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Moving as a Gift: Relocation in Older Adulthood

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Abstract

While discussions of accessibility, mobility and activities of daily living frame relocation studies, in older adulthood, the paper explores the emotional motivation of gift giving as a rationale for moving. This ethnographic study investigates the processes of household disbandment and decision-making of older adults in the Midwestern United States relocating in post-Global Financial Crisis contexts. In this study, relationships are created and sustained through the process of moving, linking older adults (n=81), their kin (n=49), and professionals (n=46) in the Midwestern United States.

Using Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (1925/1990) as a theoretical lens, relocation in older adulthood is conceptualized as a gift in two ways: to one's partner, and one's kin. Partners may consider gift-giving in terms of the act of moving to appease and honor their partner. Kin who were not moving themselves were also recipients of the gift of moving. These gifts enchain others in relationships of reciprocity. However these gifts, like all gifts, are not without costs or danger, so this paper examines some of the challenges that emerge along with gift-giving.

Keywords

Relocation; qualitative; intergenerational exchange; transition; housing; gift; anthropology; aging

Relocation in Older Adulthood: A Time for Gifts?

Older adults experience many transitions, including cognitive and physical changes, in relation to housing. Older persons may reevaluate the benefits and drawbacks of remaining in their current residence. Professionals, volunteers, or family members can assist older adults as they make their plans. If they plan to stay in their current homes, modifications, such as grab bars, and community based services may help them to stay.

Relocation is another option for older adults who worry about their emotional well-being, physical health, and safety. While relocation may be a reaction to present and future losses (Wiseman 1980; Litwak and Longino 1987, Sergeant, Ekerdt and Chapin 2010), it is also an option that can be strongly encouraged by kin concerned about the well-being of elderly relatives. Researchers argue we need to understand the decision-making processes that lead older adults to go from contemplating a move to making it (Bekhet, Zauszniewski and Nakhla 2009) Relocation can be either local, allowing older adults to change residences in

the same community, or non-local, where both community and residence change (Oswald and Rowles 2006).

It is also important to consider why people stay in their own homes and how place attachment intersects with the agency of the older adult (Wahl, Iwarsson and Oswald 2012). A pull toward family has been demonstrated repeatedly in the literature and can be thought of as the “joint impact of human and economic resources” (Longino et al. 1991: S223). Those who moved were “pulled” toward family and toward a residence with less maintenance, rather than “pushed” out of their homes because of the difficulty of maintaining them (Erickson et al. 2006; Krout et al. 2002). Human resources include relatives who will come over with meals, help after surgery, or do yard maintenance. However, if there is enough money, professionals can be hired for many of these tasks.ⁱ

Scholars are trying to better understand the role of health status in making decisions to relocate. Rather than relocation leading to declining health, as suggested in other studies, such as Golant (1998), Song-Lee and Chen’s (2009) work follows Litwak and Longino’s conceptual model in which declining health prompts relocation. Those who didn’t move said their quality of life was the same or worse after considering a move but deciding against it (Gardner, Browning & Kendig, 2005). In an earlier study, Gardner explored predictors of moving transitions, finding that there was no difference in education, occupation, or income level between those who planned life transitions and those who reacted to them. Thus, “this suggests a personal response to lifespan transitions rather than structural influences” (1994: 38).ⁱⁱ

Therefore, it is critical to better understand the processes, including personal triggers, involved in older adults’ relocation decisions (Scheidt and Norris-Baker 1984). This ethnographic study contributes to our understanding of the lived experience of how and why housing transitions are made. A qualitative approach offers an examination of microinteractions surrounding the phenomenon of relocation between older adults and their partners and other kin, not often found in the literature. Additionally, a qualitative framework foregrounds issues of significance for the present, and projections for how lives may be changed in the future.

Methodology

I employed a panel design, attempting to follow older persons and their family and friends through three stages of moving: 1) pre-move planning, 2) move in-process, and 3) post-move adjustment. Though not discrete, conceptually, the three stages served to distinguish those older adults who “completed” a move from those who were only engaged in the pre-move planning but did not undertake a move, and those who I interviewed after their moves in their post-move adjustment phase.

ⁱScholars have shown varying comfort with using non-kin as support for these concerns (Miner, 1995).

ⁱⁱRelocations don’t always come from an individual’s needs. Capezuti *et al.* document the experiences residents are relocated to other facilities after the closing of a nursing home due to state violations and financial challenges (2006).

