

BEYOND DEATH: INHERITING THE PAST AND GIVING TO THE FUTURE, TRANSMITTING THE LEGACY OF ONE'S SELF

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the phenomenon of legacy as a component of the aging experience among women. Against a backdrop of prior focus on transmission of material possessions as the primary form of legacy, the concept is critically examined in developing an expanded, theoretically and empirically grounded perspective. In-depth interviews with 38 women, ranging in age from 31 to 94 and representing diverse marital, parental, and health statuses, reveal multiple dimensions of leaving a legacy in terms of content, creation, and transmission. Through the stories of the participants in this study, legacy emerges as a means of passing on the essence of one's self, in particular one's values and beliefs. Legacy is a method of leaving something behind after death and making meaning of the end of life. The desire to leave a legacy is manifest in many different ways dependent on the individual and their culture. While the idea of legacy is often couched in terms of material possessions, it appears that passing on values and beliefs is more important to older adults.

Legacy—I was awakened to that idea while watching the movie *Armistad*. The man talks about how he is a collection of all of his ancestors. I never really thought about that before. I wrote this thing out on an index card and stuck it in my room. It says "I am all that I am for all that those have gone before me. I carry all of them in me." When I was thinking about it in that way I thought wow, I have a lot to live up to. (Lisa K, 63 years old)

Lisa's comment exemplifies the phenomenon of legacy; the process of passing one's self through generations, creating continuity from the past through the present to the future (Hunter & Rowles, 2005). This article explores legacy as a key part of the aging process. Against the backdrop of a theoretical rationale, the stories of 38 women were investigated. Legacy may have historically been thought of as a male oriented concept; however, it is becoming increasingly important in women's lives. Regardless of their age, marital status, parental status, cultural background, or health status, each of the women was able to clearly describe their thoughts and actions pertaining to legacy transmission. Through critical review and reflection of the stories a model of legacy transmission was developed. Legacies proved to be strongly individual yet still share a common human element, that of making meaning of life. More than merely leaving behind a mark of some kind, or giving away one's possessions, legacy creation provided a means to fulfill the deeper need of creating a coherent end to the twists and turns of fate that typified each woman's life story.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Legacy is best understood in the context of the stories of people's lives. How does one create a satisfactory end to one's life? People make sense of their lives and their identities by couching them in a story format (McAdams, 1985, 1993, 1996). In the context of aging, the life story becomes increasingly complex as layer upon layer of experience is melded onto a core system of values, beliefs, and identity. The stories are continuously edited by the individual and their culture.

Stage theories of human development tend to interpret life stories within the rubric of distinctive developmental processes manifesting themselves at different points in the story. One such theory is Erikson's (1963) formulation. Erikson argued that the final two stages of development focused on generativity, the desire to pass something along to future generations, or the failure to do so that results in stagnation, and ego integrity where one attempts to make holistic sense of life as it comes to a close or fails to do so, with the resulting outcome of despair (Erikson, 1963). Erikson's last two life stages combine easily with McAdams life story theory. A cogent story of one's life enhances the possibility of passing along wisdom to future generations, thereby helping with the generative process. And so, as anticipated life draws to a close, it is necessary to actively begin the process of constructing a satisfactory ending to one's story in order to achieve ego integrity.

What is the meaning of life is a question debated by philosophers and theologians. The importance of meaning in the human existence is illustrated in older women (Moreman, 2004-2005), organ transplant recipients (MacDonald, 2006), and people in palliative care (Bourgeois & Johnson, 2004) to mention just a few groups that have been explicitly explored. Life-changing events often trigger a search for meaning (Balk, 1999; Becker, 1973; Doka, 1993; Marrone,

1999). Human beings seem to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals can provoke considerable distress. In a severe form it may lead to the decision to end one's life (Yalom, 1980). Yalom (1980) suggests that individuals facing death are able to live "better" lives if they have a sense of purpose. Meaning and purpose have different connotations. Meaning refers to a sense of coherence; purpose refers to intention and aim. But in conventional usage these words are often used interchangeably. To further delineate terms, there is a difference between "the meaning of life" and "the meaning of my life." The meaning of my life embraces purpose. If one possesses a sense of meaning they experience life as having some purpose or function to be fulfilled. There is some overriding goal to which one applies oneself. Among the behaviors that provide human beings with a sense of life purpose are: altruism, leaving the world a better place, serving others and participating in charity; dedication to a cause; creativity; and self-actualization (Yalom, 1980).

