

**Morality and Meaning-Making: How Mothers Make Sense of Their Own  
Transgressions and Those of Their Adolescent Children**

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## ABSTRACT

### Morality and Meaning-Making: How Mothers Make Sense of Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Adolescent Children

Jaclyn Ohayon

This study examined mothers' constructions of meaning about transgressions, and whether the way mothers make sense of their own moral transgressions is related to how they make sense of those of their children. The sample consisted of 89 mothers of adolescent children (children's age range = 12-15 years; 43 boys, 46 girls). Each mother was asked to choose a moral value that was most important to them and to write about past experiences wherein they and their child acted out of alignment with this value. Written narratives were coded reliably for references to growth, choice, remorse, negative evaluation, and negative characterological attribution. Mothers also answered a series of related closed-ended follow-up questions on Likert scales. The first research aim was to examine how different aspects of meaning-making were interrelated within the mothers' written narrative accounts. Results indicated that, in narratives of their own transgressions, mothers' negative evaluations were positively related to their negative characterological attributions and remorse. Regarding their narratives of their child's transgressions, negative characterological attributions were positively linked to negative evaluations and growth. The second aim was to examine similarities and differences between mothers' accounts of their own and their children's transgressions. Contrary to expectations, results showed that mothers discussed growth and remorse more for themselves, and choice and negative characterological attribution more for their children. The third aim was to examine associations between the types of meanings mothers made regarding their own transgressions and those of their children. Results revealed negative correlations between mother's choice and child's growth and mother's negative

evaluation and child's choice. Negative evaluations of the mother and child were positively correlated. Findings based on the follow-up Likert scales did not consistently reflect the patterns revealed in the narratives. From a scholarly perspective, this study provides new information about the processes involved in moral socialization, and how parents come to conclusions about their children's wrongdoings. Implications for parenting are discussed.

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## **Morality and Meaning-Making: How Mothers Make Sense of Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Adolescent Children**

Typically, parents aim to pass their beliefs and values onto their children (Grusec & Danyiuk, 2014). However, within the context of parental moral socialization, there are many factors that influence the way children develop, what they believe, and how they act. One important factor may be parents' reactions to their children's wrongdoings (Grusec et al., 2014). But what guides these reactions? Alongside other factors such as parenting styles (Smetana, 2017), how parents view their own moral behaviors and how they react to their own transgressions may inform their reactions to their children's wrongdoings. For instance, parents who view their own transgressions as opportunities to learn and grow may communicate these views to their children (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). On the other hand, parents who believe transgressions reflect character may encourage their children to think the same way. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to examine mothers' constructions of meaning about transgressions, and to discover whether the way mothers make sense of their own moral transgressions is related to how they make sense of those of their adolescent children.

More specifically, the first aim of this thesis was to examine how different aspects of meaning-making were interrelated within mothers' written narrative accounts. After identifying patterns of meaning-making, additional aims were to explore (a) the similarities and differences in how mothers make sense of their own moral transgressions and those of their children, as well as (b) associations between the types of meanings that mothers construct regarding their own transgressions and those of their children.

The sections that follow will describe the different aspects of parenting, mindset, and meaning-making that form the bases of my hypotheses. First, past research on the differences in mindset that may influence reactions to moral wrongdoings will be reviewed, as well as

how people make meaning through narrative. The literature review will then describe parenting and child development, exploring how parental approaches to moral socialization across different developmental periods may influence how children make meaning of their moral wrongdoings.

### **Growth and Fixed Mindset**

People's actions are guided by their beliefs, which influence how they respond to various situations (Dweck, 2015). The way people understand themselves and others impacts how they interpret various life events. Mindset theory focuses on the idea that ability is rooted in a person's belief that they can succeed (Dweck, 2019). This theory initially revolved around the concept of intelligence. Dweck and colleagues (2019) found that students who believed that intelligence was less fixed and could be improved tended to outperform those who believed intelligence was unchangeable. In other words, those who believe ability is rooted in effort and that people become more intelligent by continuing to learn and try new techniques are more likely to improve.

More recently, scholarship based on mindset theory has expanded to include understandings of morality (Heiphetz, 2019; Scirocco & Recchia, 2021). Specifically, people's beliefs in their own and others' ability to change and grow can affect how they respond to moral wrongdoings (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). When people hold the belief that morality is innate and cannot be changed, they may judge the person who committed the transgression as bad. This is because people with a fixed mindset tend to see actions as rooted in one's character (Gelman, 2003). Yeager and colleagues (2011) conducted a series of studies exploring adolescents' likelihood to seek revenge against a classmate after a conflict, based on their implicit mindsets. These researchers were interested in whether children with fixed mindsets would be more likely to seek revenge against their peers in the context of peer conflicts and bullying. Results indicated that this was the case. Adolescents who endorsed a

growth mindset were less likely to seek revenge after conflict. Moreover, adolescents who were taught to adopt a growth mindset showed a reduced likelihood to seek revenge. Participants who were encouraged to hold a growth mindset were also less likely to make bad person attributions, whereas they were more likely to consider alternate reasons for their peer's behaviour aside from them being a bad person (e.g., immature, difficult home life; see also Heyman & Dweck, 1998, for similar correlational findings). When an attribute is deemed unchangeable by someone with a fixed mindset, they often do not strive to improve upon that trait (Erdley & Dweck, 1993). So-called "trait essentialists" are more inclined to make negative judgements about others' behaviours, seek more revenge, and ignore situational factors that may be crucial to understanding a situation (Yeager et al., 2011).

Overall, the findings from this body of scholarship suggests that when people hold a growth mindset, in which they believe that human beings can grow and improve with lessons and experience, they are likely to react differently to their own and others' wrongdoings (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). Those with this mindset may be less harsh on themselves and others after committing a transgression and will not assume that the wrongdoing defines their character. They tend to focus on constructive feedback that could help themselves and others improve in the future, and display less controlling behaviour and negative affect (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Moreover, emphasizing situational factors contributing to moral wrongdoings and discussing a person's ability to change helps those who have committed a moral violation to learn and grow (Pasupathi et al., 2019). That said, discussing wrongdoings in a constructive way can help people understand how to improve in the future.

### **Meaning-Making Through Narrative**

We create meaning in our lives by constructing autobiographical stories based on our experiences. It is partially through this narrative processing that people develop and maintain their identities. A well-formed life story stems from the ability to draw meaning from

experiences and integrate them into one's identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006). This process is integral to be able to grow from experiences and come to understand that self-improvement is possible. Through telling stories about our lives, we further our self-concepts (McLean et al., 2007). Discussing and interpreting these situations can lead to a clearer understanding of who we are and how our experiences shape us (McLean et al., 2007). All these experiences eventually tell the story of who we are and how we got there. Narrating personal events can lead us to conclusions we had not previously considered and can alter our views, turning negative experiences into positive ones.

A critical part of forming a healthy life story is to reflect on past events and make meaning of transgressions, so one can come to peace with what they have done, learn from their experiences, and reconcile them with the kind of person they believe themselves to be (Mansfield et al., 2010). Those with a growth mindset are more likely to reflect on their own and others' transgressions in a manner that fosters self-acceptance and understanding. A study by Lilgendahl and colleagues on personality (2012) focused on meaning-making of transgressions in terms of incremental theory and entity theory (reflecting growth and fixed mindset, respectively). They found that incremental theorists were more likely to make meaning and narrate their transgressions in ways emphasizing growth. Conversely, entity theorists were more likely to take their transgressions as indication that they are bad people.

