Published in final edited form as:

J Relig Spiritual Aging. 2015 ; 27(2-3): 145–165. doi:10.1080/15528030.2014.1003274.

Aging, Spirituality, and Time: A Qualitative Study

Helen K. Black and

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Susan M. Hannum

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Abstract

We examined the concepts of aging, time, spirituality, and future care needs in four randomly selected informants from a group of 54 never-married childless older women. Using data from the Generativity and Lifestyles of Older Women (GLOW) study, we questioned how women's perceptions of these concepts came together in current older age. We employed cultural theory, (our theoretical framework), ethnography, (our methodological framework), and phenomenology, (our philosophical foundation) to produce a portrait of each woman interviewed. Through a three-session interview process, we elicited the women's life stories, reasons for childlessness, and topics that emerged as significant to the women, including aging, a sense of time remaining, and spirituality. A key finding was that the context of each woman's life, both biographical and historical, transpired as a foundation for these concepts. That is, a woman's "place in time" shaped their experiences of aging, as well as her reasons for childlessness and perceptions of finitude.

Keywords

aging/ageing; spirituality qualitative research; time

INTRODUCTION

Although gerontology has noted growth in the number of childless elders in the past decades (Wenger, 2009), the literature lacks ethnographic data on the lived experiences of these elders in relation to childlessness. Our article addresses an aspect of this gap. It emerged from a study, Generativity and Lifestyles of Older Women (GLOW) that explored the experience of childlessness among 54 never-married women. We investigated concepts that emerged as significant in their narratives, including the concepts of aging, time remaining, spirituality, and thoughts about future care needs. This article focuses on the lives of four women who were randomly selected from the group of 54. In a series of three once-weekly interviews, we elicited each woman's life story and asked her questions about being childless, such as whether it was voluntary or involuntary and how she adapted and re-adapted to childlessness throughout her life. With cultural theory as a theoretical

background, we used a phenomenological foundation to ethnographically explore the concepts and issues as described previously.

Women's contexts appeared to provide a foundation that shaped women's answers about aging, time remaining, spirituality, and future care needs. These concepts merged within thick, multi-layered narratives of the women interviewed. We examined each woman's personal biography and the historical context of the cohort into which she was born. Thus, each woman's personal biography, relative to aging, spirituality, time, and future care was integrated with her cultural history. We next introduce the major concepts addressed in this article, detail our methods of data collection and analysis, and describe our approach to interpreting our research. We present our findings through four case studies. The women revealed how the concepts discussed in this article are relevant to their present and future old age.

BACKGROUND

Aging

Our sample of women hailed from the two older cohorts that co-exist in the twenty-first century: (1) an older cohort that experienced the Depression and World War II, born from 1916 to 1931, and (2) a younger cohort comprised of individuals born before the baby boomers, roughly from 1932 to 1945 (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Suiitor, 2012; Roth et al., 2012; Smith, 2008). These cohorts were delineated according to the years in which members were born and came of age and for how they responded to life circumstances, such as the Depression era cohort's ability to "pull together" and withstand hardship (Cutler, Miller, & Norton, 2007), and the younger cohort's seeming affinity for individualism, self-fulfillment, and pursuit of personal security (Roth et al., 2012). Despite the development of different goals and values within cohorts, some constants cross both cohorts and cultures, such as the notion of kinship. Families of origin created and passed on legacies of beliefs and traditions as well as norms of appropriate gender behavior and roles, e.g., parenthood (Black & Santanello, 2012), and witnessed the blossoming of their legacy in now-adult children (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008).

Another key cultural belief tied to parenthood is the notion of the finite nature of the self (Alexander et al., 1991). Through parenthood, the fear of annihilation at death is assuaged by knowledge that one's children will outlive the self, thus keeping an aspect of the self alive (Becker, 1973). Belief that one continues in an afterlife is significant in religious and spiritual thought through concepts of ancestors, heaven, reincarnation, or unity with the universe. Thus, the boundaries of aging, life, and time cross context and culture and may be considered permeable due to the self's ability to extend to preceding and succeeding generations and into eternity (Black, Hannum, Rubinstein, & de Medeiros, 2014).