The question addressed in this study is what is legacy? The term is used regularly in popular culture, but the nuts and bolts of what it is and what drives it has not been fully explored. The conception of legacy presented here allows for varied motivations in creating something to leave behind, not the least of which may be a sense of obligation to past and future generations. Rather than an expression of pure altruism, from this perspective, both the legacy leaving individual and recipients of generative or legacy building actions may benefit. An understanding of legacy involves exploring personal beliefs that underlie leaving something behind regardless of the culturally specific way in which this emerges.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Perspective

This study was based on questions such as whether women are consciously aware of a desire to leave something behind? What importance do they attribute to leaving a legacy? What are their methods for leaving a legacy? A grounded theory approach was used to identify key dimensions of leaving a legacy. Consistent with theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), sample parameters changed as the study progressed. As the study evolved women of different ages, health status, family configurations, and cultural backgrounds were added to allow for a fuller understanding of the legacy phenomenon.

Participants

Participants were recruited from an elder mentor program associated with the University of Kentucky doctoral program in gerontology (Victory, Ravdal, & Rowles, 1998), from the University of Kentucky Donovan Scholar tuition waiver program for persons 60 and over, through the University of Kentucky Markey

Cancer Center Palliative Care Clinic and by word of mouth in a process of snowball sampling. The women who participated ranged in age from 31 to 94. There was some homogeneity in terms of education level, financial situation, and ethnic background. The majority of the participants was Euro-American, had at least some college education, and would be considered middle class. An exception arose when recruiting women with cancer. The Markey Cancer Center has a large number of patients from rural Eastern Kentucky. Five of the women who participated were from a low-income socio-economic background. The participants lived in or near Lexington, Kentucky, a North American urban center of approximately 250,000 residents. Participants were added until saturation of categories was achieved. Saturation was defined as "data adequacy" meaning that data is collected until no new information is obtained (Morse, 1995, p. 147). Saturation occurs at different rates depending on the type of sample. A more restrictive and homogeneous sample will achieve saturation more quickly. This study was theoretically sampled to allow for a great deal of variation; thus a larger sample size was needed to reach saturation (Sandelowski, 1995).

Procedures

Each woman was contacted either in person, through cancer support groups, the doctor's office, or by telephone if referred by a current participant or if they were responding to a participant recruitment advertisement placed in a local newsletter. The recruitment information varied by group approached, but all women were invited to participate in an interview discussing the concept of legacy and its importance to them. No preconceived definition of legacy was presented. The women were interviewed in a place of their choosing. Interviews lasted from one to three hours and were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide format. Each interview started with the participant reading and signing a human subject consent form. The interview began with a discussion of what was to come. It was made clear that there was no pre-set definition of legacy and that identifying participants' own definition of the concept was one of the objectives of the interview.

These preliminaries were followed by a general conversation about the participant's background including family life, education, and work experience in order to establish a context, enhance rapport, and begin to uncover potential legacy issues. Once a life context was established, each interview segued into a focus on legacy. Each woman was asked to provide their definition of legacy and to express the importance of the concept in their life. The interview then transitioned into discussion of the type of legacy the participant thought was most important to them and a conversation identifying what they hoped to leave behind.