Data were collected between January of 2009 and May 2012. This period of time encompasses hours participants spent preparing for the execution of their move and the open-ended nature of post-move adjustment, often continuing for many years. An anthropological approach was used during data collected that aims at building rapport with participants as evidenced by the prolonged periods of engagement allowing for time to establish relationships as well as participate in unfolding processes (Miles and Huberman 1994: 6). This project was approved by the Blinded for Review Institutional Review Board.

Study Sample

I wanted to understand the moving experiences of older Americans from three perspectives: those of the older adults themselves (n=81), their kin (n=49), and professionals involved in the move (n=46). Primarily participants were older adults, either single (n=43) or married (n=38) when both agreed to participate. While some of the older adults were interviewed in these distinct phases (pre-move phase n=25; post-move phase n=17), most older adults, their kin and involved professionals (e.g., real estate agents, handymen or women) participated in the project through three stages of moving (pre-move, moving day, post-move). I recruited study participants within 50 miles (of either pre-move or post-move location) of a university research center in the Midwestern United States. Participants were recruited by circulating flyers, attending meetings focused on an older adult population, and through referrals at agencies serving older adults. Some researchers have proposed to identify features that distinguish a sample (Matthews, 2005). For this group, they were voluntarily moving, and most often had the resource of time to plan and execute their moves and socioeconomic resources. Most were Caucasian (95.1%), with the remaining being African-American (3.7%), and Asian (1.2%). There were 22 males and 59 female participants. Those categorized as kin were adult children and their partners, nieces, and grandchildren, siblings of the older adults, and friends who older adults identified as close to them in the move. Professionals were identified as those who supported the older adults in the moving process during any phase. While data from professionals involved such as conversations with real estate agents or estate salepersons with elders and their kin were also collected, the findings for this paper do not include analysis of interviews with professionals. A move was only distinguished as relocation if the older adults were moving to a long-term care facility or to an apartment, house, or condo.

Data Collection

This study implemented semi-structured interviews and participant observation as data collection strategies.

1) Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher which demonstrated a “co-creation of meaning” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006: 134) through interviews. This process established a relationship where participants were viewed as the experts on moving. The researcher prompted participants to clarify responses to questions about the emotional, health, financial and logistical concerns they might be experiencing in the moving process. Additionally, the researcher asked participants to contrast other moving experiences, or go

back to points that seemed particularly salient to the research questions during the interview (Padgett, 2008, 111). The researcher recorded her reactions to interviews (Padgett, 2008) which were also documented in the field notes.

Rich data were also collected from the perspective of kin and professionals. Interviews with relatives helped me understand their own roles in the moves and interviews with professionals addressed their roles in working with the movers.

2) Participant Observation

Participant observation is a key component to anthropological research wherein a researcher can better understand participant behavior (Geertz 1973) by both observing contexts and participating in the process. As I developed relationships with participants, I actively took part in the moving process. This method enhances the interview process as much of the discussion in interviews was about physical space, objects, and activities involved in moving. I participated in packing objects, working at garage sales, and walking through the original and new residences. I visited participants repeatedly including when out of town kin were visiting, I would spend time understanding moving from their perspective and discussion senior housing options. Participant observation was also useful for gathering data on the degree of space reduction (square footage and layout) between the original residence and the new residence, and the magnitude and types of possessions (e.g.: special collections of maps) involved.

Observations were recorded for information on the setting, including sensory observations, activities, and participants present, as well as analytical reflections including new questions or themes, relevance of observations to previous observations or themes, and reflections on the researcher's role (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). The old and new homes and rooms of primary participants were photographed in order to document the arrangement of their possessions, supplementing my field notes in addressing the process of leaving one's home and creating a new one. The nature of participant observation lends itself to serving as a method of "crystallization" (see Richardson 1994 in Denzin & Lincoln 2006) establishing the validity of the interview data, reducing both respondent bias and reactivity of researcher in asking or probing only certain questions (Padgett 2008; Denzin & Lincoln 2006).

Analytical Approaches

Data were transcribed and analyzed using iterative, thematic content-analysis approaches. Multiple sources of data, such as transcripts of real-time interaction, field notes, documents and photographs were included in the analysis for emergent themes along with the interview data to avoid "constraints on outputs" in the analysis phase (Patton, 2002: 39). As an additional validity measure, I facilitated conversations with participants before formal conference presentations of my research findings as well as after the presentation of my research findings, incorporating responses solicited by the results into ongoing analysis beyond the scope of this paper (Rubin and Babbie 2012). The triangulation of data collection and analysis allowed the researcher, trained as an anthropologist, to perceive the salience of transactional relationships, which would not have been apparent from the interview data alone.