Despite the many personal and social values connected to parenthood, we note that a substantial number of older adults do not have children. In 2005, about 20% of persons age 65 and older in the United States, or over 6.6 of 34.2 million elderly, never had children (Wenger, 2009). Yet, gerontology continues to focus primarily on the form and content of the parent/child relationship in the parent's old age (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, &

Lefkowitz, 2009; Checkovich & Stern, 2002; Davey, Savla, Janke, & Anderson, 2009). A mutually affective relationship between parent and child is critical to the elder receiving support, or whether a child becomes a primary caregiver to an elder parent. The adult child who provides support often views hands-on care as a reciprocal act of love (Black & Santanello, 2012; Fingerman & Pitzer, 2007; Spitze & Gallant, 2004). Gerontology has maintained the trend of investigating adult children who give care to an elderly parent. This article addresses the gap in the area of childless elders by investigating the concepts of aging, time, spirituality, and thoughts about future care needs in four childless older women.

Time

A cornerstone of human development is biographical, chronological, and developmental change over time. Aging and time, subjectively and biographically, are meaningful to and inherent in each other (Hannum, 2013). Feelings about both aging and time occur in a personal, cultural, and historical context (Brandstader & Greve, 1994) as well as in comparison with other individuals and other cohort groups (Roth et al., 2012). In addition, aging in time is a point of departure for memory, thoughts about the present, and a sense of the future. Yet, in older age, age itself is a weak predictor of a subjective *and* objective sense of “time left,” due to elders’ varied life paths (Carstensen, 2006; House, 2002). That is, diverse developmental trajectories, depending on place of birth, family life, socioeconomic status, education, opportunities, and ethnicity prompt different ways of aging and experiencing age in time (Baltes, 1987). Still, the recognition that more years are behind than ahead is both undeniable and a central cognitive component in older age. Further, the press of time may be felt more acutely in relation to illnesses and infirmities that occur in older age than actual years or decades already lived (Carstensen, 2006).

Although a sense of time remaining varies with each individual, awareness of the aging body and mind reveal that persons do not perceive themselves as ageless (Brandstader & Greve, 1994). Rather, a sense of time remaining is full of meaning to those in old age. The goals that an individual retains, such as spending time with beloved others or devoting oneself to a favorite activity, are therefore especially significant within the context of time remaining. In addition, generative action—bequeathing something of value (knowledge, wisdom, or skills) to others, particularly children and grandchildren—ultimately provides a trans-generational legacy that lengthens the boundaries of life, self, and time, and reveals a means of continuation after death (Erikson, 1963). The basis of this may be cultural—extending the self in time (Kotre, 2005)—or spiritual—a belief in eternity (Eisenhandler, 2003).

Whether cultural or spiritual, elders may view younger family members as not only representing them after death or continuing their legacy, but also as a source of support in parents’ old age (Birditt et al., 2009). Younger family members thus preserve the source of their own existence in time and add to the elder’s consolation that she will be cared for by “her own” in the “time remaining” (Black, Santanello, & Rubinstein, 2014). Although nieces, nephews, or other younger relatives may offer assistance, childless women must assume responsibility for organizing their current and future affective, emotional, and physical sustenance. It is perhaps here, in our narratives of childless older women, that we

witness how aging and the time horizon are accommodated individually and in a cohort, and if and how a woman's spiritual belief system becomes a strategic feature of this support (Young-Eisendrath & Miller, 2000).

Spirituality

Similar to aging and time, a spiritual aesthetic or belief system is sensitive to the cultural and historical environment in which the individual life path is traversed (Corbett, 1990). For those growing up in America in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, spirituality may be a legacy from various sources. For some, a traditional religious legacy may have been inherited from the family of origin, and may be salient in childhood memories in terms of Sunday school or youth groups. Some persons growing up in these decades, particularly the 1940s and 1950s, internalized their childhood religious beliefs, which remained the lens through which they prayed, worshipped, related with a deity, and developed a self- and world-view (Eisenhandler, 2003). Others, mainly those in the younger cohort, and growing up during the cultural and social upheaval of the 1960s, may have looked outside a traditional religion for their spirituality or sense of the sacred. Place in time, particularly the "times" in which persons came of age, influenced their beliefs and practices (Bengston, Putney, & Harris, 2013).