After eliciting the unconstrained ideas of each woman, each was asked to consider several forms of legacy, *genetic, material, historical, intergenerational, symbolic*, and a legacy of *values*, developed from previous research (Hunter &

Rowles, 2005). Genetic legacy included passing on genetic material and the family bloodline. Material legacy involved bequeathing personal belongings. Historical legacy encompassed passing on family rituals and stories. Symbolic legacy was the drive for immortality through attaching one's name to something that would continue to exist after one's death. Finally, a values legacy was defined as passing on one's beliefs. All of the stories the women shared were audiotaped.

Analysis

Primary emphasis in analysis was on exploring the women's stories and uncovering potential themes that arose on the topic of leaving a legacy. As interviews were completed and transcribed, analysis was concurrent. This technique allows for an increasingly focused inquiry and progressively increasing depth of insight. The result is the potential for change as the study progresses in response to emerging themes and as the investigator's inquiry becomes more focused.

Inductive thematic content analysis procedures as used by Kaufman (1986), Rubinstein (1988, 2001), Shawler, Rowles, and High (2001), and Gubrium (1993) was employed. Coding and interpretation was an ongoing iterative process. Each transcript was read several times and line-by-line color coded by specific content categories (e.g., inherited possessions, attitudes toward passing on values, expressions of generativity). Hand coding of transcripts facilitated nuanced understanding of meanings in the narrative text (Schoenberg & Rowles, 2002, p. 15). Examples of legacy pertaining to each category were incorporated into separate topical files and then aggregated into more general emergent themes. This process enabled each subsequent interview to be informed by and achieve increased focus in relation to an emerging typology. As this iterative process continued a deeper level of understanding developed (Dreyfus, 1995). Trustworthiness was established through an audit trail of principle investigator field notes and decision making. Additionally member checks were conducted with approximately a third of the participants.

RESULTS

There was a great diversity of manifestations but a strong trend emerged in terms of the underlying concept and importance of legacy.

What is a Legacy?

I don't think we have the right to waste life. That pushes my personal endeavors, but it also makes me interested in legacy. I believe that people are brought into your life on purpose and I do not believe in coincidence, so everything that has happened makes for a very unique mix that is me. Same for you, my nieces, my dad, whoever; that's what you are passing along, the

uniqueness of the mix. You are the only one who can experience that, so it is highly individual. That's what's fun to think about with legacy. (Connie R. a 57-year-old woman who has no children and has had two cancer diagnoses)

An overriding finding was that legacy, on the most fundamental level, involved the transmission of one's self or one's beliefs and values. Making meaning of life in other words. Legacy is passed on to us from the past, developed and refined during our lives; and finally given to the next generation to begin the process all over again. The thread of legacy is what connects generations of people, not just family members, but friends, communities, institutions, cultures. Our individual legacies develop over the life course as our sense of self develops from birth to death. The model created through the stories of the women who participated in this study illustrates this dynamic process of legacy though the life course (see Figure 1).

One's "self" begins at birth and is strongly influenced by parents and perhaps past generations throughout one's childhood. As one ages, the "self" develops and becomes a more and more unique entity formed by personal experiences and personally developed values and beliefs. Moving into old age the "self" may involve distilling down to the essence of meaning in one's life. The model demonstrates how legacy is inherited from the past, assumes more significance in the middle of the life course, and then is bequeathed at the end of life. How legacies are transmitted was also uncovered in this study. In general, legacies are transmitted through an overlapping combination of one's actions and one's belongings or artifacts. The model illustrates how these two modes of legacy transmission flow through the life course from past to future. A third component of legacy is its reliance on relationships. Relationships create legacy, transform it, and allow for it to be passed along. Relationships, as incorporated in the model, include all forms of relationships from the immediate interpersonal level of one's relationships with family to the less personal social interactions and relationships that interconnect and create cultures and society as a whole.

What is the Legacy of "The Self"?

If legacy is the transmission of one's self, how did this reveal itself in the interviews? Transmission of self involved three themes: identity, value, and history. Let us now consider these three themes in some depth and allow the women's words to illustrate their meanings.