Pasupathi et al. (2015) discussed how experiences of harm can be narrated in ways that emphasize our potential for growth, and as imperfect but still fundamentally good people. Conversely, they can be narrated in ways that ruminate on distress and create a sense of the self as "bad". Similarly, Pasupathi and Wainryb (2010) explored the idea that when people think about their own moral transgressions, they are furthering their understanding of themselves and others, and building on their knowledge that even good people can do bad things. Thus, over time, developing their sense of moral agency through narrative and coming

to understand their own and others' actions on a deeper level. That is, the ways that people make sense of their experiences can lay the foundation for their ability to grow and teach others that making mistakes does not make a person fundamentally bad.

People who narrate past experiences as opportunities to grow and learn are likely to feel guilt and regret for the bad things they have done. While this form of meaning-making can be beneficial to manage emotions related to past events, remorse is also a strong indicator of growth. Emotions, good or bad, have a direct influence on future behaviour (Baumeister et al., 2007). When feeling guilt or remorse, people are more likely to reflect on the event and ponder what they could have done differently, and what they may do differently in the future (Tangney & Tracy, 2012). Using those feelings of remorse as a motivator for personal change can help people grow from their wrongdoings by understanding their mistakes while ensuring that they will improve in the future. This can help form a more desirable sense of self and allow people to understand that their mistakes do not have to define them. On the other hand, a lack of remorse can leave people without the tools to navigate future situations. Thus, some moral emotions are adaptive in that they align with the ability to discern self-relevant meaning from past experiences.

Over the lifespan, we gradually learn the process of making meaning through narratives. For adolescents, exploring personal moral experiences with trusted listeners can promote a richer understanding of the self-concept (Pasupathi & Weeks, 2010). A study by McLean and Jennings (2012) discussed the importance of a mother's role in scaffolding their child's narrative identity. Their study explored conversations between mothers and their adolescent children. Each child shared one memory that showed something about them as a person, one sad memory, and one happy memory. Their findings revealed that mothers typically asked for further details on their child's experience, and encouraged them to reflect on their words and actions. These prompts are significant in helping children to reflect on

their experiences and integrate them into the narrative of their lives. That being said, the ways in which youth make meaning through narrative may vary. For example, a study by Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011) found that connecting life events to the self-concept was only beneficial when the person did not ruminate over the event in a judgmental way, therefore making a “bad self” connection. Moreover, a study by Scirocco and Recchia (2022), which was based on the same dataset as the current study, found that the way adolescents discussed their moral wrongdoings differed depending on their mindset. For example, youth who endorsed incrementalist beliefs were more likely to delve deeper into psychological facets of their stories and search for greater meaning into their actions. This may be due to their belief in their ability to change. Adolescents with a growth mindset may feel less threatened by the idea that their actions define what kind of person they are. That said, parents can scaffold their children’s formation of the self-concept by exploring the meaning behind their transgressions and helping them learn how to handle situations better in the future. Scirocco and Recchia (2022) provides context for the current study in that their study illustrates how differences in moral mindsets are linked to narrative processing among adolescents. In the current study, we built on these findings by exploring how parents construct meaning in narratives, and in particular, how the meaning they derive from their own transgressions may be linked with their understandings of their children’s transgressions. This study may thus bear on some of the moral socialization processes that, ultimately, inform adolescents’ narrative constructions.

### **Parenting and Moral Socialization**

Parents have multiple goals when it comes to raising their children. Most parents would agree that it is important to teach their children to act in ways consistent with their moral values. However, parents also simultaneously wish to protect their children from harm, promote their children’s self-esteems, foster their children’s positive social relationships and

academic achievements, along with other important developmental goals (Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Laible et al., 2019). Thus, as they socialize their children, parents weigh moral concerns against other considerations for their children (Recchia & Wainryb, 2014).

Particularly in relation to moral socialization, parents play a key role in helping their children develop a sense of moral agency (Recchia et al., 2014). In particular, conversations with parents can help children understand their moral experiences in more nuanced ways, further their conceptions of right and wrong, and consider what they can do better in the future. This can help them to better understand themselves and others as moral beings. For example, a study by Saint-Martin et al. (2022) showed that parents helped their children's responsibility and agency in relation to the role that they play in peer conflict, while simultaneously supporting their child's right to safety and self-protection.

Parental approaches to moral socialization may also be sensitive to context, in that they vary across events depending on the affordances of specific situations. For example, a study by Scirocco et al. (2018) examined mothers' conversations with their children discussing events when the child had harmed a friend or younger sibling. When discussing the harm of a sibling, mothers tended to emphasize the child's negative behaviour and the effects of their wrongdoing. On the other hand, when discussing the harm of a friend, mothers minimized the child's blame and focused on how to repair the relationship. These differences, in part, may have stemmed from more uninhibited and aggressive nature of harms against siblings (Recchia et al., 2013). Thus, this example illustrates that parents are responsive and flexible in their socialization approaches across different types of morally-laden situations.

With this background in mind, the current thesis seeks to contribute to the literature on moral socialization by exploring the possibility that mothers' responses to their own transgressions may inform how they will respond to their children's transgressions. Past research suggests that, when mothers focus on growth when narrating their experiences of

regret, it is accompanied by less rejection of their children's negative emotions (Pasupathi et al., 2019). Thus, mothers who can acknowledge their wrongdoings and display growth in their narratives may reap more benefits from reflecting on experiences and be more likely to forgive. The way mothers respond to their own negative emotions, such as regret, can influence the way they will respond to these situations in their children's lives (Pasupathi et al., 2019).

When children act in ways that are not in line with their parents' values, the way their parents respond may inform the child's development in terms of a fixed or growth mindset. Children who receive person-focused negative feedback are more likely to develop a fixed mindset, believing that their character is the problem, and they cannot improve (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). However, children who receive process-focused feedback, and are encouraged to learn from the experience, are more likely to develop a growth mindset. These parental responses may arguably be informed by how the parents conceive of moral traits and moral learning. When parents hold a fixed mindset, they may not use their children's transgressions as learning opportunities if they see this behaviour as unable to change. If a child commits a moral transgression, a mother with a fixed mindset may be more likely to be concerned that this reflects poorly on their child's character, which will likely lead to a harsher reaction.

Conversely, when mothers exhibit a growth mindset, they tend to focus on constructive feedback that could help their child to improve in the future, displaying less controlling behaviour and negative affect (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017). This is relevant because if parents treat transgressions as learning opportunities, they are more likely to provide reasoning and explanations, as opposed to leading with anger. For example, in one study, children were presented with a challenging task (Moorman & Pomerantz, 2010). When mothers were told that their child's performance could improve with practice (i.e., a growth



mindset was primed), they were less likely to give the child negative feedback concerning their performance and displayed less negative affect.

Attribution theories are also germane to understanding parents' responses to children's transgressions. Specifically, parental attributions about their children can stem from various sources (Dix, 1993). When assessing how to respond to a child's actions, Dix et al. (1986) noted that parents take multiple factors into account. First, parents consider whether the child was aware of the consequences their actions would have. Second, parents consider whether the child had the ability to purposely produce the effects of their action. Third, parents consider whether the actions were free from external control, in other words, whether the child had complete control over their actions. Specifically, parents are more likely to believe that a child's behaviour is a result of who they are if they believe that the child can control their behaviour and comprehend the consequences of their actions. In this respect, examining these processes vis-à-vis parenting of adolescents may be especially interesting, since parents may be more likely to make these attributions with their teenaged children. Indeed, parents are more likely to view older children's behaviour as intentional and as more indicative of their personality (Dix et al., 1986). Dix (1993) also discusses how parents will judge their children's actions more negatively if they attribute these actions to underlying dispositions in the child. This is because, in that case, parents believe that the child's actions are indicative of their character.