The growing secularization of the 1960s, when the women we interviewed were moving into adulthood, steered debates against permitting a particular religion to shape protocol in large-level institutions, such as government, industry, and media, and led individuals to question the relevance of accepting a religion "whole cloth" (Bengston et al., 2013). Some persons rejected the religion into which they were born but more often separated it piecemeal, kept some parts, and wove them into the practices of other religions, into popular versions of a traditional religion, and into idiosyncratic beliefs about the afterlife and the nature of a Deity (Black & Rubinstein, 2013). This "cultural bricolage" (Wuthnow, 2007) of spirituality symbolized the zeitgeist of the times. It evoked feelings of equality and unity rather than dominance and inequity with others and the earth, and perhaps offered a swifter gratification than committing to religious doctrine and imposed practice (Hays, 2007). In this environment, concrete representations of the sacred were salient in specific spiritual constructions, such as "oneness with nature." This spirituality was constructed because it seemed "real" in that it both touched the senses and was rational. It *made* sense (Young-Eisendrath & Miller, 2000). In our sample, women's belief systems showed the confluence of both conditions of conformity paramount in the 1940s and 1950s and the spiritual diversity that became more pronounced in the 1960s and into the twenty-first century.

The comingling of aging, time, and spirituality is complex. As we mentioned earlier, context (or place in time) undergirds these rubrics; one's place in times gives form, shape, meaning, and understanding to being old, as well as to being religious or spiritual. Persons may be religious or spiritual in different ways in different times of life. Or, one's religious or spiritual belief may be an ever-present but silent aspect of life, much like an instrument used for understanding, interpretation, or comfort. It also may be used at different times in life, perhaps to mark important moments of the life course, or during times of loss and grief.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION

We use cultural theory, ethnography, and phenomenology to produce multidimensional depictions of each woman interviewed. Cultural theory, as it is interpreted by cultural anthropology, attempts to understand people in their own setting (Geertz, 1973). In this case the setting is each woman's home, neighborhood, and community. This theory also considers our informants as the experts of the "truth" of their own lives, and best able to explain their experiences, including childlessness and aging, to an interested other. That is, their "truth" forms the guidelines for our interpretations of their experiences.

The point of departure for phenomenological research is lived experiences. According to Husserl (1965, cited in Gilman, 2002) phenomenology is a philosophical "way of knowing," that is using a method of reflective attentiveness to understand a person's subjectivity of a particular phenomenon. We come to know each informant's lived experience by being fully present to her, by listening with our "third ear," and without expectation of set responses (Van Manan, 1990). We were especially attuned to informants' "expert" insight regarding the influence of biographical and cultural history on her experiences.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from three ethnographically based interviews with each informant, held once a week for three consecutive weeks (Fossey et al., 2002; Reismann, 1997; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interviews with the women included three focal areas: life history (Britton, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Rubinstein, 1995), generativity (Cole & Stewart, 1996; de St. Aubin et al., 2004; Erikson, 1982; Kotre, 1984; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Rubinstein, Girling, de Medeiros, Brazda, & Hannum, 2014), and the experience and meaning of childlessness and future care needs. In particular, the final interview provided important details about each woman's religious and spiritual belief system and her plans for future care needs (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001; Barker, 2002; Dye, 2005; Freedman, 1993; Koropecj-Cox, 2002; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001).

Data Analysis

Following each interview, audio files were professionally transcribed, after which they were de-identified and placed into the qualitative database managed by *Atlas.ti* (Muhr, 2008) for later coding and use in analyses. The four women who are described in this article were chosen randomly from the group of 54 never-married, childless women. Full descriptive case summaries were developed for each informant following transcription (McAdams, 2012), focusing on our topical concepts. The case summaries were based on a deep reading of individual transcripts in their entirety, along with key codes, interviewer and meeting memos, and field notes. All were used to identify intra- and inter-individual similarities and differences through thematic development (Yin, 2014). We do not suggest that the women chosen as case examples represent the entire group, except for the fact that *each* woman's life story was unique. In all, the women in this group were (1) cognizant of aging; (2) aware of a diminishment of time remaining in their lives; and (3) felt the effect of cultural and

social history on past opportunities and choices, and present sensibilities. They spoke candidly about their religious and spiritual belief system and if and how they perceived it influenced the unfolding of their lives.