Identity

Legacy is innately related to identity. It allows the sense of one's self to pass along to others. Identity is who one knows one's self to be. It is understood through a life narrative; it is how one makes a sense of one's life and constructs the scaffolding of beliefs and behaviors that underpin its expression (McAdams,

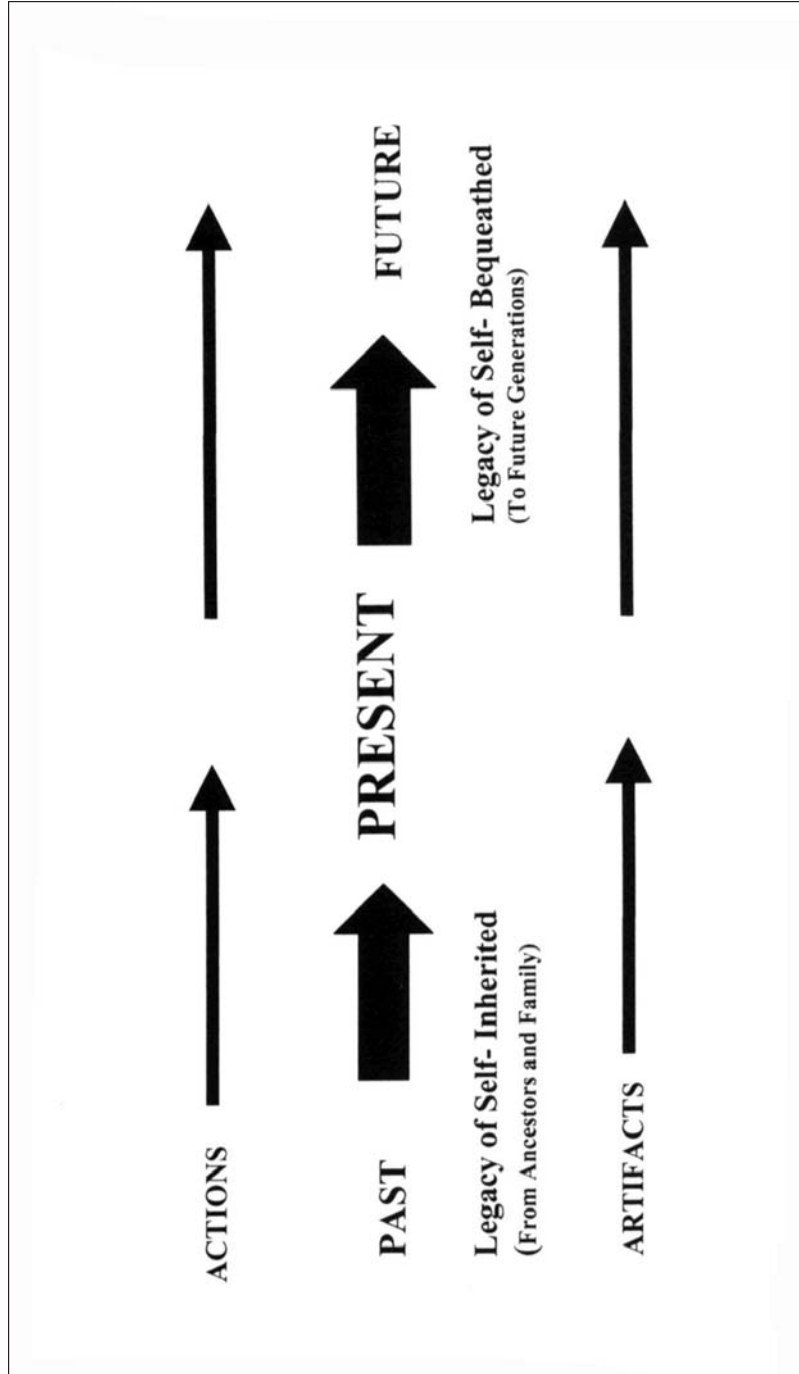


Figure 1. Legacy model.