It is also worth noting that there may be occasions where parents attribute negative characteristics to their children while still holding a growth mindset. Specifically, parents may express concern about their negative traits while recognizing the potential for improvement. For example, a "redemption sequence" is a negative experience that has come to be understood as positive through the lessons learned (Pasupathi et al., 2007). Thus, when a child misbehaves, and this behaviour is understood to reflect badly on their character,

parents may nevertheless acknowledge their potential for improvement and to grow from their mistakes (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014).

### **Comparing Mothers' Views of Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children**

Some mothers may believe that their children's transgressions are opportunities to learn, but may not consistently view their own transgressions the same way. This positive impression of children is known as developmental optimism (Coplan et al., 2002). Often, as children are developing, parents view children's mistakes as part of that growth. Since children are young and bound to make mistakes, some transgressions may be explained as signs of immaturity. For example, Coplan et al. (2002) found that parents tend to make external attributions for their children's wrongdoings, and internal attributions for their children's successes. That is, when a child does something wrong, parents often explain it as an infrequent occurrence outside of their control. When they do something right, however, parents tend to attribute it to who their child is as a person. In this respect, it is possible that mothers may view their own actions as more dire, seeing as they possess more life experience and may not as often see their own wrongdoings as "mistakes".

Alternatively, a phenomenon termed the Fundamental Attribution Error may also guide parents' reactions. This theory states that people understand the circumstances behind their own actions more than the actions of others, which may result in more harsh evaluations of others. In other words, "people tend to infer stable personality characteristics from observed behavior even when this behavior could also be due to situational factors" (Gawronski, 2007, p. 367). Generally, we are aware of the situational and personal factors that affect our behaviour. Outsiders, however, do not have access to this same information. That said, they may be more inclined to attribute someone's actions to their character rather than to the circumstances. Thus, contrary to predictions based on developmental optimism,

this phenomenon suggests instead that parents may react more harshly to their children's actions than their own.

In a similar vein, parents have moral socialization goals for their children that may not be as salient for themselves or others. As noted above, one important parenting task is to help children develop moral values (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). In this sense, most parents recognize their role as moral socializers and often work hard to teach their children these values. For this reason, moral socialization goals may be particularly salient as parents reflect on their children's transgressions and missteps, in comparison to others' transgressions. It may also be partly for this reason that children's transgressions are emotionally evocative for parents, especially when parents see their wrongdoings as intentional (Dix et al., 1989).

### **Parenting and Moral Socialization in Adolescence**

Given that the current study is focused on parents of adolescents, it is imperative to note the transitional stage in which these children exist, and how this may affect parenting. Parents are constantly exploring ways to best respond to their child's needs. These needs, however, are continually changing as the child develops (Dix et al., 1986). During this period of discovery in a child's life, adolescents tend to distance themselves from their parents and seek independence (Smetana & Campione-Barr, 2006). At this point, a parent's role is to encourage this autonomy while also ensuring their child's wellbeing and safety (Kobak et al., 2017). This is considered, by many, to be a difficult period of parenting. This is also the point where, often, the parent-child relationship shifts. Children may try to set new boundaries, and parents must adapt to the idea of their child requiring more freedom (Smetana & Campione-Barr, 2006). Moreover, parents and adolescents may interpret youths' actions in different ways, leading to conflict. Specifically, Smetana (1989) found that parents more often viewed conflicts with their child as a result of adolescents' violations of social-conventional norms appropriately regulated by parents (e.g., meeting responsibilities), whereas adolescents more

often interpreted conflicts as stemming from parents' regulation of choices that should be within their personal jurisdiction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that how parents think about their adolescents' transgressions may be different from how they think about transgressions committed by younger children. For example, Dix and colleagues (1989) suggested that parents are more likely to make negative dispositional attributions to account for older children's actions, and that they generally get more upset by the wrongdoings of older children. Thus, given that this study focuses on mothers of adolescents, it can be beneficial to further document how mothers interpret and evaluate their adolescent children's transgressions.

### **Current Study**

Building on the existing scholarship described above, the current study aims to explore mothers' views on their own and their child's potential for growth and learning from their moral wrongdoings. To do so, I examined mothers' narrative accounts of their own transgressions, as well as their narratives of their adolescent children's transgressions. My first aim was to examine how different aspects of meaning-making are interrelated within mothers' written narrative accounts. That is, associations were examined between the different measured constructs. Mothers who described the potential for growth in their narratives were expected to also emphasize choice, describe more remorse, be less likely to negatively evaluate actions, and make fewer negative characterological attributions (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017). This pattern is referred to as a "growth-oriented stance." Conversely, mothers who focused less on the potential for growth were expected to also express less choice, and less remorse, be more likely to negatively evaluate actions, and make more negative characterological attributions (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). As was outlined in the literature reviewed above (e.g., Pasupathi et al., 2019; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), when mothers recognize opportunities for growth, they may be more likely to view transgressions

as a way to further their understandings of themselves, without believing that these mistakes define them.

My second aim was to examine the similarities and differences in how mothers, on average, responded to their own moral transgressions versus those of their adolescent children. I hypothesized that mothers may show less of a growth-oriented stance toward themselves than their children, as a consequence of developmental optimism (Coplan et al., 2002). Mothers may believe that since their children are still developing, their mistakes are less an indication of the type of person they are. As adults, however, these mothers may feel that they should have known better, since they have had more life experience.

Finally, my third aim was to examine whether there were associations between the types of meanings that mothers construct regarding their own transgressions and those of their children. I hypothesized that mothers who take a more growth-oriented stance with respect to their own transgressions would also tend to do so with respect to their children's transgressions, relative to other mothers (Pasupathi et al., 2019). This is because mothers with a growth mindset will see both their own and their children's transgressions as learning experiences, and not as indicative of their character.

### **Method**

The study was based on a dataset consisting of a sample of mothers and their adolescent children, collected in the context of a doctoral dissertation by Alyssa Scirocco (2022). The overarching study was designed to examine moral mindsets, how they vary across contexts, and how they are linked to constructions of meaning about their own and others' positive and negative experiences. To date, published papers based on this dataset focused on youths' narratives and responses to vignettes (Scirocco & Recchia, 2021; 2022). The questions forming the focus of this thesis have not been previously examined.

The full sample included 98 mother-child dyads (52 girls, 46 boys). Children were between the ages of 12 and 15 years ( $M = 13.86$  years, range = 12.08 to 15.92 years). Recruitment was done via social media, in public spaces such as libraries, by word of mouth, via flyers, and by contacting past research participants. Participants were mostly Canadian-born (74%) and White (78%). Remaining families varied in racial/ethnic backgrounds (1% Chinese, 2% Latin American, 2% West Asian, 3% Middle Eastern, 4% South Asian, 4% Black, 6% Eastern European). Most mothers were well educated (52% completed University) and had a mean age of 43.7 years. The children's other parent (85% described as fathers) were also well educated (47% completed university) and had a mean age of 46.7 years. Most of the families spoke English at home (84%) and all children spoke fluent English. Some of the participants also spoke French, Arabic, Russian, Spanish, and Persian at home. Most of the children had one or more siblings (87%). Due to missing data, the analytic sample for this thesis consisted of 89 mother-child dyads where complete narrative data was available for mothers (46 girls, 43 boys).

## **Procedure**

Ethics approval was received from the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Committee (Certificate # 30009420). Parental consent and adolescent written assent were obtained for each participant. The study took place either in a university lab or in the participants' homes, depending on their preference. Mothers and adolescents each completed several measures on tablet computers, including written narratives, vignette-based measures, and questionnaires. A summary of all measures is available in Scirocco (2022).