FINDINGS

We explored how aging, time, and spirituality were inter-related in women's narratives, and how these concepts intersected their discussions of childlessness, thoughts of the future, and support in old age. We also examined how the context of women's lives, both biographical and historical, prompted them to link aging, spirituality, and time in their narratives. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Aging

In our research interviews, women's accounts of early life were laden with meaning about how they arrived at older age with particular strengths and idiosyncrasies. What was a "normal" occurrence in early life or what upset the daily status quo became important pieces in the construction of a presentday aging identity. For example, Miss Halpern is a European-American woman born in 1939. She was 71 years old at the time of the interviews and lived and worked as a chaplain in a thriving Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC). Although she described her health as "good," she also had "fallen lots of times," and limited her activities because of fear of falling again. Miss Halpern's thwarted desire to go into ministry as a young woman influenced her to "live fiercely in reality" and keep a close watch on her interior life. She spent her early career combating obstacles against women entering the Episcopal priesthood, but viewed the present as a "quieter" period and a time "to reflect. "Reflecting gives form and shape to things," she said. "It means paying attention. Doing things that keep you from drifting." Miss Halpern stated that "journaling" was armor against mindlessness and wished she had begun it earlier in life. This self-reflection also meant awareness of her age, especially in comparison with others living in the CCRC:

I am very aware that I am obviously aging, and anybody is [aging] that's alive. But it's true that I'm one of the youngest here and the healthiest. Sometimes others will reject me on the basis that I don't understand [old-old age]. And it's true that I don't. But how that works, I think particularly in the last 5 years, I've become much more interior.

In explicating the nature of interiority, Miss Halpern remarked that it prompts greater understanding of others' motives and a deeper relationship with God.

I try to be in touch with what I'm thinking and feeling, even if it's not kind, and express it [to myself]. And that applies to my relationship with God. And to be aware of what's around me, be aware that other people exist, and interact with them. It's so easy not to see people. Sometimes I think the most creative thing anybody can do is simply to love.

Miss Halpern noted the importance of witnessing the "otherness" both of persons and of God. Her comment resonates with Buber's description of the I-Thou relationship and with wisdom gained from age and careful self-study (Buber, 2004).

We follow with Miss Taylor, a 79-year-old African American woman who was born in 1931. She began the interview by stating, “I feel blessed to be in relatively good health at this age. Most people don’t think I’m going to be 80 soon.” When asked to tell her life story, she began:

I try to keep up; I like to go places and do things. I’m a happy person. I’ve been blessed coming from a small house in the country with no running water or electricity, and now I live in a nice condo. I’ve been blessed with a lot of supportive friends. And my church family provides me with lots of activities. And last Saturday I went with my nephew and his family for dinner.

Despite early poverty, Miss Taylor viewed her older age as a time “of continued blessings.” Her comment suggested that she remained on the Biblical “narrow path” she was set upon in childhood. Despite the vagaries in life—poverty, segregated schools, discrimination in early adulthood—her belief in God and the church of her childhood never varied and led her, she stated, to contentment in older age.

Miss Redman, a European-American woman born in 1943, was 66 years old at the time of the interviews. Growing up Catholic in the 1950s, Miss Redman decided to enter the convent. “I was 21. I left at age 44. I was a nun for 23 years.” She was trained as a teacher and social worker for the order she joined. She described herself in the “old days”:

I used to have a bubbly personality, but as I’ve aged, I’ve become more sedate. When I was in the convent I didn’t take anything too serious. I wasn’t real responsible. I imagine it’s a matter of age. None of the people I know now knew me when I was younger.

Unlike Miss Taylor, Miss Redman did not stay on her “childhood” course. She remained in the convent “until [her] father died” because it would “hurt him” to witness her leaving. Afterward, she joined a lay community worker group and lived with “fellow activists” whom she “greatly admired” until she reached her mid-50s: “I think we really did some good works during that time.”

Miss Jones, a 67-year-old African American woman, was born in 1943. She identified herself at the beginning of the interview as a “war baby. Not a baby boomer, a war baby,” placing herself within a particular cohort. The area in which Miss Jones lived held an attractive mix of condos, townhomes, and apartments. Miss Jones noted throughout the interview that she was adopted and never knew the identity of her birth parents. This lack of knowledge about her “beginnings” did not allow her, she felt, to get “too close” to others, especially men. She decided against marriage despite enjoying several romantic relationships.

I could get so close and then ... I was off and on with someone for 9 years. And I just broke up with somebody; that was off and on for 4 years. I think part of not wanting to be married is that I don’t really know who I am and I don’t want to put that on somebody else. So it goes back to being adopted.