1985, 1993, 1996). Identity is what each individual creates out of all the facets of a life. Life narrative is, as McAdams (1985, 1996) puts it, the story one uses to make a sense of one's life. It is not a chronological listing of the milestones of a life but a constantly changing understanding of the world that stems from a mixture of the individual, his or her experiences and his or her history.

Each of the women who participated was asked to tell me about their life before we discussed legacy. What each person picked to talk about, the order in which life events were presented, and the over arching beliefs and values that permeated these presentations of self all illustrated their current understanding of themselves.

Life narratives cannot be divorced from beliefs. The narratives were full of such themes as benefiting from the kindness of others, creativity, personal talents, stories of overcoming obstacles, stories of growth, and strong identification with certain roles. Living through different eras left different imprints on each of these women. Those who were in some way touched by The Great Depression spoke often of the kindness of others, of their gratitude and of how they stressed traditional values. Millicent, 70 years old, fondly remembered her youth during the Depression and the impact it had on her development.

I had a good life. I was born during the Depression but we always had plenty to eat and we were warm. At that time not everyone could say that. We raised all our food and we canned and killed our own meat. We were typical rural people. I had very loving parents. We grew up in church which was about ½ mile from our house.

In contrast, younger women who were at a formative point in their development during the 1960s and 1970s were strongly influenced by the Women's Movement and discussed their feminist ideas quite passionately. Lisa, 63 years old, discusses how her environment influenced her experiences and, subsequently, beliefs:

The feminist thing, I never would have been a feminist if I hadn't gone to Ohio State University. I might have woken up somewhere along the way! I read this article about women traveling alone and that was the first thing I could relate to. Then I went into therapy in Columbus in a group that was co-led by a woman who was a feminist and so a lot of issues got talked about. I eventually got into a women's consciousness raising group. . . . In the long run I was involved with a small group of women who founded the Center for Women's Studies. My name is on a bronze plaque . . . and I'm really proud of that.

Personal development was an important theme in these life stories. Overcoming problems, finding passions, having a career calling, separating from one's parents—all were stressed with the final outcome of a feeling of being unique. Many of the women felt it was important in their stories to explain how they were different from their parents. Whether this was cohort related in that younger women expected and wanted careers when their mother's did not have

one, or whether it exemplified how they had developed different values, there was a strong need to express individuality. Terry, 58 years old, described the conflict she felt in her relationship with her mother and the strong influence this had on her identity:

My mother was born in Philadelphia. She was brought up with the whole Eastern thing. Daddy was from Ohio and a little more laid back. . . . My mother's father worked for Dupont, that's where he made his money. The social thing was important, we belonged to the country club. . . . I was a disappointment to my mother when I didn't join a sorority in college. I joined a service sorority and thought that would pacify her but it didn't work out that way (laughter). I'm more like my father. My mother and I always butting heads. My father said the reason you are that way is because you are exactly like your mother. Back then at 21 that wasn't what I wanted to hear at all. That was an insult. Now that I'm older I have gotten to see that yes my disposition is like hers. I try not to be like that but some of it did rub off on me.

The complex issue of nature versus nurture emerges in this story. What part of legacy can we control and what is out of our control? Just as we have no control over our genetic make-up but can influence health outcomes through behavior, certain personality traits may be beyond our control. But, as Terry discusses, we may be able to adjust our behavior. There is a constant tension in legacy giving and receiving. We really do not have control over every aspect of what we give or what we receive.

Values

The land is great but I would rather for my children to remember that they know the Lord and that he is there to take care of them. That they are good children and I am thankful and proud of that. I hope they pass that on to their children. That's the most important thing to me. The land'll take care of itself one way or another. Fortunes, money, and buildings come and go. You can lose things, they can burn down or a tornado can come through. I think you have to pass along values. Missy, 72 years old

All of the interviews revealed that a primary task in creating a legacy is determining the values we cherish most in life and conveying these values to our descendants and or our communities. A legacy is often the distillation of wisdom accumulated throughout life. This, the essence of the person, is often what they most want remembered. Quite often personal values have given meaning to one's life. In that sense there is a strong spiritual connection, be it religious or secular, in legacy.