As part of this overall procedure, mothers were asked to complete a survey about their moral values. They were asked to identify the value that was most important to them: honesty, caring, fairness, or dependability. This was done to prompt participants' commitment to this value and provoke a challenge to be resolved when they narrated an

experience in which they acted inconsistently with that important value. They then provided a written narrative account of a past experience when they acted inconsistently with the moral value. They answered follow-up questions regarding the account provided, and were asked how the situation made them think and feel about themselves. Later in the survey (following additional measures, including a written narrative account of a time that the mother behaved consistently with a moral value, as well as questionnaire-based measures of their implicit theories), they were asked to provide a written narrative about a time their child acted inconsistently with the same moral value. They also answered follow-up questions regarding their child's transgression, and were asked to describe what their child thought and felt about themselves following the transgression. Participants received either \$20 or two movie tickets in appreciation of their participation. The narrative prompts and relevant follow-up questions are available in Appendix A.

### **Measures and Coding**

The following section will briefly present the narrative coding scheme for the current study and outline how each variable was measured. Some constructs were solely based on narrative coding, whereas others were assessed by both narrative coding and responses to Likert-type follow-up questions, as outlined below. The complete coding scheme is available in Appendix B. Interrater reliability for the coding was established based on 31% of the narratives between two coders, one of whom was unaware of hypotheses. Agreement was assessed using Cohen's  $\kappa$ s.

### ***Growth***

Growth was defined as the belief that a person's character is not fixed, and can be improved and developed. This variable was coded based on the content of the narratives on a global 3-point scale from none (0) to a lot (2); Cohen's  $\kappa$  = .89. For example, a statement in the narrative about the child's experience such as "I am not sure if it bothered him at all

because it has happened since” indicated a lack of growth (0). One Likert-type follow-up question for each event also captured growth. Specifically, higher scores on the statement “I/They used it (my/their mistake) as a tool to improve in the future” reflected greater degrees of growth”. This variable was measured on a 6-point scale with endpoints labelled “strongly disagree” (0) and “strongly agree” (5).

### ***Choice***

Choice was defined as the understanding of the role a person plays in a situation and the control they have over their actions. The variable was coded based on the content of the narratives on a 3-point scale from no choice (0) to choice (2); Cohen’s *kappa* = .93. For example, statements in the mother’s narrative of her own experience such as “When my kids were little, I **had to** go back to work and leave them in daycare” indicated a lack of choice (0). One follow-up question for each event also captured choice. Specifically, “Why do you think you/they did it?” Higher scores on the statement “because of the circumstances” (strongly disagree (0) – strongly agree (5)) were reverse-coded to indicate choice.

### ***Remorse***

Remorse was defined as the feeling of guilt or regret in the aftermath of wrongdoing. The variable was coded on a three-point scale based on the lack (0), no mention (1), or presence (2) of remorse in the narratives; Cohen’s *kappa* = .90. For example, statements such as “I think that she is indifferent” would indicate a lack of remorse. One Likert-type follow-up question for each event also captured remorse. Higher scores on the question “How guilty do you/they feel about it?” reflected greater degrees of remorse. This was measured on a 3-point scale with endpoints labeled “not guilty” (0) and “very guilty” (2).

### ***Negative Characterological Attributions***

Negative characterological attributions were defined as the negative judgements given to a person based on their character. This does not necessarily imply that this behaviour is



consistent over time. The variable was coded based on the content of the narratives using a presence (1) or absence (0) coding scheme; Cohen's  $kappa = .89$ . For example, statements such as "[child] has always had a problem embellishing things" indicated a negative characterological attribution, as did "My oldest son, [...] can be the most caring person sometimes, [but] I've seen him be mean to his friend over games, treat them like trash. He can be a sore winner when his friends haven't played a game before and he wins." The follow-up question "Why did you/they do this?" with higher scores on the response "because of the kind of person I am/they are" reflected greater negative characterological attributions. This was measured for each event on a 6-point scale with endpoints labelled "strongly disagree" (0) and "strongly agree" (5).

### ***Negative Evaluation***

Negative evaluation was defined as whether a person's actions were judged negatively. It was coded based on the content of the narratives using a presence (1) or absence (0) coding scheme; Cohen's  $kappa = .96$ . For example, statements such as "It was a huge disappointment" indicated a negative evaluation. The dataset did not include a follow-up question assessing negative evaluation that could be used for the purpose of the current thesis.

## **Results**

The current study aimed to uncover associations between different aspects of meaning-making, similarities and differences between mothers' discussions of their own and their children's transgressions, and how different aspects of meaning-making are interrelated within mothers' written accounts of their transgressions. Each research question will be discussed in turn. Results are displayed in the tables below. For all tests, statistical significance was assessed at  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed). Preliminary analyses were used to test associations with the child's age and gender. Specifically, I examined how age and gender

were associated with each of the key narrative variables and follow-up questions. Of 36 associations tested (18 with age and 18 with gender), none were significant (range of  $r$ s= -.20 to 0.20,  $p$ s > .05).

### **Associations Between Different Aspects of Meaning-Making**

How are different aspects of meaning-making interrelated within mothers' narrative accounts of their own and their children's transgressions? This section reports findings on the correlations between different aspects of meaning-making for a given event. These associations were also tested based on mothers' responses to follow-up questions.

Results are reported in Tables 1 and 2. First, correlations were examined based on the narrative measures. Correlations below the diagonal correspond to the associations for the mothers' narratives of their own transgressions, while correlations above the diagonal correspond to the associations for their narratives of their child's transgressions. For mothers' own transgressions, the table indicates that there were only two significant findings: (1) negative evaluations were positively related to remorse, and (2) negative characterological attributions were positively related to negative evaluations. For the narratives concerning the child, results indicate that positive links between (1) growth and negative characterological attribution, as well as (2) negative evaluation and negative characterological attribution were significant. These results demonstrate that while certain constructs are related, the specific patterns were not consistently aligned with my hypotheses that mothers who exhibit a more growth-oriented stance would also display more remorse and choice, and less negative evaluation and negative characterological attribution.

**Table 1***Correlations Between Constructs in Mothers' Narrative Accounts of Their Own and Their Children's Transgressions*

	Choice	Growth	Remorse	Negative Evaluation	NCA
Choice	--	-.042	-.085	-.009	-.017
Growth	.152	--	.180	.118	.212*
Remorse	-.077	-.034	--	-.117	-.165
Negative Evaluation	-.018	.026	.375**	--	.557**
NCA	.064	.028	.061	.264*	--

*Note.* NCA = negative characterological attributions; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Correlations below and above the diagonal correspond to the associations for the narratives of the mother's and children's transgressions, respectively.

Next, differences based on the follow-up questions were examined. For the questions concerning the mothers' experiences, the only significant finding was a positive link between remorse and growth. For the questions pertaining to the child's transgression, there were multiple significant findings: (1) Choice was negatively linked to growth, (2) growth was positively linked to remorse, and (3) remorse was negatively linked to negative characterological attribution. These results align more with my hypotheses. For instance, I expected that growth and remorse would be positively correlated, as well as remorse and negative characterological attribution being negatively correlated.

**Table 2**

*Correlations Between Constructs in Mothers' Follow-Up Question Responses of Their Own and Their Children's Transgressions*

	Choice	Growth	Remorse	NCA
Choice	--	-.342**	-.136	.207
Growth	.147	--	.382**	-.070
Remorse	.094	.211*	--	-.273**
NCA	.023	-.097	-.135	--

Note. NCA = negative characterological attributions; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Correlations below and above the diagonal correspond to the associations for the narratives of the mother's and children's transgressions, respectively.

### **Similarities and Differences Between Mothers' Accounts of Their Own and Their Children's Transgressions**

What are the similarities and differences in how mothers make sense of their own transgressions and those of their children, on average? This was tested based on both the narratives as well as the relevant follow-up questions. For continuous measures, differences were examined using paired samples t-tests. For dichotomous measures, the McNemar's test was used.

