evaluations per total number of clauses.

### **Group Differences**

With respect to linguistic content, the results indicated that children from divorced homes produced significantly more orientative comments ( $F(1,8) = 8.68, p < .05$ ) and appendages per T-unit ( $F(1,8) = 31.59, p < .01$ ) than did their peers from non-divorced homes, whereas the children from non-divorced homes produced significantly more complicating actions per T-unit ( $F(1,8) = 5.83, p < .05$ ). No significant group differences were found with respect to the number of evaluative comments produced per T-unit ( $F(1,8) = 0.01, p > .05$ ) or the number of resolutions produced per T-unit ( $F(1,8) = 0.04, p > .05$ ). Likewise, no significant group differences were found with respect to linguistic productivity or complexity as measured by T-units ( $F(1,8) = 0.06, p > .05$ ), number of dependent clauses ( $F(1,8) = 0.34, p > .05$ ), and number of dependent clauses per T-unit ( $F(1,8) = 0.37, p > .05$ ).

### **Topic Differences**

Narrative topic differences, with respect to linguistic content, were found to be significant across groups in three of the five high point analysis categories (i.e., evaluation ( $F(1,8) = 3.77, p < .05$ ), orientation ( $F(1,8) = 6.91, p < .001$ ), and complicating action ( $F(1,8) = 3.16, p < .05$ ). Both groups produced significantly more evaluations and evaluations/total number of clauses in the Doctor Visit/Shot story as compared to the number of evaluations produced in the Pets story ( $p < .05$ ). Across both groups, there were significantly more ( $p < .05$ ) orientations/T-unit produced for the Pets story as compared to the number of orientations/T-unit produced in the Doctor Visits/Shots story, the Hospital story, and the Accident story. Both groups also produced significantly more



( $p < .05$ ) orientations/total number of clauses in the Pets story as compared to the number of orientations/total number of clauses produced in both the Doctor Visits/Shots story and the Accident story. There were also significantly more ( $p < .05$ ) complicating actions per T-unit produced in both the Pets story and the Hospital story. A significant narrative topic difference ( $F(1,8) = 3.56, p < .05$ ) was found with respect to linguistic productivity (i.e., number of T-units). The two groups produced significantly longer narratives (more T-units) ( $p < .05$ ) for the Pets story as compared to the number of T-units produced in the Doctor Visits/Shots story. No significant narrative topic difference ( $F(1,8) = 0.96, p > .05$ ) was found with respect to syntactic complexity (i.e., number of dependent clauses per T-unit).

### Conclusions

These preliminary data support the usefulness of these five topics (i.e., trips, pets, hospitalizations, accidents (car wrecks), and doctor visits/shots) for eliciting personal event narratives from school-age children. In addition, the Pets story topic was found to be useful for eliciting lengthy narratives, the Doctor Visits/Shots topic was useful for eliciting evaluative comments, and the Accident story topic was useful in eliciting specific event details in the personal event narratives.

With respect to linguistic content, children from divorced homes were found to produce significantly more orientative comments and appendages per T-unit than did their peers from non-divorced homes, whereas the children from non-divorced homes produced significantly more complicating actions per T-unit. No significant group

differences were found with respect to the number of evaluative comments produced per T-unit. In addition, children from divorced and non-divorced homes were not found to differ significantly with respect to the length or complexity of their personal event narratives as measured by the number of T-units, number of dependent clauses, or the number of dependent clauses per T-unit produced.

Given the small sample size, the results of this study should be considered preliminary in nature. Future research would be necessary to draw definitive conclusions regarding any differences in personal event narratives produced by children from divorced and non-divorced homes.

**Appendix**

**Sample Narrative: Pets**

Speakers: Adult (A), Child (C)

A: I was wondering if you have any pets?

C: (um) We have a cat/ **Orientation**

A: Oh you do? Tell me about your cat.

C: (well) We named it Toby/ **Complicating Action**

A: Um hum

C: And we had a other cat/ **Orientation**  
But it ran away/ **Complicating Action (High Point)**  
And it never came back again/ **Resolution**

A: Um hum

C: (um) That's all/ **Appendage**

A: Do you want to tell me about the cat that ran away?

C: His name was Kitty Kitty/**Orientation**  
And it was a girl/**Orientation**  
And Toby was a boy/**Orientation**

**Sample Narrative: Doctor Visits/Shots**

Speakers: Adult (A), Child (C)

A: Have you ever been to the doctor's office or had a shot?

C: I had to get my (h)epatitis B shots/**Orientation**

A: Tell me about that.

C: I got two in my legs and one in my arm/**Complicating Action**

I didn't want to get my shots/**Evaluation**

So I wiggle and wiggle/**Complicating Action**

(And) and I wiggle so much that they had to get another person to help hold me  
down/**Complicating Action**

I was like I don't want to get a shot/**Evaluation**

And I wiggled and wiggled/**Evaluation**

But I kept on crying/**Evaluation**

I didn't stop/**Evaluation**

A: You kept on crying?

C: (And my) and I even got the chicken pox shot/**Orientation**

A: Oh, the chicken pox shot?

C: I didn't like that either/**Evaluation**

She said the last one was like (a little) a very hard pinch/**Complicating Action/High  
Point**

But I didn't go for that/**Evaluation**

I wouldn't stop moving/**Complicating Action**

I don't like shots/**Evaluation**

A: I don't think most people do.

C: At least it's over with/**Evaluation**

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