Values were passed on in a variety of ways including verbally, in writing, and through actions. Barb, 76 years old, felt strongly that her behavior was the main way for her to pass along her values. She wanted to lead by example.

My volunteering is important but I try not to talk about it, I just figure they can see what I'm doing and judge by that. That should set the tone. I think it shows I'm honest, I go to church, I believe in God, and I try and work hard.

The importance of passing on one's values was highlighted among the Jewish women participants. The culture and religious values of Judaism were the most important values to pass on to friends and family. Sixty-five-year-old Betsy evocatively described what it meant to be raised in a "Jewish home." The obligation for the intergenerational cultural transmission of values was very important to her.

I was raised in a very Jewish home. I was educated . . . in fact when I was growing up girls weren't educated, girls weren't Bat Mitzvah, but we learned about making a Jewish home. Friday night was the Shabbat, the Sabbath. We lit candles and there were prayers and a special dinner. I remember very much coming home . . . the only day I ever ate at school was the day that my mother changed the house from everyday to Passover because you have to change all the dishes and get everything all changed. Every Friday when I came home from school there would be preparations for the Sabbath. So as I say I was raised in a very Jewish home. It was considered, I was raised that the role of the woman was very important. That was a very important thing to keep your home, to follow the things that women traditionally did to nurture their home and to make it a Jewish home. In fact when I prepare for the holidays I feel like I have my grandmother on one shoulder and my mother on the other.

The ancient, dramatic, and traumatic history of the Jews is such that there may be a visceral need for some Jews to pass along their history and to keep the memories of past generations burning bright. While culture and its traditions change over time, these women strongly felt the obligation of passing on the legacy of their culture. It was fine if circumstances changed so long as the underlying ethical and moral beliefs of Judaism were maintained and passed along together with a sense of Jewish identity.

History

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

A third key element in defining legacy was the integral immersion of this phenomenon in history. This was apparent with these participants through ancestors and parents.

Ancestors—Legacy is about the times in which we live and the people and events that have helped shape us. *Ancestors* set the stage for the development of families and the positive and/or negative influences that influence personal growth. The women in this study had very diverse ideas of the importance of

history in their lives. Some, such as Claudia, a 62 year old who had survived cancer, felt that a sense of history was crucial to maintain, acknowledge, and pass along. She had fears that younger generations had lost interest in the past and were missing out on very important parts of life.

I have the last thing my grandmother ever knitted. That should stay in the family somewhere. These are things that I see as legacies that need to be passed on to try to make the next generation connect to their ancestors. We have lost our connections. My theory is that once we lost our oral tradition which kept us in touch with the family—I think TV intervened—we lost our sense of continuity of family. I think this has been to our detriment. I'm not saying we need to dwell in the past but I think we need to feel connected.

A pertinent finding was that a legacy of history is fleeting. At most, the average family has two or three generations of information to pass along. People die, events are forgotten, and in the worst-case scenario, the past is ignored completely. Barb, a 76 year old with children, found herself becoming the conduit of family history and this responsibility scared her.

It was frightening to me after my parents died and then my brother died. I was the last standing information for two different families. It was scary. I told my kids they don't know if I'm telling the truth or not. I could tell them anything I wanted to! It's kind of a sobering thought.

People whose families had immigrated recently to the United States often had less family history to pass along. The process of relocation caused families to sever themselves from their past and leave behind family belongings and documents. The cultural severance that the family had undergone had also taken a toll on future generations inheriting the full effect of a family's past. Ellen is a 73-year-old Jewish woman with no children. Her experience was that much of her family history was lost when the family separated and immigrated to the United States.

My brother tried to do some work on our family history. We are the first generation of our family born in this country. My grandparents, both sets, emigrated to this country. Unfortunately we never got a history of their brothers and sisters and the rest of it. So, whatever history there is, is only one generation.

