The Role of Relevancy and Social Suffering in “Generativity” Among Older Post-Soviet Women Immigrants

Kate de Medeiros, PhD,*¹ Robert Rubinstein, PhD,² and Polina Ermoshkina, MS¹

¹Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. ²Department of Anthropology & Sociology, University of Maryland Baltimore County.

*Address correspondence to Kate de Medeiros, PhD, Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, 375 Upham Hall, Oxford, OH 45056. E-mail: demedekb@miamiOH.edu

Received April 1 2013; Accepted September 11 2013.

Decision Editor: Nancy Schoenberg, PhD

Purpose of the Study: This paper examines generativity, social suffering, and culture change in a sample of 16 women aged 65 years or older who emigrated from the former Soviet Union. Key concerns with generativity are identity, which can be strongly rooted in one’s original cultural formation, and a stable life course, which is what ideally enables generative impulses to be cultivated in later life.

Design and Methods: To better understand how early social suffering may affect later life generativity, we conducted two 90-min interviews with each of our participants on their past experiences and current views of generativity.

Results: The trauma of World War II, poor quality of life in the Soviet Union, scarcity of shelter and supplies, and fear of arrest emerged as common components in social suffering, which affected their identity.

Implications: Overall, the theme of broken links to the future—the sense that their current lives were irrelevant to future generations—was strong among informants in their interviews, pointing to the importance of life course stability in relation to certain forms of generativity.

Key Words: Culture, Suffering, Identity, Generativity, Soviet Union, Older women, Women’s issues, Social support

This paper brings together two bodies of theoretical work to examine the life course and present-day situations of a sample of older women from the former Soviet Union. The first relates to the notion of generativity; the second to ideas on social suffering. Concerning generativity, Erikson (1980) defined generativity as “a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation.” Erikson placed generativity in middle age, after identity formation, and connected it to a set of internal life course personality conflicts (in

the case of generativity, the paired possibility is stagnation). Later, Stewart and Vandewater (1998) described generativity in terms of phases over the course of adulthood: generativity desire in early adulthood and in middle adulthood, and generativity accomplishment in middle adulthood. They describe midlife generativity as “including both an increased sense of efficacy and a vision of oneself as having made contributions to a wider community” (p. 94). They and others suggest that “identity certainty” is

necessary in order for one to use the resources available in middle age (e.g., secure relationships, career) to act beyond the immediate needs of the self and toward the larger community (Peterson & Duncan, 2007; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998; Schoklitsch & Baumann, 2011). We discuss this issue again later. These perspectives on generativity are notable because they may assume an essentially stable and relatively untroubled life course for the majority of people, a view of the life course quite different from that assumed by the second body of literature reflected in this paper, social suffering.

We begin with a brief review of some key concepts regarding identity, culture, and generativity and, in doing so, highlight some ways in which social suffering may play a role in them. We then examine the role of culture change as a potential for the adaptation of a newer self in later life, by examining the expressions of generativity among 16 older women who immigrated to the United States from the former Soviet Union after its collapse in the late 1980s, and whose experience of social suffering in Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes was profound (Conquest, 1986; Alexeyeva & Goldberg, 1993; Boobbyer, 2000; Applebaum, 2003; Figes, 2007; Cohen, 2012). We highlight some of the ways in which such change can lead to continued suffering as many of the generative investments our informants had during times of relatively more secure identity seem no longer available to them. In these cases, informants described both their prior experiences of suffering and personal development and their present-day lives as being irrelevant to current and future generations. For them, the fruits of the generative energy they had invested in their youth were no longer relevant, they told us, in the present or the future, given the sweeping changes within the former Soviet Union, the negation of the meaning of their prior suffering, and the reconstitution of forms of suffering since their move to the United States. We also introduce the concept of “generativity in the moment” to describe the ways in which women in our study invested themselves into the immediate future in their communities (e.g., a small act of kindness), rather than toward a longer term investment in future (e.g., influencing the next generation). We speculate that a person’s sense of how relevant her current view of self is at present compared with the generative acts undertaken prior to a change in culture will, in part, determine current generative possibilities.

Identity, Culture, and Generativity

Building upon earlier definitions of generativity, McAdams and de St Aubin (1998) describe generativity as “the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation

through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and generating products and outcomes that aim to benefit youth and foster the development and well being of individuals and social systems that will outlive the self” (p. xx). One question that emerges in this approach, and other theories of generativity, is the degree to which life course disruption might mitigate an otherwise continuous, uninterrupted life course flow. Clearly, persons who experience trauma in life can grow beyond this experience, leading to the expression of generativity later in life. However, there are many with trauma who find it difficult to recover from such events. In most discussions of generativity, there is rarely an analysis of the effects of traumatic interference in the life course. Thus, in most generativity theory, there is an implicit expectation that generations will be biologically and culturally continuous, relatively undisturbed, and linked in significant ways.