Findings

In this study, gift-giving emerged as a theme throughout data collection and analysis. Sometimes, older adults would explicitly mention gifts and at other times, ideas of reciprocity and benefits from relocation were acknowledged. By applying the anthropological literature on gift-giving, a rich understanding of the effect of relocation on older adults and their kin surfaces.

In “The Gift,” Marcel Mauss describes how gift exchange practices around the world involve multiple types of objects and multiple persons. Embedded in this gift is the circulation of material objects, writ large involving a residential transition and changes in the contents of the house.ⁱⁱⁱ Mauss claims that what appears voluntary is often not, arguing that embedded in gift-giving are three obligations: 1) to give gifts 2) to receive gifts and 3) to reciprocate gifts (1925/1990: 13). He argues, “the gift necessarily entails the notion of credit” (1925/1990: 36). Recipients feel the need to reciprocate in similar, and/or creative ways; to “refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war” (1925/1990: 13).

Other scholars have used gift-giving to understand Western contexts (see Titmuss’s (1970) comparison of blood donation in the U.S. and U.K.). For this project set in the Midwestern USA, gift-giving often incorporates existing kin networks, creating and re-creating social relationships in the process. One of the ways the relationships are sustained is through a temporality established between the gift made and its reciprocation, which can take many forms. Gift giving creates temporal relationships for older adults themselves, in the form of reciprocity extending between a present self and a future self living in a new environment. The temporality of reciprocity may also be extended to the relationship between those living and those dead. The temporalities of reciprocity also extend between generations within family members negotiating caregiving, and inheritance of financial assets and material objects.

In this section, I will consider gifts that are made to others that invoke obligation and reciprocation (Mauss 1925/1990). The gift of moving can be exchanged for future instrumental or emotional support from partners or kin. For the latter, perhaps the gift of moving could be exchanged for expectations of family’s involvement in later life. Since reciprocation is inherent in gift-giving, these gifts may or may not be welcomed by kin, who may have their own concerns or time pressures. Emotional closeness, or lack thereof, can also be a factor in how welcome or unwelcome these gifts are. The examples of gift-giving including partners and kin emerged as salient in the data. While kin can biological and non-biological relations to older adults, adult children have often been found to provide assistance more than other kin in the process of moving (Wolff & Kasper, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱI am describing a “total system of giving” (Munn, 1992). Similarly, in this project, homes and their contents follow the construction of selves and relationships.

A Gift to One's Partner: Partner's Desire to Move

In this study, negotiating the timing and decision to move involved partners, adult children and other kin, as well as external factors such as the availability of their chosen residence. Older people could offer the gift in different ways, either deciding to move at all (choosing to move) or when to move (timing). In the next example, Mr. and Mrs. Paul struggled with both of those concerns.

Mr. and Mrs. Paul lived on a farm on the outskirts of town. It was not their first move as they referred to a difficult prior move from another state when they left a farm in the town where the family still had ties. Nevertheless, they had been in this town a long time, enjoying the peacefulness that a rural life offered them. They had a home, a barn, and farmland, which they partially leased to a farmer. They had four grown children who lived in what Mr. Paul described to me as some of the best cities in the world. They had hopes that one of their children living overseas might consider taking over the property but did not see that possibility happening soon. That daughter and her husband had built internationally driven careers and they were still engaged in working to send their own kids through college.

I visited their lovely home several times, taking in the quiet that their internal and external surroundings seemed to foster. It was furnished simply yet elegantly and they talked about the ways that they loved their home. I soon discovered that Mr. Paul did not wish to move at all. They decided not to sell their home and barn (which housed his workshop) because he intended to go back and work on projects. He planned to return again and again to the space that he loved. Several men in the study expressed sadness over giving up tool collections given the effort taken over decades to assemble them. By retaining the workshop, he did not have to go through this process.

Mrs. Paul wanted to move because she had faced some health concerns and, being over 80 years old, wanted to move for peace of mind. She had identified a retirement community in their town and was excited about the social possibilities as well. She told me that they lived a quiet life, unlike her friends, who were busy volunteering and involved in community activities. She and her husband had lived on a schedule for many years and enjoyed the slowness of their days. She looked forward to having the possibility of friendships in the retirement community as a way to broaden their lives. Overall, she was excited about the move and in subsequent post-move interviews, she still seemed happy, having started walking with a few neighbors and participating in exercise classes.