Results are reported in Table 3. First, differences were examined based on the narrative measures. The results for growth indicated that mothers discuss growth more for themselves than their children ( $d = .75$ ). For choice, mothers discuss choice for their children more than for themselves ( $d = .71$ ). For remorse, mothers discuss their own remorse more than their children's remorse ( $d = 1.09$ ). In turn, mothers were more likely to make negative characterological attributions for their children than for themselves. The difference for negative evaluations was not significant.

Next, differences were examined based on the follow-up questions. Like the narratives, there was a significant difference for growth. Mothers discussed their own growth more than the growth of their children ( $d = 1.45$ ). Like the narratives, mothers discussed their

children’s choice more than their own ( $d = 1.92$ ). However, the results were not significant for remorse ( $d = 1.21$ ) or negative characterological attribution ( $d = 1.81$ ).

Overall, then, the observed patterns were not consistent with our hypotheses; I had expected mothers to take a more growth-oriented stance for their children more than for themselves, but results largely indicated the opposite.

**Table 3**

*Similarities and Differences Between How Mothers Construct Meaning About Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children*

	Mother Event	Child Event	Test of Difference
<b>Narrative Measures</b>			
Growth	$M=.49, SE=.077$	$M=.08, SE=.033$	$t(88) = -5.22, p < .001$
Choice	$M=1.66, SE=.064$	$M=1.91, SE=.034$	$t(88) = 3.28, p = .002$
Remorse	$M=1.80, SE=.053$	$M=1.22, SE=.096$	$t(88) = -4.98, p < .001$
Negative Evaluation	55/89 (62%)	43/89 (48%)	$p=.058$ based on McNemar’s test
NCA	9/89 (10%)	20/89 (22%)	$p=.035$ based on McNemar’s test
<b>Follow-up Measures</b>			
Growth	$M=4.88, SE=.133$	$M=4.28, SE=.120$	$t(88) = -3.87, p < .001$
Choice	$M=2.17, SE=.133$	$M=2.88, SE=.146$	$t(87) = 3.56, p < .001$
Remorse	$M=1.29, SE=.088$	$M=1.20, SE=.095$	$t(88) = -.70, p = .486$
NCA	$M=3.39, SE=.175$	$M=3.27, SE=.155$	$t(87) = -.59, p = .555$

### **Associations in Mothers’ Meaning-Making Between Their Own and Their Child’s**

#### **Transgressions**

Are there associations between the types of meanings mothers construct regarding their own transgressions and those of their children? This section includes findings on the correlations between the type of meaning mothers construct regarding their own transgressions and those of their children. These results are based on the narratives as well as mothers’ responses to select follow-up questions. Although the child’s age and gender were

not significantly correlated with the study variables at  $p < .05$ , as a conservative test, these patterns were analysed by examining partial correlations controlling for age and gender.

Results are reported in Tables 4 and 5. For the narrative measures (Table 4), it was revealed that (1) choice for the mother was significantly negatively correlated to growth for the child, (2) negative evaluation for the mother was significantly negatively correlated to choice for the child, and (3) negative evaluation for the mother was significantly positively correlated to negative evaluation for the child. I hypothesized that mothers who showed a more growth-oriented stance towards themselves would also do so for their children, and vice versa. This was only demonstrated for negative evaluation, and the opposite was shown for choice and growth.

**Table 4**

*Partial Correlations Between Mothers' Narratives of Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children (Controlling for the Child's Age and Gender)*

	Choice (c)	Growth (c)	Remorse (c)	Negative Eval (c)	NCA (c)
Choice (m)	-.062	-.224*	-.002	-.076	-.098
Growth (m)	-.058	.135	.109	.020	.001
Remorse (m)	.195	.090	-.135	.136	.174
Negative Evaluation (m)	-.222*	-.013	-.117	.256*	.144
NCA (m)	.133	-.074	.036	.054	.086

Note. NCA = negative characterological attributions; c = narrative about the child; m = narrative about the mother. \*  $p < .05$

For the data based on follow-up questions (Table 5), it was revealed that (1) growth in relation to the mother's experience was significantly negatively correlated to the child's choice, (2) mother's choice was significantly positively correlated to child's growth (notably, there was a significant *negative* correlation for these two constructs in the narrative data), (3) mother and child's growth were positively correlated, and (4) negative characterological attributions for the mother and child were positively correlated.

**Table 5**

*Partial Correlations Between Mothers' Follow-Up Question Responses Regarding Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children (Controlling for the Child's Age and Gender)*

	Choice (c)	Growth (c)	Remorse (c)	NCA (c)
Choice (m)	-.074	.267*	-.017	.123
Growth (m)	-.225*	.272*	-.063	.007
Remorse (m)	.048	-.057	-.002	-.169
NCA (m)	.057	-.042	-.179	.333**

Note. NCA = negative characterological attributions; c = narrative about the child; m = narrative about the mother. \*  $p < .05$

### Discussion

While there exists a rich body of scholarship discussing many aspects of parenting, only a handful of studies have investigated how mothers' judgements of their own transgressions may bear on their socialization practices. This research focuses on how mother's views of their own wrongdoings are interrelated with their views of their children's wrongdoings. I had expected that mothers who had taken a more growth-oriented stance would view their own and their children's transgressions as opportunities to improve, and that mothers would hold this view for their children more than for themselves. While certain findings support these hypotheses, some findings diverged from these expectations.

#### **How Are Different Aspects of Meaning-Making Interrelated Within Mothers' Narrative Accounts of Their Own and Their Children's Transgressions?**

For the first research question, I hypothesized that mothers who focus on the potential for growth in their narratives would also emphasize choice, discuss remorse more frequently, be less likely to negatively evaluate their own and their child's actions, and make fewer negative characterological attributions (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017). This was termed a "growth-oriented stance."

Certain associations aligned with my hypotheses. Specifically, negative characterological attribution was positively linked to negative evaluation in mothers'

narratives of both their own and their children's transgressions. This was expected based on the literature. People with a less growth-oriented stance may discuss their actions in a way that does not promote self-acceptance and understanding (Lilgendahl et al., 2012). That is, these mothers likely view their transgressions as indicative of their character, guiding them to judge their own actions more harshly (Gelman, 2003). It is important to note, however, that negative characterological attribution as coded in the current study did not necessarily imply a fixed mindset; this is discussed further below.

Regarding the follow-up questions, as expected, descriptions of growth were positively linked to references to remorse for narrations of both their own and their child's transgressions. In narratives of the child's transgressions, specifically, attributions of remorse were linked to fewer negative characterological attributions. Those with a growth mindset foster an understanding and self-acceptance for their wrongdoings, leading them to reflect on their actions and make sense of their transgressions (Lilgendahl et al., 2012). That said, individuals focusing on growth may also take this time to think about who they have hurt, and how they can remedy this relationship in the future. In the same vein, Mansfield et al. (2015) found that discussing transgressions and narrating growth in these situations was associated with higher self-compassion. The researchers argued that holding oneself accountable while practicing self-compassion can be beneficial for the future. By discussing wrongdoings and coming to conclusions about how one can act differently next time, people can learn new ways to cope with difficult situations.