Kotre (1984, 1996) suggested that generativity is not a stage of development, but rather an impulse that can be released throughout the life course after maturity. In addition to viewing generativity as investing in forms of life and work that will outlive the self, Kotre stressed the importance of culture(s), writ large or small, on generative expressions. Cultural generativity is described by Kotre as the point at which the teacher is no longer merely passing along skills (which he terms “technical generativity”) but has become a mentor, helping the student to discover more about self and meaning (Weber, 1990). Kotre (1996) describes cultural generativity as unfolding first through a conscious entry into a culture. This culture could be that of one’s birth or new, diverse types of world views into which a person may enter later in life, leading to, for some, a reconceptualized self. According to Kotre, cultural generativity “transforms defects into virtues and validates the new self by giving it a reproductive outlet” (p. 260) or generative opportunities to meaningfully invest in the future.

The majority of work on cultural generativity has focused on “culture” in a broad sense to include local cultures such as organizations and neighborhoods rather than culture in the anthropological sense of groups of people with shared symbol systems. Few studies to date have looked at generativity from a cross-cultural perspective (Hofer, Busch, Chasiotis, Kärtner, & Campos, 2008; Coleman & Podolskij, 2007; Cheng, Chan, & Chan, 2008; Cheng, 2009). In the present study, we were interested in learning how social suffering and culture change affect generativity in later life. We begin by first looking at identity formation as a precursor of generativity. Because identity can be strongly rooted in one’s original cultural formation, it is important to consider how changes in identity can affect how generativity is experienced over time and

with cultural change (Urban, 2001). Next, we look at the few cross-cultural studies of generativity. We then turn to our own study.

Identity is a key concern regarding explorations of generativity. McCrae and Costa (1990, p. 162) describe identity as “those aspects of the self that are essential to one’s self definition.” According to them, a person recognizes a set of characteristics as descriptive of her larger whole and uses them as a means of projecting an external view of the internal person. Erikson (1980) described identity in terms of a person’s awareness and recognition of self-sameness and continuity over time and confirmation of that self-sameness by others. We note that there is a lengthy literature on identity and immigration, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Identity and culture have been labeled as “the building blocks of ethnicity” (Nagel, 1994, p. 152). Peterson and Duncan (2007) suggest that identity is a “prerequisite for successful negotiation of the generativity stage” (p. 413) and that generative individuals have achieved a sense of identity in using resources in ways to benefit family and community. Informants in the research we describe subsequently derive a degree of identity certainty from the very challenging times and circumstances they experienced in the Soviet Union.

We turn next to studies that have examined identity and generativity in older adults. As Hofer and colleagues (2008) noted, cross-cultural work on generativity is scarce. Recent work by Cheng (2009) explored culture and generativity in old age in Hong Kong within the context of perceived respect. Cheng used data from instruments designed to measure perceived respect, generative acts and concerns, and psychological wellbeing and found that perceived respect mediated generative concern. Cheng and colleagues (2008) conducted focus groups, stratified by age and socioeconomic status, in Hong Kong regarding views of generativity and thoughts about the younger generation. Overall, they found that passing on moral codes was important, despite also recognizing that technological changes had made much of their knowledge no longer applicable to younger people. In short, many older people felt that they were no longer respected by younger generations and therefore did not believe that any generative acts would be recognized, a situation similar to that of our own informants. However, as we shall argue, a key difference in our informants is that their notion of irrelevancy is not due to culture change in general or to language barriers specifically, but to disruptions in their life course caused by social suffering, which in turn has limited their generative opportunities in later life, as discussed in the next section.

Coleman and Podolskij (2007) studied identity loss and reconstruction in 50 Soviet Second World War veterans living in Russia. They used McAdams’ concept of “generativity

scripts,” which they defined as “mature adults’ creation of an imagined future within a framework of belief and value that links to key events in the individual’s life”; in this framework, personal identity “is both reaffirmed and projected into the future” (p. 53). Overall, they found that despite the immense social upheaval that rendered their accomplishments as war heroes in the Soviet regime invisible in the years after its collapse, nevertheless family provided an outlet for generative expression. The participants were optimistic that their children and grandchildren would carry on important values, thereby reflecting a type of cultural generativity.

Glicksman (2003) reported on a study of two groups of Soviet refugees ($N = 30$) composed of adult children and their parents. Although many of the participants expressed difficulty and unfamiliarity with American culture, Glicksman reported that many in the study found generative outlets by passing on religious faith, cultural history, and family tradition to their children.

Social Suffering and Generativity

As mentioned earlier, missing from work on generativity is the notion of social suffering and the harm that it may directly or indirectly cause to generativity in later life. Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997, p. ix) define social suffering as “an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social forces can inflict on human experience.” They view social suffering as relating to the most difficult, complex, and destructive problems that humans can have, those that “defeat . . . categorization,” and note that social suffering represents both a challenge to the helping professions and at the same time is situated in the individual.