Mrs. Paul: But, but I think that because, I've, my attitude toward our move was that it was the right thing to do.

Researcher: Yeah

Mrs. Paul: And I, so my, my attitude was always very positive that this is something we can do, this is good for us.

Researcher: Yeah

Mrs. Paul: It's, it is a, and, and when it came, I thought, when it came to the time when were taking down the pictures. And I did that, I was the one that took down the pictures, I was the one that figured out how we were going to, this was going to work, I ya know I was the one that got the movers to come and show them what we're gonna leave and what, and all that. All of these steps were to me, positive. And interesting. And I wasn't looking at it with great nostalgia like oh we're leaving some place we've loved. That, we have loved living there. But the feeling I got when I was taking down these pictures, I was thinking, this house is still beautiful.

Researcher: Huh.

Mrs. Paul: Even without our stuff in it.

Researcher: Okay.

Mrs. Paul: And the, the rooms, the bones of the house, I said this to many people, but the bones of the house are still there for people to love.

Alternatively, Mr. Paul was not excited about the move, and even after the move, he stated in a soft voice that he was "still in transition" (2011). He moved only for his wife, because he wanted her to be taken care of in case anything should happen to him. He would not want her to be left alone with the home and adjacent farm. Interestingly, similar to conversations with other couples, both Mr. and Mrs. Paul presumed that he would die first. However, he told me that if his wife passed away first he would move back to their home...even if he ate scrambled eggs three times a day (field notes).^{iv}

Mr. Paul: I'm still in transition.

Researcher: Yeah, it's ha, it must be hard.

Mr. Paul: Yeah.

Researcher: Yeah.

Mrs. Paul: I think it's maybe becau--, perhaps would you say (First name of Mr.P) that's because you still have unfinished projects there that you've, you know that, that these are things that he, that were brought from (State) from his dad's, you know that belonged to his dad. That, that you've always, you know you've treasured those things but you feel like they need to be, something needs to be done to them. And we, you know we really did try to, in the back of our minds thinking that we, we need to do this for our children. They, they shouldn't have all these, these things left undecided we, we are the ones that should be, as long we're still thinking people we should be the ones to be deciding what should happen to these things, not leave it to them. So I think there are a lot of things left for you, for you to do there. But, on the other hand it's probably good for me to go back with him too, on this, right now, that isn't, that hasn't become a pattern.

^{iv}He told me he was not the most talented cook. Gendered roles on cooking were also common among the couples in this study.

Researcher: Okay.

Mrs. Paul: for us.

While, Mr. Paul is “still in transition,” Mrs. Paul has become very involved in the retirement community. She has joined an informal walking group and attends exercise classes. In the transcript preceding, she also mentions that, even post-move, there is still a lot of work to be done at their old home, to which Mr. Paul continues returning. Later in the conversation we discuss that there is also the possibility to become too busy in the new retirement community. She says, “I, some years ago I decided I did not want to join things. ...we like the life where we aren’t, where we don’t have a lot of, um, commitments. Cause we really believe if you join something, um, you should be a part, I mean, be willing to serve.” She also told me that they had had some residents of the retirement community over to their home. Mrs. Paul brought up another couple later in the conversation.

Mrs. Paul: But I thought it was interesting that the (Keiths) was just, was just the other way around for them. She didn’t want to move, because the home they lived in (Name of Town) was a home that they had built especially for retirement. On a lake and their children and grandchildren could come and they just, they had wonderful memories associated with that place. But, ah, but the, but Mr. Keith wanted, he was more interested in moving. And they really were quite charmed by the by (unclear) she too thought it was a very charming, ah, setting. Well then when she, after she got here, what she told me was that is that she, ah, they went home, back home to (Name of Town) and she went to their house and she said, ‘I sat down on the hearth in the living room and I thought, No, I’m glad we’re now at the (Name of Retirement Community).’ I’m, she was able to ah, get a sense that this they had done the right thing. So, I think maybe, it just, take you some time to, I don’t know do you feel like we’ve done the right thing?

Mr. Paul: I hope so.