Miss Jones suggested that the intimacy of marriage hinged on knowing herself, which in her view depended on knowing her roots. She felt her true self went missing when she was

adopted and believed that, without knowledge of her biological parents, her identity was false.

I always felt like something was missing. I had a very good life with material things. But I always felt that I didn't quite belong. [I have] questions that are still unanswered. I thought about hiring a detective. But now at this age they're probably dead anyway.

Miss Jones perceived that time had run out for her to know her biological parents, and the dilemma about her "real" identity would remain unresolved. She noted that she "never told anyone, not even my two best friends" about being adopted. She remarked that, as she ages, why she kept this fact a secret "is something to ponder."

The nature of the interview questions prompted each woman to give an accounting of her life. Informants revealed awareness of how their pasts unfolded into the present. They showed unique themes about aging within their narratives. Miss Halpern looked to her "interior life" to witness her development as she ages. Miss Redman seemed to measure her aging by the "good works" she accomplished for others. Miss Taylor discovered that following the straight path of her childhood led to "contentment" in old age. Miss Jones, who because she never knew her birth parents, believed she would also "never truly know [her]self."

Time

Aging, above, clearly incorporates chronological, historical, and generational dimensions of time in the life course. In exploring the four informants' perceptions of time, we return to the foundational concept of our paper: the women's context. A sense of time passed, time remaining, and living in an historical and cultural time period were aspects of the women's narratives (Carstensen, 2006). Important characters had roles in women's life stories, such as parents, siblings, and extended family members. For many women, their mothers figured prominently in their narratives. In this way, women extended personal or biographical time by looking both forward *and* backward a generation (Black et al., 2014). Each woman suggested that the unfolding of her life in time was shaped by how her mother's life unfolded in a particular historical and cultural era. Each woman recognized that life options, such as those surrounding career, marriage, and motherhood, were circumscribed by the times in which she was born and came of age, and that this circumscription of roles had been even narrower for their mothers. For example, Miss Taylor considered her mother the most influential person in her life.

We lived in a tenant house, and my mother cleaned for the people who owned it. I went to a segregated school about 12 miles away. We were a humble family with strong family values, like the love of education. My mother worked hard as a domestic, but she wanted us to go to college, so my sister and I both went, and my brother went to business school. My mother was a real warrior who kept us on the right path.

Miss Taylor used the metaphor of a path to show that her mother was unable, due to overt and sanctioned racism in the place and time she grew up, to travel the route of education and achievement. She therefore “battled” to place and keep her children on this path.

Some informants talked about following a road early in life that precluded having children. Miss Halpern reported that she “knew from the time [she] was in fifth grade that [she] wanted to be in ministry.” Although ordination to the Episcopalian priesthood was not open to women when Miss Halpern came of age in the 1960s, she chose what was “closest to what [she] wanted.”

If ordination is not open to women, what can I do? I looked at the things women were doing in the [Episcopal] church. They were missionaries in the mountains and the inner cities. So I decided to enter the Order [of Episcopalian nuns].

After entering, Miss Halpern became “part of the struggle to open ordination to women.” Despite continued opposition from church hierarchy, women were officially permitted ordination in 1977, and Miss Halpern was eventually ordained. She articulated how her life unfolded based on existing organizational rules surrounding women’s roles at the time:

The first couple of years in the novitiate, you say, ‘Is this for me?’ But you’re young. If this doesn’t work, I’ll try that. Then your body says: ‘This is not an ongoing option. Now where are you? What do you want? Who are you?’ If society had been different ... but the option of a single woman having a child was not in the world of the 60s. If I could have gone for ordination when I wanted to, like the guys—they saw no barrier between marriage and ordination.

When Miss Halpern finally was ordained in mid-life, she perceived that other life options, such as motherhood, were closed to her. But male counterparts had not been forced to choose between the priesthood and marriage and parenthood. Her choices were shaped by the power structures of the church in the 1960s. For Miss Halpern, anger and regret were tempered because she and other women razed those structures. Her actions extended her sense of time to include future generations of women who would not be forced to make such choices.