The attempt by these ethnographers and others is in part to bear witness to the suffering “of people living under the impact of extreme social hardships and events of political atrocity” (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 4). Work on social suffering examines the effects of political, military, ethnic, or environmental forces on the everyday life of people in local settings. It is likely that these globally pervasive effects could have a profound influence on the nature of the life course and how aging and later life are experienced and constructed.

Social suffering may be related to generativity in both its disruption of the life course and the thwarting of the ability of the individuals’ earlier generative impulses to succeed. For example, in much of the work on generativity, there is an implicit notion that deep suffering has not have been a major component of one’s life or that the life course has not been seriously interrupted or altered due to social suffering. There is recognition by Kotre that suffering experienced

earlier in life could be channeled into productive generative outlets that also provide new opportunities for the self to develop. Yet, entering a new cultural milieu could also have the opposite of a generative effect and could be devastating to the self if, in the transformation, virtues become defects, life becomes stagnant or generative outlets are unavailable or meaningless (de Medeiros, 2009). The negotiation of identity and generativity in the context of disruption is especially salient in older age and may require more careful processing of how the interaction between the two can be affected. Thus, for example, older persons who have experienced the effects of profound social suffering earlier in life may need to undertake the negotiation of identity and generativity carefully or it may become unavailable to them.

In our own study, we were initially interested in learning how generativity is emically defined and experienced by Russian women who immigrated to the United States after the end of the Soviet Union in 1989. Our sample provided an opportunity to examine identity and culture and the effects of social suffering within the framework of generativity and ultimately to shed light on the nature of generative opportunities that reflected culture change in later life.

Methods

Sample: Post-Soviet Era Women Immigrants

We interviewed 16 women from a Mid-Atlantic region who were aged 65 and older and who immigrated to the United States after 1989, when the Soviet Union collapsed. We recruited informants through senior centers, senior housing, and other organizations that catered to older adults. We developed a series of simple questions about generative actions and motives, centering around four focal areas (people, groups, things, and activities) and four spheres of generativity (historical, familial, individual, and relational). The items were developed to elicit responses to questions about generativity in informants' natural language, focusing on ideas and concepts they naturally used in talking about topics such as generativity, identity, life course changes, family relations, and especially relations with children.

Qualitative research methods were chosen as appropriate for the nature of the research we were undertaking. Marshall (1996) suggests that qualitative research can be employed "to explore complex human issues" (p. 524). Interviews continued until data saturation was reached or the point at which the women's interviews had thematic similarities (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). This was possible after 16 women were enrolled (32 total interviews) due in large part to the homogeneity of the sample. Marshall notes that, "[a]n appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question.

For simple questions or very detailed studies, this might be in the single figures" (1996, p. 523). For many kinds of qualitative research, sampling continues until thematic saturation is achieved. Data saturation can be defined as the emergence of repetitive themes, ideas, or rationales from the interview data (cf. Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). We also paid close attention to questions of data trustworthiness, a notion in qualitative research that applies to issues such as credibility of data and conclusions, and their transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). This was accomplished through team discussion and consensus as well as careful readings of relevant literature. We selected former Soviet immigrant women for several reasons. First, these women developed their initial sense of identity during a time in which the State dictated and controlled much of the social world including education, health, family life, policies on reproduction, political participation, place of work, expression of religion, and many other domains. In addition, these informants are ideally suited to consider the larger concepts of social suffering and generativity in later life because recent social changes have provided new alternatives they may have chosen (or been forced to choose) in midlife. Identity as a Soviet citizen with its various opportunities and challenges had ended. The women in our study left the Soviet Union for an entirely new country with little to no skill in English and, for most, limited knowledge of life in the United States. Such a homogeneous sample was necessary to help inform our understanding of early life experiences, culture, and the role of social suffering.

Of our participants, 15 had children, 1 did not. Their ages ranged from 61 to 84 years ($M = 74.5$ years; $SD = 5.8$ years). Ten described themselves as widowed, four as married, and one as single. Mean years in the United States at the time of their interview was 15.2 (range 4 months to 22 years). Seven described their race or ethnicity as Jewish; nine as Russian. All but one of the women had the equivalency of a college education. Only one woman in the sample was proficient enough in English to complete her interview without a translator; other interviews were conducted with a Russian translator. A second translator independently reviewed the audio recordings and the translations for accuracy.

Each informant participated in two 90-min interviews at home. A semistructured question guide touching on personal history and generativity was used (see Table 1). Questions on generativity covered four broad spheres of generativity, each of which represents a distinctive conceptualization of time: historical, which includes generativity with respect to the larger culture, such as cultural traditions and presence during historical events; familial, which includes values passed down through the informants'

Table 1. Sample Questions From the Interview Guide

General background:

- 1) What is your age and date of birth? Marital status?
- 2) What is your religion? (or, do you have a religion that you practice?)
- 3) How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
- 4) Did you ever work? What did you do most of your working life?
- 5) What is a typical day like for you? Can you walk me through a day?
- 6) What are your main activities nowadays? What are your favorite activities at the present time?
- 7) Now that we have met and talked for a few minutes, I'd like to know more about you and your life. Could you describe your life for me; whatever comes to your mind about what happened along the way? Start where you like and take as much time as you need.