Mrs. Paul said the other couple had owned a beautiful home that they loved. She also noted that Mr. Keith wanted to move, rather than Mrs. Keith, and that it was the “other way around for them” (line 2). In talking about them, Mrs. Paul is also talking about her and her husband. She says that Mrs. Keith was able to say, after living in her new home, that she was happy at the retirement community. Mrs. Paul then poses it in moral terms, “I’m, she was able to ah, get a sense that this they had done the right thing” (lines 14–5). Mrs. Paul switches here from “I’m” to “she” to refer again to Mrs. Keith’s experience rather than her own. However, in the subsequent line, she says, “So, I think maybe, it just, take you some time to, I don’t know do you feel like we’ve done the right thing?” (line 15–16). In this case, she is now addressing her husband, using an authoritative assessment “I think, maybe, it just, take you some time to...”, leaving one phrase, “take you some time to” speaking about his possible adjustment, perhaps. Yet, she avoids that word and instead switches to a question approach. Her question asks him, using “you” about whether “we’ve” made a correct choice; the switch from first person to the couple as the unit of analysis is striking. Especially since he really did not want them to move at all. He answers with “I hope so,” an ambivalent statement analogous to his first declaration, “still adjusting.”

Mr. and Mrs. Paul also struggled with the timing of the move; she wanted to move in the fall, he preferred the following summer. They split the difference by moving in February. Since they decided to rent and not to sell, the couple had the additional burden of preparing their home (excluding the barn) for rental. Thus, they worked steadily on preparing their home for the move by showing me their progress in sorting and discarding each time I visited. All the while, they both held the heavy realization that one partner was reluctant to move. Out of love for his wife, Mr. Paul was willing to do so. Therefore, his participation in the preparations and the move were gifts to his wife.

Gifts, however, can be dangerous (Mauss 1925/1990). The danger in this case may be in how, in the long-term, a move motivated by love for his wife may affect Mr. Paul's own wellbeing and happiness. Maintenance-free living is a big adjustment for someone who has lived and worked on a farm. Mr. Paul retains his barn so that he can work on projects, which now requires him to drive back and forth between his barn/workshop and the retirement community. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Paul may also be affected if the desire to move continues to be viewed as Mrs. Paul's alone. Will Mrs. Paul find an "equivalent" gift to reciprocate? What would be an equivalent gift to moving from the home one loves? Thus, the impact of moving as a gift to a partner may bring as much uncertainty as benefit.

A Gift to One's Partner: Honor Partner

Moving can also be gift to a partner posthumously. In this case, it is not about preparing a partner for a life beyond the other's, but rather paying clear attention to the legacy left. Legacies can be in terms of reputation and material wealth. When I met Mrs. Ash, I soon realized that she would honor her late husband by diligently dispersing the possessions that they had accumulated over a lifetime together.

The entire family was involved in making sure the possessions in the home were settled before her move could take place. These possessions included collections of books in German, Spanish, French, English, and Hebrew, cartoons and newspapers of Nazi propaganda, rare maps, figurines collected in various trips to Mexico and South America, and wax seals of European political leaders. Mrs. Ash was a Holocaust survivor and recounted how she jumped out of her window when the Nazis came and took her parents and brother away to their deaths in the concentration camp. In her basement hung a painting that the Nazis had slashed with knives, which she and her daughter planned to donate to a Holocaust museum.

Mrs. Ash's husband passed away after a four-year battle with Alzheimer's and Mrs. Ash viewed the settling of these possessions as a way to care for the man who had assembled the collections. For Mrs. Ash, actively working on moving meant making repeated lists of possessions, arranging visits by auction house representatives to decide which she would select to handle the collections, and inviting university collections specialists to purchase objects for teaching and research purposes. I participated in many of these meetings, and observed the care that Mrs. Ash took in the process.

During most of these meetings, her emotional approach was task-oriented and business-like. Mrs. Ash told me that Mr. Ash's secretary always remarked about his "belt and suspenders"

approach to business, making doubly sure to check on his accounts and papers. Mr. Ash had multiple copies of many of the documents in the house and I spent some time helping her sort through which documents were duplicates and which were originals. One room in their house was entirely devoted to his paperwork. She would always have a work plan for me when I came and would often serve me ice cream as we were poring through her paperwork.