Other observed associations were not consistent with my expectations. Namely, negative evaluation and remorse were positively related for mothers' narratives regarding their own transgressions. This was an unexpected finding. I had hypothesized that mothers who displayed high levels of one of these constructs would display low levels of the other. This is because the presence of remorse would typically indicate a growth-oriented stance,



while the presence of negative evaluation would likely indicate a less growth-oriented stance. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it is unsurprising that when mothers feel guilty for their transgressions, they may display this guilt in a self-deprecating way, by negatively evaluating their actions. That is, while remorse may encourage people to apologize and change their behaviour, it may also be accompanied by negative judgments (Baumeister et al., 2007). One example of this comes from a mother who shared a situation in which she felt she acted in a way that was not dependable. The excerpt below displays both remorse and negative evaluation:

*When it comes to my mom, sometimes I feel that I'm not dependable enough because I'm exhausted and overwhelmed at times and when I reach that point I tend to forget and neglect her as my children take up my priority list and I end up neglecting her. [...] It upsets me when I get distracted with other matters and ignore her simple requests. That's when I feel I'm not dependable. I feel that I'm too forgetful, not focused and intentionally or unintentionally negligent and not caring. I feel like a hypocrite when it happens.*

In this passage, the mother negatively evaluates her actions (i.e., “I feel that I’m not dependable enough”) and expresses remorse (i.e. “It upsets me when I get distracted with other matters and ignore her simple requests”). In discussing this event and her feelings on the matter, she may be more likely to reflect on her actions and identify how she is seeking to change her behaviour in the future. That said, it is clear that this mother has conflicting demands and recognizes that, at times, it is difficult to balance these pressures.

Growth and negative characterological attribution were also positively correlated in the mothers’ narratives about their children’s transgressions. Although this did not align with my hypothesis, it does corroborate the idea that mothers may identify negative qualities in their child while simultaneously discussing their actual or potential growth over time. A passage displaying this can be seen below:

*Up until about 6 months again my child was not particularly caring towards me at all, she treated me like I was dispensable and a nuisance to her in her life. I would tell her how she was making me feel and to think before speaking to me or treating me in*

*the way she was but it seemed to have gone nowhere till about 4 months ago and I'm starting to see little moments of decency and respect popping up in her personality. Was it a phase? I don't know but it truly was hurtful and it frightened me to think that is who my child was turning into.*

This may suggest, then, that negative characterological attributions do not necessarily imply that the child's character is viewed as unchangeable. Rather, it may reflect the view that character can change and develop with time and guidance (Pasupathi et al., 2007).

With reference to the follow-up questions surrounding the child's transgression, choice was found to be negatively linked to growth, which was the opposite of what was expected. Below is an excerpt of a mother discussing her child's transgression in a way that implies high choice and low growth:

*My son has the responsibility only to walk his puppy, which we drove to pick up. Often enough, he neglects this responsibility so he can play on his phone. I have left him home alone with the puppy, while I went to work. I came home, and the puppy had been left in his cage, all day, without being fed, and his cage was full of urine and feces, and the puppy was starving. I had asked him not to leave the puppy in the cage all day, and to walk and feed him, but my son showed no regard to it and stayed in bed all day playing on his phone.*

In this situation, the mother describes her child as having had all the means necessary to carry out his responsibilities, but made the choice to play on his phone instead. The narrative makes clear that his mother viewed this choice as irresponsible, rendering her dismayed; this may explain why she did not emphasize the possibility for growth in her narration. It is important to remember, however, that parents and adolescents may interpret situations differently. While the mother's perspective is clear in this case, the child's views on the situation are unknown.

Overall, then, while certain associations within accounts of events aligned with what I had expected to find, it is clear that a "growth-oriented stance" is not a straightforward concept, and the constructs do not fit neatly into these boxes. It had been hypothesized that growth would be positively linked to choice and remorse, and negatively linked to negative

characterological attribution and negative evaluation. This may be too simple. Interpreting and evaluating transgressions may be more complex than this straightforward model would suggest; while my findings are suggestive, additional research is needed to capture the varied forms of meanings that may be constructed in narrative accounts of transgressions.

It is important to note the differences between the narrative and follow-up question responses, and to consider the different information provided by each set of measures. In particular, the coding of the narratives provided information about how mothers constructed meaning about their own and their children's transgressions when discussed spontaneously, without direct prompting. This gave participants the opportunity to explain the situation the way they remembered it, and to emphasize the aspects of events that were most salient to them. In turn, the follow-up questions provided further context about specific emotions and responses when mothers were asked explicitly to reflect specifically on these aspects of events. This may partially explain why some associations were distinct across the two sets of measures.

### **What Are the Similarities and Differences in How Mothers Make Sense of Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children, on Average?**

For the second research question, I had expected that mothers would hold a less growth-oriented stance for themselves than for their children. The rationale for this hypothesis was that mothers would view their children as young enough to learn from their mistakes and grow from their experiences, but may not necessarily have the same outlook for themselves (Coplan et al., 2002). Instead, results showed that in the narratives and follow-up questions, mothers discussed growth and remorse more often for themselves, and choice and negative characterological attribution more frequently for their children. In coding the narratives, it became apparent that some participating mothers negatively evaluated their children's behavior. That is, they narrated their children's transgressions in ways suggesting

that they doubted whether their children felt remorse from their actions or grew from their experiences. An example from one of these narratives is presented below:

*[...] her personality in general is not fair. She's not fair with her [sibling], chores and homework. She gets away with it because as parents we are so tired of repeating the talks and trying to change her. We've tried every approach but all fails. I believe it's her personality that cannot be changed. She knows she's not being fair and understands the consequences but she doesn't seem to care!!!*

In this passage, the mother suggests that her daughter often acts in unfair ways and expresses concern that this aspect of her daughter's personality cannot be changed. More specifically, this narrative was coded as not referencing growth or remorse, but as viewing the child's actions as reflecting a choice; negative characterological attributions and a negative evaluation were also coded. Based on this account, this mother might be characterized as having a fixed mindset in relation to her child's actions in this specific instance (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). As Haimovitz and Dweck explain, a parent's mindset and how they communicate their feelings can be translated to their children. When parents demonstrate a fixed mindset, their children may also adopt this way of thinking. That being said, it may be frustrating and alarming for a mother to be experiencing this with her child, and she is clearly trying to navigate this challenge intentionally and diligently. Most likely, her daughter also has a unique perspective on the situation that diverges from that of her mother (Smetana, 1989).

Based on these findings, the idea of developmental optimism, the notion that mothers see their children's actions in a forgiving light, was not consistently observed in this sample (Coplan et al., 2002). It is important to note, however, that Coplan found that developmental optimism varies based on parenting style, which was not considered in the current study. My findings are more aligned with the well-known social psychological phenomenon termed the "fundamental attribution error" (Gawronski, 2007). Connected to this, our findings may, in part, be attributable to the participating children's ages. The children in this study were aged

12-15 years. At this point in a child's life, their mother may no longer be inclined to attribute their behaviours to developmental limitations. As these children enter their teenage years, their mothers may believe that they have reached an age where they should be held responsible for their actions and know right from wrong (Dix, 1993). This can be also attributed to parenting challenges linked to the developmental affordances of adolescence (Christie & Viner, 2005). At this stage, adolescents are entering a phase of their lives where they are discovering their minds, their bodies, and their autonomy (Smetana & Campione-Barr, 2006). Youth at this age tend to begin the process of emotionally separating themselves from their parents. With this comes conflict and disagreement on the part of the parent (Dix et al., 1986). As teenagers discover their independence, they may act in ways that challenge their parents' beliefs and values. This can be a trying time for parents as they attempt to support their children while also giving them a sense of independence (Valizadeh et al., 2018).

It is also important to situate these findings in terms of the overall context of the study. Parents were asked to reflect back on experiences in which they and their child acted in ways that are out of line with a moral value that was important to them. One key role for parents is to morally socialize their children and to help them navigate their experiences more effectively (Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Recchia & Wainryb, 2014). In doing so, parents may be understandably concerned when children are out of line with their values, and reflectively narrate their experiences in ways that reflect these concerns. However, this does not necessarily mean that these parents have a fixed mindset, nor that they communicate directly to their children in these ways. Indeed, other research suggests that similar samples of parents tend to converse with their children about moral transgressions in ways that are often encouraging and constructive, while also communicating the importance of moral learning (e.g., Recchia et al., 2014; Saint-Martin et al., 2022). Furthermore, parents may construct

varied meanings and adjust their strategies depending on the situation (Scirocco et al., 2018). In this study, we asked mothers to discuss only one challenging situation involving their child, but their responses may not necessarily generalize to other events. Indeed, our data showed considerable variability in how mothers narrated their recollections of own and their children's experiences. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that parents' meaning-making is likely to vary across contexts.