Historical generativity:

- 1) Suppose, someone asked you—as an older person—to write down some advice on how to live that you thought would be as good 100 years from now as it is today. What would you write down?
- 2) Do you ever feel that you are a living representative of a particular cultural, historic, ethnic, or racial tradition? Are there any traditions you feel a part of?
- 3) Would you say that you think your family's history is personally important to you? How so? What things in particular?
- 4) Is there a person in your family who keeps track of things like family history, births and deaths, and things like that? Who is it?
- 5) All and all, what things in your life do you think will outlive you?

Familial generativity:

- 1) What would you say that you feel about your family's heritage or history? Do you feel that it is a part of who you are? How so?
- 2) Thinking about your family for a moment, that is, all the people and generations in your family that have come before you, what do you think are the most important beliefs, ideas, or values you got from them?
- 3) Do you feel you are a part of a family tradition? Do you see anything of your mother/father in you?

Individual generativity:

- 1) Thinking about your life, what things are you most glad went the way they did?
- 2) Thinking about (the last 5 years/your life as a whole), what activities have given you the greatest happiness or satisfaction or have had the most meaning for you?
- 3) What are the most important ideas or values you think you'll pass on to other people? To whom?
- 4) Thinking about (the last 5 years/your life as a whole), in what ways/what areas have you been most creative or productive?
- 5) Was there ever a moment when you felt the desire to describe what you know or what you've experienced to other people, so that it won't be lost when you pass on?

Relational generativity:

- 1) Think about (when you were a child/when you were 50/the last 5 years) . . . who did/do you admire most? Which persons have had the greatest influence on you? How?
- 2) Thinking about your life in the last 5 years, who have you been closest to in that time? Who is the most important person in your life right now?
- 3) Suppose a younger person, a teenager, say, came to you and asked you for your most valuable advice on how best to live. What would you tell them?
- 4) Which people do you think you have had the greatest influence on in their life? How so? Do you see anything of yourself in other people? Elaborate.
- 5) Thinking about your life (as a whole/the last 5 years), which people or groups do you feel you've influenced the most?
- 6) Thinking about the people you know, how would you like people to remember you? Who will do so?

families; individual or experiences and perceptions of the informant's own life; and the relational, which describes how others, such as siblings or spouses, have influenced the informants' life. The study was approved by the authors' respective Institutional Review Boards. Written informed consent was obtained for all women.

Thematic analysis was conducted by having two researchers first independently read each transcript several times, making memos on key ideas and concepts (Hennink et al., 2011). Next, the two met to discuss major ideas. Discussion continued until consensus was reached on the most salient points that were present in the majority of the interviews. Excerpts of themes were then extracted and

again compared by the researchers to see if any disconfirming evidence was apparent. All themes were thoroughly discussed with the entire research team until consensus was reached. We note themes are not mutually exclusive and that some overlap. This was intentional and points to the ways that identity and culture can be differentially positioned, depending on context.

Results

More than half of the women in our study reported being of Jewish ancestry, but had never practiced any Jewish customs or visited a synagogue, even when in the United States

because they had not participated in any type of religion traditions throughout their life. We discuss this in greater detail later in this section. All of the women had worked full time in the Soviet Union until age 55, which they stated was the official retirement age for women. The majority described themselves as “engineers,” a term which in the Soviet Union often referred to jobs performing tasks on assembly lines. One participant had been a dentist.

To better understand the context of how informants viewed generative potential currently, we begin with descriptions of the challenges from social suffering that they described as part of their early life, including continued persecution among the Jewish informants. These challenges are important, because they speak to an initial type of “identity certainty,” albeit a destructive one for some, and later challenges to that identity upon arrival in the United States. It is important to note that an informant’s experience of the past is cited by many as the main reason they feel their experiences are no longer relevant to future generations. We then discuss religion and its relationship to generativity, social suffering, generative expressions, and what many of the women describe as broken links to the future.

Early Life and Identity Certainty

The major challenges and the basis for social suffering that informants mentioned were World War II, life in Stalinist and post-Stalinist times, scarcity of shelter and food, and the potential for arrest. Many of these challenges overlapped and existed until their departure for the United States. Regarding World War II, several participants lost their fathers during the war; others were evacuated eastward during the German advance. Overall, the war was devastating to the Soviet Union in many respects and included a nationwide famine. Estimates of Soviet deaths during the war run as high as 25 million persons. The extent of the women’s suffering was so great that most said that it was impossible for people to understand how hard it was and how they had managed to live through it. When asked about their experiences, informants often lacked the wording to describe the depth of difficulty (Scarry, 1985). Others said that people today could never truly know the depth of their suffering.