In the moving process, Mrs. Ash used the same “belt and suspenders approach” to managing her affairs. She had already decided what items would remain in the family as gifts to children or grandchildren. Since her preoccupation was in getting a fair price for their remaining collection,^v she interacted with many professionals during the process, including both a nationally recognized auction house and local antiques dealers.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Max Weber argues, “the idea of a person’s duty to maintain possessions entrusted to him, to which he subordinates himself as a dutiful steward or even as a ‘machine for producing wealth,’ lies upon his life with chilling seriousness. And as one’s possessions become more valuable, the more burdensome becomes the feeling of responsibility...” (1946/2002: 115). Mrs. Ash undertook the task of moving with this “chilling seriousness” even waking in the early hours of the morning to continue shuffling through the paperwork. Her move took a long time to plan (From February 2009 to November 2010) and a lot of work.

When I met her son, he told me that he wished she had moved sooner. In fact, he wished that his parents had moved together before his father had become so ill. When Mr. Ash fell ill, Mrs. Ash became engrossed in caregiving and could not simultaneously focus on moving. Given the diligence of Mrs. Ash’s moving process, I assert that she could not have moved with the same methodical approach while also caring for her husband.^{vi}

While Mrs. Ash’s diligence helped to honor her husband, the gift made was not without a price. She was physically exhausted and emotionally stressed as she organized his possessions. She gave up exercise until the work of honoring her husband could be completed, and turned down several social engagements to focus on her move. Her gift was also made to a partner who was not able to acknowledge or reciprocate her gift.

A Gift to One’s Kin: Peace of Mind

I shall now focus on the ways moving can be viewed as a gift to one’s kin. Considering ways that moves can be both present and future gifts provides the opportunity to understand why older people undertake moves to meet the emotional and logistical needs of their kin.

^vIn March 2012, I spoke with one of the university collections specialists who worked with Mr. and Mrs. Ash for over 20 years. He also agreed that Mrs. Ash’s concern was to generate money to circulating the objects on the market. He also agreed that she had little concern with dissembling collections as objects went to different owners. This is an example of how I triangulated data interview to understand the process of moving for older adults.

^{vi}Here I use kin, as I did in the research design, according to Janet Carsten’s definition of relatedness. I also draw on John Borneman’s work where closeness has clearly been created and sustained among non-biologically linked individuals. In “Caring and being cared for: displacing marriage, kinship, gender and sexuality,” Borneman (1997) traces an adoption case in Germany of a 55 year old man wanted to adopt a 35 year old son. Since the younger man’s own father was dead, but the younger man’s mother was still living, she had to agree to the adoption. In the end, the adoption was approved by a judge who first had to ascertain that this relationship was not sexual in nature. In this process a legal relationship is established through “the subordination of the principle of ... descent to relation of care” (1997: 578). He argues for relations of care to be viewed as another way to conceptualize kinship.

Mrs. Ash loved her home, and even while she was through selling and donating possessions, she paid meticulous attention to her home maintenance. In fact, one day when I drove up, she was negotiating with someone about the cost of mowing her lawn, telling me that she needed to get a good price for the service. She had her lawn raked, trees trimmed to unobscure views, and in the winter, driveway plowed and walkways cleared of snow.

Mrs. Ash's daughter, Karen, was deeply concerned about her mother in the winter. She encouraged her mother to leave before the winter season fell. Given the scope of work needed prior to the move, Mrs. Ash wanted to stay one last winter. Mrs. Ash lived on a corner, with the driveway situated on the side of her house while her mailbox faced the street. To comfort her daughter, who lived out of state, Mrs. Ash promised that, to prevent falls, she would drive to the mailbox rather than walk on her driveway.

Some study participants do not have adult children or partners; they involve other relatives or kin in the move. One night I was having dinner at a Chinese restaurant with three nieces who came to help their aunt, Mrs. Sand, move.

Researcher: So I have to ask you guys, and I ask everyone this, but um what do you think this move will mean to your aunt?

Niece 1:^{vii} I think it'll be great.

Niece 2: It'll make her life much easier.

Niece 1: To be on one level

Researcher: Okay

Unclear To not have to worry that you'll you know fall. To have the garage right attached to the house. To be able to get in the car and go. To not worry about who's going to mow the lawn or who's going to shovel snow and all that I think that'll be great.

Researcher: Okay

Unclear And you know to just have other people around.

Unclear I think--It'll be a relief for you. For all those reasons.

Researcher: Okay, a lot of people have told me that.

Mrs. Sand: and it'll make the next move easier you know when I can't live there anymore for health reasons.

Researcher: It's sort of a plan you know a plan and a safety net.

Mrs. Sand: Well I go to the [Name of Retirement Community] home.