One final qualification of these findings pertains to some divergence between the narratives and follow-up questions in terms of mean levels reported by mothers. For example, while references to growth for the child were not commonly observed in the narratives, Likert-type scores for growth based on the follow-up questions were above the mean of the scale. Thus, while mothers did not frequently reference growth in their narratives of their child's past actions, they did more often judge their child as having grown, when asked directly.

### **Are There Associations Between the Type of Meaning Mothers Construct Regarding Their Own Transgressions and Those of Their Children?**

For the final research aim, I hypothesized that mothers who are more growth-oriented in regard to their own transgressions would display a similar stance for their children. This was based on the notion that the way parents respond to their own transgressions will likely inform the way they respond to their children's transgressions (Pasupathi et al., 2019). As expected, results showed that negative evaluation was significantly positively correlated across mothers' narrative accounts, and follow-up measures of both growth and negative characterological attributions were each positively associated across events. Surprisingly, however, mothers' expression of choice in their own narrative was negatively correlated to descriptions of their child's growth, and mothers' negative evaluations of their own actions were negatively correlated to their descriptions of choice in their narrative concerning their

child. One important caution to keep in mind is that child's growth and choice both tended towards a floor effect (for growth) or ceiling effect (for choice). Thus, these associations should be replicated before arriving at any firm conclusions. Indeed, for the follow-up questions, mother's choice and child's growth were *positively* (rather than negatively) correlated, although mother's growth and child's choice were negatively correlated. The literature suggested that mothers who were high on choice, growth, and remorse would also display high levels of choice, growth, and remorse for their children, thus exhibiting the growth-oriented stance for mother and child transgressions (Pasupathi et al., 2019). However, this expectation was not consistently aligned with the findings. For example, while reviewing pairs of narratives for different participants, I found that some mothers who are hard on themselves may be forgiving of their children. The pair of narratives from one participant below exhibit this.

*Narrative about mother: At work there have been times when I have procrastinated getting some work done and made other people's stress level increase because they were counting on me. They expected that I would do the task and I left it to the last minute which increased my stress and caused me to rush and then feel guilty that I could have delivered on time and provided a better quality result. It made me feel inadequate to be given a task and then not deliver it to the timeline and quality that I could. It made me feel inferior to others that I work with and made me question whether I deserved the job that I have.*

*Narrative about child: Last year she was not keeping up with her work assignments as she was very unhappy at school. She was not making friends and a long commute left her feeling very tired. She allowed her grades to be affected because she was not motivated and was feeling defeated. This made her quite depressed. She was unmotivated, unhappy, and very hard on herself. She didn't think she was good enough for the school or for the group of girls that went there. She was extremely disappointed in herself.*

In these examples, the mother describes situations that share some common themes, that both she and her daughter have not kept up with their assignments. This mother, however, discusses her own situation in a less compassionate manner than the way she

describes that of her daughter. She claims that in her case, she could have had the work done on time and caused everyone excessive stress for no reason. With her daughter, however, she considers the reasons behind the behaviour and what may have led to her child's troubles. This may suggest that some mothers who are hard on themselves may nevertheless strive to apply a different model to their parenting of their own children.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As previously mentioned, one limitation of the current study was the use of pre-existing data. This meant that the formulated questions were constrained by the available data. This study may have been enriched by asking follow-up questions centering on constructs of interest. For example, I could have gathered information relating to how mothers feel when their child commits a moral transgression, and how their emotions inform their responses.

Furthermore, the sample for this study was limited to mothers; in future research, it would be beneficial to include fathers and other parents who do not identify as mothers in order to uncover similarities and differences. While most research on parenting to date centers on mothers, one study by Lewis and Lamb (2003) found that mothers tend to interact with their children in a more sensitive manner than fathers, but fathers are more likely to assume the role of playmate. This may impact the way children make meaning of their transgressions if this pattern extends to transgressions. For example, if fathers are more likely to also react to transgressions in a playful manner (although this question has not been empirically investigated), it may affect how the child interprets and remembers events, therefore affecting how they may act in the future.

It would have also been interesting to study mothers with multiple children, to consider how their responses differed based on which child they discussed. This could have provided some insight as to how parenting varies between children in the same family, and



whether birth order comes into play when considering moral socialization by parents. For example, are parents more lenient with their youngest child versus their oldest?

Moreover, this study included children between the ages of 12 and 15. It would be useful to test whether these same patterns generalize to younger children. As noted above, I did not find support for developmental optimism in my study, possibly due to the age of the participants. If a similar study was conducted with parents of younger children, perhaps this pattern would be more salient.

In terms of cultural and educational variability, the participants were mostly Canadian-born and White, with over half of the parents holding at least one university degree. That said, these findings cannot be generalized to families from different racial or cultural backgrounds or parents with lower levels of education. For example, results may have varied if I had been able to include families from other cultures, in that differences in parenting attitude and style could have affected our findings. For instance, Chinese mothers tend to privilege moral educational aims and have higher expectations for children's behavior driven by different values (Gorman, 1998; Li, Fung, & Chen, 2014). Moreover, mothers with higher levels of education may place different emphasis on particular socialization goals. For example, highly educated parents may be more likely to promote a growth mindset vis-à-vis academic achievement in their children (Svensen, 2023), although it is unclear how these patterns may extend to the moral domain.

It is also worth noting that only two narratives were collected from each mother, one about herself and one about her child. The participants' narratives were quite varied. While all mothers were presented with the same prompt, some mothers discussed situations that were significant and affectively salient, while others discussed more everyday, less emotional events. Thus, it would be worthwhile to collect multiple narratives from each person in order to overcome the problem of situation specificity. Mothers' choice of narrative may have

influenced their responses and judgements. Parents may make different judgments and attributions regarding their children's actions depending on their emotions (Dix et al., 1986). Thus, examining multiple events would help to document the complexities underlying parents' reactions and how their responses may vary based on their emotional state.

Finally, the mothers in this study all discussed their own transgressions first, followed by those of their children. Other measures were also administered between these two tasks, including an additional narrative prompt and questionnaires assessing implicit theories (see Scirocco, 2022). Thus, I cannot rule out the possibility that the order of the two narrative elicitations influenced participants' responses.

The findings from the current study were based on a variable-centred approach (i.e., correlations). This may have been limiting in terms of the type of information that was gathered. It may be illuminating to further explore the data using a person-centred approach that allows for the possible identification of subgroups of mothers who show similar patterns of meaning-making. Furthermore, as alluded to above, some scores showed limited variability, and thus significant findings were based on a relatively small number of participants. Relatedly, it is important to interpret significant findings while considering also overall scores for particular variables. For instance, mothers discussed child's negative characterological attributions only 22% of the time and their own 10% of the time. Thus, the majority of the sample did not make negative characterological attributions in either narrative.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

From a scholarly perspective, this study provides new information about the processes involved in moral socialization, and how parents come to conclusions about their children's wrongdoings. It contributes to scholarship on parents' beliefs, and in particular, identifies beliefs that lend themselves to more or less forgiving and restorative responses to their

children's wrongdoings. For example, in some cases, narrative constructions reflecting more fixed mindsets were associated with specific types of parental understandings of their children's wrongdoings that may not lend themselves to allowing space for their children to learn from their mistakes and improve in the future. Emphasizing possibilities for growth, on the other hand, may provide an opportunity for the child to understand their transgressions and make better choices. It should be noted, however, that the observed patterns across narratives were not as straightforward as those that I had hypothesized.