Similar to Miss Taylor, Miss Jones noted that coming of age in the 1960s as an African-American woman affected every area of her life, even hard-fought achievements:

After graduation, I went to library school. That was a one-year Master’s. I did that, and turned out to be the first black librarian in the county in 1967, which was a trip. People would call up and say, ‘Are you that black bitch?’ I’d say no because I wasn’t. And I’d hang up the phone. I actually got promoted over two white librarians to be head of the department. But then I decided I’d had enough.

When asked if she had taken part in the Civil Rights movement, she replied:

I was on the fringes of that. I was too scared to go out there, and now I regret that I didn’t do more. I always contributed money. But I think it was a good experience to see that things can change and people can make a difference. I’m sorry that we’re not further along. I’m glad I’ve seen a black president in my lifetime, I’m sorry

he's going through what he's going through and that it's the worst time since the Depression.

Miss Jones "knew" she would never marry "because of the adoption thing;" not marrying precluded having children:

I was raised you didn't have a child unless you had a husband. So it's out of the question. I think also my thoughts on the matter were that a child should have a mother and a father.

Miss Taylor, on the other hand, seemed surprised by the question, "Why did you decide to not have children?"

Well, I was never married. And the era in which I was brought up that was a no-no to have a child out of wedlock. That would have killed my mother. Now I love children but I never felt I had to have them. There's a joke in my church. They say you look the way you do because you never had a husband or children to worry you to death.

Miss Jones and Miss Taylor grew up in a different time and place, and with a dissimilar socio-economic background. Yet both women's responses to questions about children showed that cultural and family mores dictated what was considered acceptable behavior for single women when they were of childbearing age. Miss Taylor's surprise at our question also underscored how personal and social opinions regarding single motherhood have both changed *and* remained the same within and across generations depending on place in time.

Miss Redman how her awareness of "changing times," and the few options open to a young, unmarried Catholic woman fostered her idea to enter the convent:

I thought about those who have less than others. I wasn't a child of the '60s—I was before the '60s—but I wanted to save the world. I went to college for a couple years, and I couldn't get the convent out of my head, so I signed up. Religious life is tricky; they say that you're called to it. But there was always something in me that I didn't know if this is right for me. But when I talked to the spiritual director, she would say, "Well, that's (doubt) probably the cross." Because I liked the work; I liked the sisters.

The time was pre-Vatican II. A vocation to the religious life was considered a divine calling that required an equally sacred response. Yet, when Miss Redman questioned her vocation, her superiors' role was not to examine her doubt but to consider it a further religious call—to take up the cross of suffering that doubt caused her. Miss Redman explained, "The idea was that you learned how to accept the cross and find contentment in the suffering." As time passed, she realized that joining the convent was perhaps less a calling than a life path that was acceptable to the smaller (family, church, community) and larger (culture and society) worlds in which she lived.

Miss Redman left the convent over 20 years later, when she was 44 years old. She remarked that it was not poverty or chastity that was hard to endure; it was obedience to rules that did

not make sense at best, or at worst contradicted Jesus's call "to serve the least." After leaving, she described a time of self-discovery that resonated with late adolescence:

I dated a lot but felt I couldn't entrust myself to somebody else. You know when you go in the convent you let somebody take over your life almost. And I think I saw marriage that way ... I was afraid I would be absorbed by somebody ...

Although Miss Redman reported that she came "close" to marriage a few times, "fear" kept her from that level of intimacy. She noted that this fear "was probably the biggest downside of the convent for me." Miss Redman later noted that she has been dating someone "for about ten years." She added that although he is "a really nice guy," she has not considered marriage.

Although our four women described their cohort as "before the '60s," they also lived through the vast cultural changes that the 1960s heralded. During that decade, reservations about institutional authority and dominance, both religious and political, women's activism, and the Civil Rights Movement broadened women's choices, expectations, and opportunities. Time, then, for our informants, was not merely chronological, but deeply biographical and historical. It tied women's biographies to the external course of historic events.

Spirituality

Informant narratives revealed the life course dimension of spirituality that is entwined with questions about aging and the quality and quantity of time – including time past and time remaining (Eliade, 1961). When Miss Redman was asked what religious or spiritual belief system she currently followed, she recounted the last years of her mother's life, bringing together aging—her mother's and her own—biographical and family time, with spirituality.