^{vii}In this recording, at times, it is difficult to distinguish between the voices of the nieces present.

Researcher: Yeah

Unclear Ah we figure you'll just live to a hundred and just keel over.

Unclear (laughter)

Unclear probably at an elder hostel on a zip line.

Researcher: in Antarctica.

Mrs. Sand: I'm going to Alaska—Antarctica.

Researcher: Yeah you told me. I was telling her it's your post move reward.

Unclear I think its even going to make traveling easier because you won't have to worry about the house.

Mrs. Sand: That's right.

In this conversation, one niece points out all the logistical benefits that Mrs. Sand will enjoy in her new home, while also emphasizing that a new residence will also make it easier for her to travel. The move will also offer peace of mind to her three nieces, the closest of which lives five hours away.

However, gifts also impose obligations. For example, when relatives come to assist with a move, they may not accept the older person's wishes about number and types of possessions. After unpacking her aunt's tea collection, one niece told her aunt that she didn't need to buy more tea. Her aunt, Mrs. Sand, told me that soon after she went to the store and bought three more boxes. It is uncertain whether her niece would laugh about this defiance or be disappointed. Does Mrs. Sand feel an obligation to her niece because she helped her move? Do contributions such as unpacking the tea boxes give the niece license to tell her aunt that she need not acquire more objects i.e. boxes of tea? Or will her niece be able to see past the tea bag collection to the peace of mind attained for her aunt and for herself in this new environment? The aunt's actions and niece's reactions may extend the temporality created in the act of moving. For years to come, their relationship may involve examining material accumulation.

A Gift to One's Kin: Freedom

The emotional and logistical involvement of kin in the moving process varies. Sometimes older adults really make most of the plans and kin are directed to perform certain duties, including reclaiming their childhood objects that their parents had been storing, or taking objects that aren't being moved. Sometimes they are taken out of duty, and sometimes out of desire. I also see that older adults' moves affected kin far beyond the material circulation of possessions. Moving could also be an opportunity for kin to benefit in other ways.

Gordon, the adult son of Mr. and Mrs. Keith, would often bring his dog when he came to visit his parents two and a half hours away from his home. One night when I was talking with him after he had driven over, I asked what his parents move meant to him. This

conversation took place in the final month before his parents' move in late fall. He said, "this is done now and I'm done working it." He and his sister had been very involved in the move. His sister, Nancy, would come every other week, spending the night Monday through Thursday to help her parents get ready for the move. The Keith family endured a stressful summer, with Mr. Keith suffering a broken leg, followed by an anxiety disorder that affected the whole moving preparation. Gordon was thankful that the summer was behind them because his parents "nebulous future" seemed more certain. Gordon clarified, "It's a weight off of my shoulder...well, because first of all, having to come out this way...I'm glad that I'm available to do it. I'm really, I'm grateful for that. But I would like to be free of having to do that. Now I can launch into a new life." He further clarified that "I can move away now" and that he'd always wanted to live in a different part of the country. Here we see a family deeply involved in the moving process, and yet also family members feeling that the move is a gift to them.

The gift of moving comes with the expectation that the adult children will become involved in significant packing and unpacking chores. The Keith's move to within two miles of their daughter creates the potential for an imbalance of responsibility on adult children. Over time, their daughter may feel the need to reciprocate her parents' gift of moving in other ways, such as providing transportation for shopping or medical visits. With many children of her own, the Keith's daughter has other responsibilities that she will have to balance with her obligations to her parents. Her brother Gordon faces the possibility of moving himself, yet, with his parents now 45 minutes away from him, it is uncertain whether he will still feel free to move away as his parents age. Though their housing provides a less demanding environment with supports in place, if his parents experience changes in their health status, he may not feel the same freedom expressed during the moving period.

A Gift to One's Kin: Ease of Caregiving

Mr. Lewis explained that the previous moving experiences of older relatives, as well as their experience with moving their own family 27 times, affected their relocation decision.

Mr. Lewis: The move is a philosophical move.

Researcher: Okay.

Mr. Lewis: It's a philosophical move to basically, uh, two, two major objectives. To, to be help and assistance to our to our kids and grandkids and number two to make it so that our kids didn't have to go out to (location) in the middle of nowhere and pick up the pieces. And, if

Researcher: Okay.

Mr. Lewis: you're going to move in your seventies when you're still moveable

Researcher: Uh huh.

Mr. Lewis: and you can still make friends and you can still live under your own system. We took my grandmother away from her home in (location).