After the war, shortages of housing, food, and other supplies as well as the political climate created challenges. For example, during the Soviet era, communal apartments were commonplace whereby several families shared one living unit. One woman described a common housing situation. She said:

It’s like an apartment for four different families with one kitchen, one bathroom, one toilet for four different

families. We lived together. We shared the same hallway to the same kitchen. It was all common places, hallway and kitchen and bathroom. We were very fortunate people because we had very good neighbors in that part, even though other people on the lower or upper floors were fighting, screaming. They lived really badly.

In addition to housing, food was also scarce. One woman told a story about her grandfather’s arrest when he salvaged some frozen beets from a collective farm:

These were very hungry years [after World War II]. These were very, very tough times. I remember that when I was growing up, there were not enough products to eat, not enough things to have. My mother was working. I remember my grandfather went to the fields and took, he took frozen beets, red beets. He took them. It was like not like anybody else needed them. They were frozen. Somebody, like our neighbor, called the government and they [the government] took him. They put him in the prison for that.

Other descriptions of hunger included one woman talking about conditions during the Siege of Leningrad, or the Leningrad Blockade:

I lived in St. Petersburg. That was Leningrad then, and there was a blockage of the whole city by the Germans. It was completely surrounded. We only had 125 grams of bread per person for one day. Nothing else and no other food. It was not even real bread. It was a mix of something eatable. I thank the Leningrad scientists who made it out of some type of water grass or plankton.

Several of the participants noted that people outside of the Soviet Union, including Americans, seemed to know very little about how bad things really were.

Even with the hardships, however, many of our participants also described a level of contentment in making do with what they had. One woman said, “Well, mostly I anyway remember my childhood as a happy time just because it was childhood and I played with whatever I had to play with. And I didn’t have too much and I didn’t think about some hard stuff.” Another woman had a similar observation. She said, “Even though it was hard and everything, it was my life. It was my youth. I had a lot of friends there, even though it was a very hard, complicated life. But I never know a different life and I think it’s a life, it’s normal life. Everybody lives this way.” What both women suggest is that there was sense of normalcy that coexisted with the hardship.

Another challenge that our informants discussed was the constant fear of arrest. In addition to the earlier story of the grandfather’s arrest for stealing frozen beets, one woman described the general tension following World War II:

But in this time, uh, '49 and '50 years, they were persecuting Jewish people and a lot of other people, not only Jewish. Armenians. People of different nationalities. The KGB persecuted people. There were cars that were called black ravens. If somebody saw that that car was coming, it meant they [KGB] were arresting someone. It could be for something a person said, something about politics, about government . . . You know, some neighbor called them to report someone. And hey, they took people to prison, to Siberia, to the north.

Nearly all of the women had a friend or family member who had been arrested for something, often, as the previous quote suggests, on the suspicions of a neighbor rather than due to any real evidence.

The suffering experienced by these informants was extreme and made their life very difficult. There were both explicit and unstated rules by which a person could be seriously punished. There was little sense of existential security; a person could be turned in to the authorities through gossip or innuendo. One woman recalled how her father was reported to the authorities by his assistant, who wanted her father's job:

My father was a military engineer at the department of automatics and his assistant wrote an anonymous letter to the government that my father was an enemy of the nation because he was hoping to get my father's position. And my father was taken from the family. He was in the prison for three years without the right to write letters, without the right to connect to the family, and my mother didn't know anything: Where is he? Is he alive? Is he? Was he killed or something? They didn't know anything and there was, we were so scared because we didn't know what to expect from the government.

Shortly before her father was released, she said her mother was called in to the KGB office without any sort of explanation. Although it was summertime, her mother feared her own arrest and consequently made arrangements with the neighbors to care for the children. She dressed in several layers of winter clothes in anticipation of being sent to the north. When she arrived, the agents laughed, causing her mother to soil her garments because of fear. As it turned out, the reason for the call was just to tell her of her husband's impending release. Later, the interviewer asked what she would put in a time capsule that would not be opened for 100 years. The woman answered, "I would say to the new generations, be happy and do kind things to people." Other participants expressed similar sentiments when asked about advice they would give to younger people or about what they would want to pass along to future generations, saying things such as "Be kind" or "Try to do kind things for people." Kindness as a universal ideal was

more important than any particular skill or aspect of the women's own life such as a family tree or personal qualities.

The strong presence of fear and suspicion did not mean that community was absent. In fact, some of the women told stories of their mothers' nursing other women's children in difficult times or taking in orphaned children. An example is a story told by one woman concerning her neighbors' willingness to help her mother:

The village we lived in was very peaceful and also the neighbors were very close to each other and they were very helpful to each other. If somebody needed something, someone else would give it to them. My grandmother worked from the morning until night in the fields. When she prepared food, she brought some to the neighbors. The neighbors also took care of her.