Parents—Legacy transmission between parent and child is often much more intense due to the nearness of the relationship. *Parental* legacies produced universally strong emotions, both positive and negative, among the women. A parent's role is clearly a dominant one in the development of children. From parenting skills, to views of the world, many of the women appreciated their upbringing and hoped to pass along elements of their own experience to their children or other planned legacy recipients. Jasmine, a 78-year-old woman with

children, felt strong admiration for her father. He was a self-made man who had many accomplishments on the world stage. He had lived a life of giving and caring for others and had urged her to do the same.

My father had a huge influence on me. I do try and pass on his values to my son, I would like that. The biggest thing for me is passing on the values I got from my parents.

Another striking theme is the importance of one's mother. Often, the women broke down and cried when talking about their mother. Their mother's honesty, caring, and love were mentioned again and again. Women who had positive relationships with their mother found them to be strong role models and sources of strength throughout their life. Connie, a 54-year-old woman, eloquently discussed her mother's impact in her life.

When my mother died, I had been through cancer, I had been through litigation, I was widowed, but when my mother died it damn near kneecapped me. I'll tell you this, when things have gotten hard . . . I kept telling myself if my mother could start over and she didn't have the shots I have, I can do anything. That is a beautiful legacy.

Most of the women had either experienced the Great Depression themselves or had parents who had lived through this experience. The values and the strength that emerged from living through that era were often cited as having influenced their lives and had made them better people. Repeatedly, the women talked about fear for the current generation and the seeming materialism that permeates contemporary culture. Millie, a 61 year old without children, explained:

I really do believe that I have been influenced by my past and my family. I guess as far as materialistic things are concerned I feel positive about the idea that you can get along with very little material things and feel happy. That comes from growing up in The Depression. I think that is missing today and I am concerned we will have sad times in the future because of the way we live. We live as if there is no tomorrow. We don't conserve natural resources and all that. I got this value from my parents and grandparents.

Parents were most often seen as supports but some of the women had experienced a less than supportive relationship with one or both parents. The women who recognized these limitations had already processed them to the point that they could verbalize how they were attempting to stop these particular legacies from being passed along to their own children or others. As this theme emerged, it became clear that there is a potential for a negative legacy. Many people receive negative legacies but are able to transform them into a positive legacy by not passing them on; the idea was that "It ends here; it stops with me." Alcoholism, abuse, and suicide were mentioned in this context. Less dramatic themes such as parental aloofness and certain types of parenting skills were also mentioned.

Polly, a 53-year-old Jewish convert with children, had numerous negative legacies entwined with each other. Her parents were alcoholics and two of her brothers committed suicide. She described how she came through these trials stronger and wiser.

I decided the way my parents did things, I would do the complete opposite. My dad was . . . you know when he was drinking he would say to me things like the only thing you are able to do in life is get a husband and have children. You don't need to go to college . . . he criticized me for becoming a nurse and yet I was the one who took care of him in the end. My dad could say some things that were pretty bigoted. I do not have a prejudice within me at all toward anybody. Maybe that's why. Not that I'm going to thank my father for that but I understand where it came from.

History is impossible to ignore but it is something that we can control to a certain extent. We can pick and choose what in our past we want to discard and what we decide to pass along to the next generation. We can learn from those who have gone before us. Personal histories, and therefore our historical legacies, seem to be, on the whole, limited to one or two generations. Indeed, only one of the women talked about legacy received from ancestors more than two generations removed. Family history is the starting point for legacy creation.

DISCUSSION

One's legacy is not created in a vacuum. It is developed through a life story, from the lessons of one's past, the key values one holds in the present and beliefs one holds about the future. Legacy begins before conception and lasts past death, for some longer than others. It is comprised of receiving, sharing, and giving, concepts so intertwined that they cannot easily be separated. Legacy can be positive or it can be negative; it can be conscious or unconscious. We inherit things, share things, and pass them along as we move through life. Some people are more cognizant of this than others. They behave accordingly, giving great thought to what they received and what they would like to share and pass along.