Mrs. Lewis: Where all of her friends were

Mr. Lewis: Her friends, her house, her things,

Researcher: Uh huh

Mr. Lewis and it was, it was, oh god it was...(begins to get upset).

Mrs. Lewis: Brought her to (place) and she stayed with his parents until she died.

Here, Mr. Lewis asserts that he is moving to circumvent his children's possible need to move closer to them should that become necessary. Secondly, his children would not have to "pick up the pieces" because by living nearby they will know each other's homes, and lives more in-depth rather than superficially during periodic visits. Lastly, he asserts that by moving at a younger age (he and his wife moved in their early 70s), the couple would have an opportunity to establish social connections in their new community.

He alludes to his grandmother's experience of moving-in with his parents and his own caregiving experience of moving back to the town where his mother and his wife's mother were both in a nursing home. For the latter, this relocation entailed caring for their mothers and disposing of their estates, placing their own lives and dreams essentially on hold.

Ekerdt and Sergeant (2006) suggest that moves become family lore. The recalling of how others aged becomes a script to inform their own decisions. Underlying the content of a story may be a moral message, that moving is a way to express one's love, or that putting one's life on hold shows the ultimate love for a parent. The retelling of narratives will be subject to layered interpretations. A generation ago, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis moved themselves rather than having their mothers move to be caregivers. In the future, moving as a gift may take a different tone.

Conclusion

This study shows that gift-giving occurs in the process of relocation of older adults. In addition to physical gifts, such as inheritances, the emotional gifts to partners and kin include appeasing a partner's desire, honoring a partner, and providing peace of mind, freedom and ease of caregiving to other kin. Other relocation scholarship has understood moving in terms of older adults' ability to navigate their physical surroundings or in terms of physical and cognitive losses or expected losses as triggers for relocation. While push-pull frameworks have been important in understanding this process, this paper analyses emotional triggers.

Additionally, this paper helps elucidate the role of kin in the moving process. Ekerdt and Sergeant (2006) discuss the role of kin as agents in terms of assistance and assertion in relocation of older adults. Other research has shown family roles are transformed in the moving process (author, 2013). This paper demonstrates how older adults take their kin's perceived wishes and needs into account throughout the process.

As I have shown, moving as a gift is a complex lens. While this project was originally conceived as contributing to the household disbandment literature, above I've shown that the individual possessions do not solely comprise the gift. Considering the amount of objects in a household, accumulated over a lifetime, there are different ways to think about objects. And although some are, not every object may be laden with memories or ancestral ties. Since this is also a gift about new spaces, relationships and patterns of interactions may be transformed as some kin are visited more often, and others less.

The "weight" of objects housed in residences demonstrate that moving is a gift in the very act of completing it. Moving, with its varied contexts of old and new spaces, requires negotiation of spaces and relationships. Moreover, the interpretation of moving as a gift suggests that giver and receiver remain intertwined long after the physical move is accomplished, extending temporalities in unforeseen places and ways. While some may have moved their possessions, they may not have addressed challenges of how to manage her them in her new surroundings. Some older adults may or may not adjust well to their new environments. Moving is one of many experiences in the ongoing relationships of reciprocity between older adults and their kin. Looking at this process using a Maussian lens shows us how obligations may underlie the relocation process. Also, peace of mind for kin comes at a high financial price in the current long-term care landscape in the U.S., where inheritances may be expended to pay for this peace of mind. For the older adult, the loss of one's former community may be substantial if the new location is far away and unfamiliar.

In the forward to *The Gift*, anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests recording the entire credit structure of a community (1925/1990: x). I argue that moving is one moment in a family's history; obligations come after the move and also before it. This project incorporates two suggestions by Douglas on ways to advance research on gift-giving. First of all, this study, set in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis in the Midwestern United States (USA), applies the concept of gift-giving to a "contemporary, industrial society" (1925/1990: xv). Second, this study responds to Douglas's call to apply the concept of gift-giving to ourselves (1925/1990: xv).

This is an ethnographic study of ourselves in a few ways; first it traces the study of families in contemporary times. Families in the new millennium face the consequences of extended longevity, with older adulthood possibly reaching multiple decades. Families also face the global consequences of the wide dispersal of families across the country and even the world.

Lastly, it is a study of ourselves, in that it explores what it means to be human and to care for those who, in the past, cared for us.

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Figure 1.
Photo – Painting Slashed by Nazis