My mother was blind by then so I took her to church and got to know people. When she died they spoke highly of her. The pastor was nice to our family. I fancy that someday I'll go back; I was there at Christmas. The guy next door to me is Lutheran, and he'd like me to go to his church. But I can't do that. If I go to church, it has to be Catholic. I haven't got past that. My beliefs? Do you know the poem about Abou ben Adhem, may his tribe increase, awoke one night from a deep dream of peace? In Catholic school we memorized it. He woke up to see an angel writing in a book of gold the names of people who loved the Lord, and his name wasn't there. At the end of the poem, he said to the angel, "Then write me in as one who loves my fellow men." That's probably true for me. Just make yourself useful. Look around and see what needs to be done.

Miss Redman's recitation of the Leigh Hunt poem (Cox, 1999) resonated with her description of the "best time of [her] life"—when she left the convent, lived in community with fellow activists, and "did good works." It also resonated with admiration for her mother, who she described as an "activist. She was just always on the go."

When Miss Jones was asked if her religious or spiritual beliefs would be important in future life choices, she said:

I'm more spiritual. I like nature, that's why I wanted to live near the zoo. I was reared Catholic, but we were in a segregated parish with a racist priest. Eventually they got rid of him and desegregated it, but that was my formative years. So when I go to church I go to the Unitarian, but I rarely go. Sometimes I go to the Catholic church to hear the music. I believe in God, but I don't believe in religion; I don't believe in doctrine or dogma.

Miss Jones said that because she associated the Catholic church with racism, she rejected Catholicism "years ago." Her negativity was reinforced when she visited the Vatican "to see the art." She was dismayed "by all the gold they had there."

Miss Taylor said that the rural Baptist church she attended as a child was "central" in her life. She stated that her religious and spiritual beliefs influenced all her life choices:

I was reared in the church. All through elementary and high school I was always in the Sunday school and the junior choir, and I always had a desire to do well and live an upstanding life. My faith has led me through my life and gives me hope to continue.

Miss Taylor believed that her present and past faith provides hope, and would see her through whatever would occur in the future.

Miss Halpern, in discussing personal spirituality, similarly reported that she "tries very hard to live in the day. I could get totally panicked by thinking about the future." Here, Miss Halpern expressed how aging, time, and spirituality may come together. In talking about the future, which "panics" her, she is talking about *chronos*, or time that can be measured, quantified, and has been described as "dead" time (Reardon, 2005). When she "lives in the day," however, she is living in the *kairos*, the spiritual time of "now," and the only time of which she is assured (Black & Rubinstein, 2013; Marsh, 2014).

DISCUSSION

An inescapable fact of aging is that declines, both cognitive and physical, begin in young-old age and become more debilitating in old-old age. A necessary part of aging is gauging what care needs an individual has currently and may require in the future. The four women introduced in this article showed how aging, time, and spirituality overlapped at various points in their lives (Corbett, 1990; Eisenhandler, 2003). Although each woman's story was unique, as was her expression of aging and spirituality, we suggest that her time in place, or historical context, influenced personal patterns of aging and spirituality. In part, women made life choices based on the options available to them when they came of age. As time passed and opportunities opened, they pursued new goals. Miss Halpern entered the seminary; Miss Redman left the convent; Miss Taylor and Miss Jones pursued advanced education. These women represent a cohort that made concrete plans for how they want to live in old age (Hudson & Gonyea, 2014).

Most distinctly, there was little expectation that others would provide care for them in the future. Miss Halpern, who throughout life "faced reality fiercely," described care needs as resting on the elder. She expressed that, for some older women, whether or not they have

children, there “may be no future generation” to take care of them. As Miss Redman noted, her siblings, who *are* parents, do not expect their children to provide care for them in older age. This was the anticipated future that women came to expect and accept through the years; *their* future reality was one of self-care. Among our respondents, a strong faith shaped self-perception. Women’s spirituality seemed to mirror a sense of responsibility of providing for themselves; each woman saw her work or activities as spiritual expressiveness. For example, Miss Jones explained that she left a good-paying job because “it didn’t feed [her] soul.” Miss Halpern’s spiritual path was deeply interior; yet she found both spiritual discipline and joy by “living in community.”