Legacy allows for personal identity formation, it facilitates maintenance of social norms and it enhances the flavor of culture. Legacy is the fiber of a net that connects people, societies, and cultures. It connects us all and is interconnected with each individual's personal, societal, and cultural background. What is passed along as a legacy is formed by a unique mix of these aspects of one's identity, values, and history.

The tenets of personal construct psychology seem to closely align with the legacy findings. This field of psychology allows one to capture the complexity in the ways individuals deal with the phenomenon of death (Warren, 1984). It provides a more phenomenological perspective. A focus on personal values in

personal construct psychology echo the information shared by the participants in this study. Legacy creation is the transmission of personal values as one begins the process of self-evaluation toward the end of life. According to Warren (1984), individuals at the same distance from death have quite different patterns of meaning in relation to death. On the other hand, similarities emerged for women facing a life-threatening illness. Regardless of age or time of life, each woman had consciously begun the process of legacy transmission (Hunter, 2008). This held true among these participants and legacy allowed them to transmit their individuality.

Narrative psychology in the field of motivation is another field closely tied to the study. Through narrative psychology it's possible to investigate the construct of personal meanings or the process of valuation in which the person is continuously involved. By allowing the participants to tell their story, they were able to express their perception of reality and be intentional actors in the creation and transmission of their legacies (Hermans, 2002).

Out of this study has emerged a complex perspective on legacy. Although closely tied to generativity and ego integrity, legacy has the potential to be a broader, less culturally constrained facet of human development. While this study is based in Western culture, by allowing the concept of legacy to be broader than giving objects and money, the way is paved for a more sophisticated perspective involving myriad types of legacy that would conform to the culture in which the individual is immersed. The drive to make life meaningful is broader than the altruistic giving of items to future generations. Altruism may indeed be an important part of legacy creation, but it is not required. A broader perspective on the concept of legacy allows for the desire to pass on part of one's self, something that was very important to all the women who participated in this study.

CONCLUSION

It is important to conclude with some caveats. This model is based on a study, albeit in some depth, of 38 women representing select segments of the United States population. Future studies can usefully probe types of legacy in more depth. Comparative studies employing larger samples are warranted. There is a need for deeper probing of variations in expressions of legacy manifest by individuals from different socio-economic and ethnic groups. There is a need to investigate gender differences in legacy: for example, are men more at ease with the idea of symbolic legacy than women as seemed to be emerging in 10 interviews with men that were conducted but not included in this analysis? Cohort differences in legacy merit investigation: to what extent do different generations attribute different levels of importance to one type of legacy over another? It is also important to expand our conception of legacy to embrace the

recipients of legacy. I have approached the topic from the perspective of the individual creating the legacy, but what about “legatees,” those who receive the legacy? To what extent is the meaning and value of a legacy defined by its acknowledgment and acceptance by the receiver? Finally, and perhaps most intriguing, there is a need for longitudinal studies of legacy that explore the concept as it evolves over the life course and among generations and to provide insight on the increasing concern with one’s legacy that appears to become a key issue during life-threatening illness and during the terminal phases of a life.

This study has shown that women respond to the challenge of creating a legacy in remarkably similar ways regardless of family configuration, culture, and health. While the process may vary in manifestation with respect to focus, intensity, and target, a common underlying thread is the desire to help future generations make a mark of their own and to pass along hard won knowledge, values and beliefs—wisdom. Legacy creation is a universal drive, broader than Erikson’s (1963) idea of generativity. While perhaps not a biological imperative it is a social one. Legacy creation is a universal experience for any person enmeshed in a social and cultural network.

Legacy is an extremely important notion for practitioners. Those who work with the aging population or those faced with a life-threatening illness must be aware of the importance of passing along one’s “self,” of making meaning. It may emerge as important when one is faced with the death of a spouse, relocation, or facing mortality. Practitioners need to be sensitive to the need for legacy among older women or younger women facing a life-threatening illness as a way to provide meaning to life and enhance well-being.

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