Another woman, who lived in a communal apartment, talked about the help she received from her neighbor:

That old lady was one of those people [from an aristocratic family] and she was, she had to hide the history of her family from the Communists. Otherwise she would be probably persecuted somehow, in some way. That lady supported everybody a lot and she taught us a lot, many things. When I failed to get accepted into college or university, the first year, that lady helped me to find job. So the neighbors were very, very close people, like family.

The hardships experienced by the women undoubtedly did much to form their identity certainty and relates to the importance of kindness that most of the women mentioned. We did come on an example of an informant whose identity was completely shaken prior to emigrating. She said:

I was one of the few people in our country who really truly believed in Communism until the very last moment, even when everyone else stopped believing. I truly believed in my mind that everybody is the same. I really, truly believed it would happen. That's why I worked so hard and believed the government. And when in 1986, *perestroika* occurred, and Soviet Union collapsed, everything was closed. Then, everything about government started to open up, like what was going on? They lied to people. I read all this stuff. In 1987 and 1988 I started absorbing this truth. This [declassified] information that was not accessible before and I became crushed. I was just crushed. Everything. My beliefs. Everything just collapsed.

This woman's identity went from firm rooting in the Communist Party to one that was completely shaken after learning that much of what she believed was simply not true.

Religion, Ethnicity, and Social Suffering

The distinction between social and personal identity was complicated for our informants, especially those who described themselves as both not having practiced any religion and of being of Jewish ancestry. When we asked, "Is there any religion that you practice," a common answer was, "I do not practice any religion because I am from the former Soviet Union and we never really practiced any." When we asked, "How would you describe your race or ethnicity?" we often heard responses such as "I came from the Soviet Union. We didn't really have ethnicity. We all were Russian. But my background, my mother, my grandparents were Jewish. So I'm Jewish." Another informant told a similar story, noting, "It's not even religion to be Jewish, it's just nationality. If you're Jewish, you're different. Everybody has to be Russian." For the majority of informants, the idea of claiming an ethnicity or nationality was reported to have had no identifying meaning. It was a slot on identity papers that led to arbitrary opportunity for some and persecution for others. For Jewish people, there was the double-edged sword that although religion was not recognized or permitted and all citizens were to consider themselves as "Russians," people of Jewish descent were treated differently than others.

In an interesting turn of conversation, the interviewer asked one participant how the persecution affected her self-esteem. She said: "It was terrible. I was feeling like I was destroyed because I'm Jewish. That's why I'm different. It was the same for my husband and the same for my children. Everybody feels this pressure. If you're Jewish, you're kind of an alien. You're different. It's like you have two heads or something."

Culture and Change

We address the informants' descriptions of culture in the Soviet Union and of culture in their current home in Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants lived in apartment complexes or neighborhoods where most if not of the residents were Russian-speaking and where services such as Russian Adult Day Care and other amenities were available. There were two active Russian language newspapers and local Russian food markets. Despite living in a sizable Russian-speaking community, some informants felt they were unable to leave their neighborhoods without English language help.

In addition to challenges in the local culture, one informant spoke about how Americans did not understand Russians because of the experience of war:

[American's] don't understand Russian immigration mentality. They don't understand World War II because

even they, United States participated in that war but many people just don't understand what that [the War] was actually about. They don't understand what was so hard in Russia before the war, during, and after war, was what exactly about life. It was too hard.

The unique suffering and long-occurring effects of the War were something informants felt that anyone who had not experienced it firsthand could not understand. Entry into a new culture was a radical experience that required the reshaping of personal and social identities and a revisiting of the long-standing effects of social suffering. Next, we discuss how the effects of these events on the capacity to undertake generative action were profound.

Generativity and Broken Links to the Future

Our interview guide included questions specifically related to cultural generativity, inquiring about what values informants would like to pass along to future generations. There were two values that emerged which participants spoke about in their interviews: (1) Treat everyone with honesty and kindness and (2) Help others. The first value, honesty, was one that nearly all of the women mentioned, and may be seen as relating to the lack of openness that characterized Soviet society. Honesty was in stark contrast to what these women had experienced during their life. The second value, helping others, stemmed, we believe, from the general "watchfulness" of and by others that characterized Soviet society and related to the risk of arrest. For example, one woman explained, "It's like almost on a religious level. Family should help other people and be honest." This idea also relates to two earlier examples of neighbors helping the participants.