One implication of these findings centres on the importance of mothers' self-compassion when it comes to making sense of their own and their children's wrongdoings. Indeed, conflicts are part of the human experience, and moral socialization goals sit alongside many other socialization goals such as promoting self-esteem and the possibility of redemption. This research underlines the value for mothers of approaching mistakes as growth opportunities for themselves and their children. Relatedly, the findings of this research may also be illuminating to parents in terms of prompting reflection on how their reactions to their own and their children's wrongdoings may impact their adolescent children. Perhaps understanding the impact of conveying a growth mindset for their child's development can help parents respond to future wrongdoings using approaches that help children to navigate and make sense of transgressions in constructive ways. By considering the interpretations and emotions that guide their reactions, parents may be better able to navigate these challenging but crucial parenting situations. For instance, by focusing on opportunities for growth, improvement, and self-forgiveness, parents may be able to better support their children through difficult periods. In this respect, the study also can highlight potential entrées for intervention that could be investigated in future work. With the information gleaned from this study, we may be able to better understand parents' thinking,

which can help researchers to develop interventions that support constructive moral mindsets and approaches to moral socialization.

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## Appendix A: Narrative Prompts

*Note that value that was mentioned depended on which value was ranked most highly by the participant (Honesty, Dependability, Caring, or Fairness); an illustrative example is provided below for the narrative prompts referring to the value of Honesty.*

### *Narrative Elicitation (Mother)*

You mentioned that being an honest person is the most important to you.

Please take some time to think about a time when you were NOT HONEST and you think it was wrong.

Think about a time that is important to you and that you remember well.

Now that you have thought about this time when you were not honest, please write it down.

Write down everything you remember about this time in the box- Please provide as much detail as you can.

[written narrative]

Follow-up: Please write about how this experience makes you THINK and FEEL about YOURSELF.

[written response]

### *Narrative Elicitation (Child)*

Please take some time to think about a time when your child who is participating in this study was NOT HONEST and you think it was wrong.

Think about a time that is important and that you remember well.

Now that you have thought about this time when your child was not honest and you think it was wrong, please write it down.

Write down everything you remember about this time in the box.

[written narrative]

Follow-up: Please write about how you think this experience makes him/her THINK and FEEL about HIM/HERSELF?

[written response]

## Appendix B: Coding Scheme

The following section will present the coding scheme for the current study, and describe how each variable was measured.

### **Growth**

#### ***Definition***

- The belief that one's character is not fixed and can be improved and developed.
- The ability to learn from mistakes and change for the better.

#### ***Follow-up question***

One Likert-type follow-up question for each event captures growth. Specifically, higher scores on the statement "I used it (my mistake) as a tool to improve in the future" reflected greater degrees of growth (measured on a 6-degree scale with endpoints labelled "strongly disagree" (0) and "strongly agree" (5)).

#### ***Coding***

This variable was coded based on the content of the narratives on a global 3-point scale from none (0) to a lot (2):

- **None (0):**
  - No mention of learning / improving / changing.
  - Some indication that the transgression has happened again / continues to happen.
    - e.g., "I am not sure if it bothered him at all because it has happened since"
- **Some (1):**
  - Some implicit indication that the person has changed over time

- e.g., “he used to steal when he was younger” implies (but does not state directly) growth
  - Evidence of growth that is limited to a very specific domain or in terms of particular skills rather than character overall
    - e.g., “I now double check my cart before leaving the store”
- **A lot (2):**
  - Clear indication that the person has broadly taken steps to learn and grow.
  - Emphasis on trying to do better or that efforts to change are “a work in progress”
    - e.g., “I know myself well. And I know my competencies and positive capabilities. I also know what I am not good at and my character flaws. I went through years of therapy and I got the tools that I need. It made me into who I am and I am happy with who I am”

## **Choice**

### ***Definition***

- One’s understanding of the role they play in a situation and the control one has over their actions.

### ***Follow-up Question***

One follow-up question for each event also captured choice. Specifically, “Why do you think you/they did it?” Higher scores on the statement “because of the circumstances” (strongly disagree (0) – strongly agree (5)) are reverse-coded to indicate choice.

### ***Coding***

Coded based on the content of the narratives on a 3-point scale from no choice (0) to choice (2):

- **None (0):**
  - Reference to lack of choice in the situation (“I had no choice” / “I had to”).
    - e.g., “When my kids were little, I *had to* go back to work and leave them in daycare.”
- **Unclear (1):**
  - Unclear whether there is an indication of choice in the situation
    - e.g., “My child is going through his own personal challenges being a teenager in high school, and his hormonal changes can influence his behaviour.”
- **Choice (2):**
  - Person understands that they made a choice to act in a certain way (“I made a bad decision”).
    - e.g., “I was bullied at work by a student and the student wanted to talk to me with the principle. I pretended I was sick and called off so that I would not have to go to the meeting. My boss kept calling me to see how I was but I was dishonest and told her I was sick but I just didn’t want to go to the meeting”

## **Remorse**

### ***Definition***

- The feeling of guilt or regret in the aftermath of wrongdoing.

### ***Follow-up Questions***

One Likert-type follow-up question for each event also captured remorse. Higher scores on the question “How guilty do you/they feel about it?” reflected greater degrees of remorse.

This was measured on a 3-point scale with endpoints labeled “not guilty” (0) and “very guilty” (2).

### ***Coding***

Remorse was coded on a 3-point scale based on the lack of remorse (0), no mention of remorse (1), or presence of remorse (2) in the narratives:

- **Lack (0):**
  - Indication of not caring, not feeling bad, repeating the action.
    - e.g., “He has done it since”, “he only felt bad that he got caught / punished”, “he didn’t care”. “I think that she is indifferent”
- **No Mention (1):**
  - Regret, feeling bad (or lack thereof) is not mentioned in the narratives.
- **Presence (2):**
  - Indication of feeling bad, guilty, regretful.
    - e.g., “I feel horrible” or “he was very ashamed of himself and wishes he could take it back”. “It makes me feel very sad and guilty”

### **Negative Characterological Attributions**

#### ***Definition***

- Negative judgements given to a person based on their character (not just their actions). Does not necessarily imply, however, that the character trait is fixed.



### ***Follow-up Question***

The follow-up question “Why did you/they do this?” with higher scores on the response “because of the kind of person I am/they are” reflect greater negative characterological attributions. This was measured for each event on a 6-point scale with endpoints labelled “strongly disagree” (0) and “strongly agree” (5).

### ***Coding***

It was coded based on the content of the narratives using a presence or absence coding scheme. (1 = present, 0 = absent)

- Statements such as “...her personality in general is not fair” would indicate a negative characterological attribution.
- Indication that negative behaviour is part of their character.

### **Negative Evaluation**

#### ***Definition***

- Judging someone’s actions negatively.

#### ***Coding***

It was coded based on the content of the narratives using a presence (1) or absence (0) coding scheme.

- **No reference (0):**
  - No mention of how severe they think the action was.
  - Simply stating the situation descriptively.
  - No negative evaluative words (ex. “bad”, “shouldn’t have”).

- By themselves, statements such as “My child was dishonest when she told me she had done something when she had not actually done it” do not indicate a negative evaluation.
- **Negative evaluation (1):**
  - Expressing that the action was wrong.
  - Explanation of how bad the person believes the situation to be.
  - Indication that the person thinks the situation was wrong/bad.
    - e.g., “It was a huge disappointment”, “I should not have done that”, “It’s very wrong because if she cannot do what she is supposed to do first then enjoy herself, she will not only kill time but also achieve nothing.”