Many of the informants in our study described what we can only call broken links to future generations, including their own children and grandchildren. A common theme was that the informants were simply no longer needed at the present time in the United States and certainly not as needed by family members and others as they had been when they lived in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. One informant described her granddaughter as, "She's different. She's mostly American." For this informant, the distinction of her granddaughter being American made it impossible to pass along traditions, skills, insights, or even memories because the granddaughter would have no basis for understanding her grandmother's life. Informants had children and grandchildren who could not remember life prior to the life in the United States, who did not speak any Russian at all, and who had no appreciation of Russian culture and history, least of all the suffering these women had gone through during the War and under and after Stalin. One woman explained:

My kids do not remember the life there [in Russia]. They don't really worry about it much because they like it here [in the United States]. I kind of miss [Russia] because it was where I lived in my younger life. I worked, I was productive, I brought something to society. I was active all the time. People relied on me and I was a part of society, I was doing something. And here I'm nobody. I'm just grandmother and mother. That's it. My children call for one minute and make sure I'm alive and nobody has time. I'm upset about it.

She attributes her lack of a role to culture change from Russia to the United States. She has not found a way to be productive in the United States. She resigned herself to the belief that this change in role is just a part of life.

One of our questions about cultural generativity concerned whether one felt like a living representative of a particular historical past. Again, there was a pervasive view among the informants that anything they had experienced in the past was not relevant to the present or the future. One informant responded, "Well, I just get frustrated because I feel that I'm behind what's going on now in this life. I feel as if I'm from last century, too far behind in this life."

One woman in our sample did not have children. She was a 78-year-old widow and was also the only person in the sample who spoke fluent English. She described herself as a resource for other Russians who lived nearby because of her language skills and her skills as a dentist. Although she could not legally practice dentistry in the United States, she pulled teeth and performed other minor services from inside her apartment, in exchange for goods and services. When we asked if she thought she was a living part of history, she answered: "No, I am a simple person." We also asked about former customs or traditions, but she said that she gave those up when she moved to America, that it was important to take on the customs of the new country. This is an important point that goes back to Kotre's conception of culture and acquiring a new sense of culture through identity formation. Generativity was limited for this informant by her perception of what is valued by others, that is, her lack of relevancy. Despite helping others with minor dentistry and translating documents from English, these actions have no generative component for her.

Discussion

Erikson initially described both biological and psychosocial forms of generativity, which he defined as caring for the next generation; these were expanded by Kotre to include technical and cultural generativity. Kotre also defined generativity as "outliving the self." The work of McAdams and de St Aubin and Kotre focused in part on life history narratives as significant in understanding generativity. The

women we interviewed, with one exception, all had children or grandchildren, thus enacting forms of biological generativity. However, in narrating their personal stories, informants discussed their relations with their descendants as now culturally and emotionally distant, primarily because their descendants could not or did not want to grasp the full meaning of what these elders had gone through in the Soviet Union before coming to the United States. Their relationships were affected by the cultural distance that had emerged between generations. Our informants expressed the idea that they were unable to act generatively by passing down their lifetime experiences and knowledge, which were experiences of great suffering, due to the lack of interest and the perceived lack of interest among their descendants. Rather, the informants existed in a context of "broken links" to their biological descendants.

In thinking about how generativity is experienced through connections to others and as a personal passage through time, it is important to think beyond a notion of passing something along to future generations. Although many people have the opportunity to invest in the future and to "outlive the self," others do not. In the case of our informants, the extreme suffering of their earlier life cannot meaningfully be translated into the present or the future. Their prior suffering, along with present-day situations, disconnects with children and grandchildren, some of whom do not speak Russian or show little interest in the life of their elders, and from the larger American society, suggest that some older people may reach a point at which their connection to future generations is no longer relevant to them or even needed by those future generations.

In this respect, our findings are similar to [Cheng's \(2009\)](#) studies of older Hong Kong residents. Cheng's work shows that reduction in generativity was linked to lessened respect and fewer opportunities for older people. In our own study, "respect" was not mentioned as a cultural value per se. Instead, there was a strong sense of both informants' histories of suffering and their lifetime contributions as no longer wanted by others. This notion of relevancy, then, is more salient in our sample than is the idea of respect. In fact, our participants did not mention much about how they thought others actually viewed them. Instead, they talked about how their experiences were so unique, given modern life, and so different from anything that people today would confront, that their grandchildren or children, for example, could not understand their life. The relationship between relevancy and generative impulses is important but often overlooked. For many of our participants, generative impulses were suppressed by an overwhelming feeling of futility.

In addition to the broader idea of relevancy, relative to generative impulses, social suffering also can work to negate

generative impulses. The extent of social suffering experienced by our sample creates a divide between them and other generations. Their suffering was not something that needed to be remembered as part of a history to be inherited by future generations; more to the point, it appeared as if it was too difficult to explain to others or could not be otherwise effectively voiced. This was expressed by one informant who spoke about having no one to pass along her skills to given the immense changes both within the former Soviet Union and in the United States.

One of the most important findings from this study is the highly cultural nature of generativity. One important insight relates to Erikson's (1980) pairing of generativity to stagnation or self-absorption. Erikson wrote that people who failed to develop generativity "often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own one and only child" (p. 103). As the women in our sample demonstrated, it is not that they lack an interest in the next generation per se. Rather, the cultural field in the United States does not provide them with a way to link their past and present to others because so much of what they went through is grounded in horrific experiences in the former Soviet Union. As we have argued, these women are not "stagnant" or self-absorbed. They simply cannot find any relevant ways to link themselves to the future, given what they have lived through and the cultural changes that have occurred. Although one may challenge the notion of generativity as a normative part of the life cycle, to be sure, these informants experience "generativity in the moment," a term that describes the small ways in which they try to invest themselves into the very near future in their small communities, despite difficulties in doing so. As in the case of the dentist who pulled neighbors' teeth, generativity of one sort was not a legacy but a small act of kindness.

We note that there are some limitations to our study. Because this was a qualitative inquiry with a purposive sample, our results are not generalizable to other post-Soviet era immigrants or to older adults. A majority of our participants described themselves as Jewish by ethnicity. This distinction may have caused them to have different experiences throughout their life in the Soviet Union than others. Despite these limitations; however, our participants were able to provide important insights into the concept of generativity in light of major disruptions under the rubric of social suffering, something not addressed by Erikson's original formulation of the concept.

Funding

Data reported in this paper derived from two research projects, "Lifestyles and generativity of childless older women" (AG030614) and "Lifestyles and generativity of older Russian women"

(AG030614-S1). We are grateful for the National Institute of Aging for support of this research.

References

- Alexeyeva, L., & Goldberg, P. (1993). *The thaw generation: Coming of age in the post-stalin era*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Applebaum, A. (2003). *Gulag: A history*. New York: Doubleday.
- Boobbyer, P. (2000). *The Stalin Era*. New York: Routledge.
- Cheng, S. T. (2009). Generativity in later life: Perceived respect from younger generations as a determinant of goal disengagement and psychological well-being. *Journal of gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 64, P45-P54. doi:10.1093/geronb/gbn027
- Cheng, S.-T., Chan, W., & Chan, A. C. M. (2008). Older people's realization of generativity in a changing society: The case of Hong Kong. *Ageing and Society*, 28, 609-627. doi:10.1017/S0144686X07006903
- Cohen, S. F. (2012). *The victim returns: Survivors of the Gulag after Stalin*. New York: IB Tauris.
- Coleman, P. G., & Podolskij, A. (2007). Identity loss and recovery in the life stories of Soviet World War II veterans. *The Gerontologist*, 47, 52-60. doi:10.1093/geront/47.1.52
- Conquest, R. (1986). *The harvest of sorrow: Soviet collectivization and the terror-famine*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- de Medeiros, K. (2009). Suffering and generativity: Repairing threats to self in old age. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 23, 97-102. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2008.11.001
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Figes, O. (2007). *The whisperers: Private life in Stalin's Russia*. New York: Picador.
- Glicksman, A. (2003). Gods, living and dead: Generativity among Soviet born elders in the United States. In C. M. Messikomer, J. P. Swazey, & A. Glicksman (Eds.), *Society and medicine* (pp. 43-58). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 50-82. doi:10.1177/1525822X05279903
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative research methods*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Hofer, J., Busch, H., Chasiotis, A., Kärtner, J., & Campos, D. (2008). Concern for generativity and its relation to implicit pro-social power motivation, generative goals, and satisfaction with life: A cross-cultural investigation. *Journal of Personality*, 76, 1-30. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00478.x
- Kleinman, A., Das, V., & Lock, M. (1997). Introduction. In A. Kleinman, V. Das, & M. Lock (Eds.), *Social suffering* (pp. ix-xxv). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kotre, J. (1984). *Outliving the self: Generativity and the interpretation of lives*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kotre, J. (1996). *Outliving the self: How we live on in future generations*. New York: Norton.
- Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13, 522-525.
- McAdams, D. P., & de St Aubin, E. (1998). *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (1990). *Personality in adulthood*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems*, *41*, 152–176. doi:10.2307/3096847
- Peterson, B. E., & Duncan, L. E. (2007). Midlife women's generativity and authoritarianism: marriage, motherhood, and 10 years of aging. *Psychology and Aging*, *22*, 411–419. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.22.3.411
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schoklitsch, A., & Baumann, U. (2011). Measuring generativity in older adults: The development of new scales. *GeroPsych: The Journal of Gerontopsychology and Geriatric Psychiatry*, *24*, 31–43. doi:10.1024/1662-9647/a000030
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*, 63–75.
- Stewart, A. J., & Vandewater, E. A. (1998). The course of generativity. In D. P. McAdams, & E. de St. Aubin (Eds.), *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation* (pp. 75–100). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Urban, G. (2001). *Metaculture: How culture moves through the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Weber, S. (1990). The teacher educator's experience: Cultural generativity and duality of commitment. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *20*, 141–159.
- Wilkinson, I. (2005). *Suffering: A sociological introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.