Though the women expressed knowledge of providing for the self emotionally and financially, they felt a spiritual need for relationships. For instance, Miss Taylor reported, “I would like to have a companion. That is the only thing I would change in my life because I’m relatively at peace,” recognizing that relationships provide spiritual sustenance. Miss Redman, discerning early in life that her spiritual path must be active, compared herself to the poem “Abou ben Adhem” (Hall, 1868); she described her spirituality as strewn with “good work and love of her fellow man.” A central component of the experience of spirituality appeared to rest on the capacity to live in concert with others. This interdependence seemed created by a sense of spiritual relatedness through which persons are enabled to both enjoy and endure the experiences of life.

The future that the women imagined was built on many components. For example, when Miss Redman was asked how she will care for herself or be cared for in older age, she described witnessing her mother and aunts give care to older relatives. Because Miss Redman was the single child in a family of three siblings, it fell to her to buy a home and care for her mother in the last years of her mother’s life. Despite the family’s tradition of caregiving, Miss Redman’s expectation about future care differed from the cohort that preceded her. Interestingly, her siblings, who have children, shared Miss Redman’s expectation of entering “assisted living,” lending credence to her opinions about future care in terms of “my generation”:

My generation thinks we’ll go to assisted living, a place with all levels of care. You go from level to level depending on need. Though our family has historically taken care of one another, I don’t think that would be my brother’s or sister’s expectation and they both have children. I just have nieces and that certainly is not my expectation.

Miss Jones described herself as “not worried” about the future. She talked about “having more than enough [income to support herself], although the economy gives me pause.” When asked about future care needs, she remarked that she is currently looking for a “place where there will be people my age.” In interviews, Miss Jones repeatedly remarked on “nature” as well social involvement as components in her faith in life itself (Kotre, 1996; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998).

When Miss Taylor was asked about future support, she remarked that she and her sister planned adequately for later life. They decided five years previously to move together to the condo where Miss Taylor resided. Shortly after the move, her sister became ill and passed

away. Miss Taylor talked about future care in relation to meeting someone who might help assuage her loneliness. “I feel like I would like to have somebody else that was close to me now.” Both Miss Jones and Miss Taylor highlighted the emotional component of care needs in later life. When Miss Halpern was asked about support, she reported feeling “secure” in continuing to “bring in money” due to her part-time work as a chaplain.

You can’t take health for granted. That’s part of coming here [to the CCRC]. It’s a good idea for those who don’t have family they can or should depend on. Being here means, when a health problem develops, I know what the provisions are. It’s being responsible and realistic and not pretending things are different. There’s an assumption that a younger generation will do things for us. For a lot of us, and not just childless, that’s not true. Maybe there was a younger generation who died, or from whom you are estranged, maybe there never was, or maybe the younger generation is in conflict with each other.

We suggest that aging, time remaining, and spirituality came together at the forefront of women’s thoughts. These concepts provided a foundation for planning future care needs through interdependence, such as living in community settings where levels of care are assured. Faced with chronic or acute health problems, women’s plans were described as based on the *unknownness* of the future coupled with a life lived with limited familial resources. Personal spirituality was experienced through a growing desire for connectedness with God and others. We posit that the lives of the childless women were well planned, particularly in terms of present and future illness and the spiritual necessity of relationships.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research may benefit from viewing the concepts explored in our research—aging, time remaining, and spirituality—broadly. Spirituality, as culturally and socially shaped, is fluid, contextual, and rooted in an individual’s personal and historical past, present, and sense of the future. It continues to grow through active self- and other-insight while acknowledging the real sufferings of life. Aging is accommodated realistically by facing existential aloneness in self and others (whether childless or childless) and embracing aloneness in relationship. As the time horizon closes in, the future may promise continued life through generative attitudes and behaviors with ancestors, peers, and future generations, and belief in an afterlife. Future research also may benefit by exploring these concepts with other groups of childless elders, such as men, clergypersons, and the youngest-old—baby boomers.

Acknowledgments

FUNDING

Data presented in this article were gathered in a research project titled Generativity and Lifestyles of Older Women (GLOW). This research was supported by the National Institute on Aging (R01AG030614; R. Rubinstein and K. de Medeiros, PIs). We are extremely grateful to NIA for its support of this research. Susan M. Hannum would additionally like to thank the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School and Public Health and, specifically, NCI for its support of her continued research through the Cancer Epidemiology, Prevention, and Control Postdoctoral Training Fellowship (T32 CA009314).

REFERENCES

- Alexander B, Rubinstein R, Goodman M, Luborsky M. Generativity in cultural context: The self, death, and immortality as experienced by older American women. *Ageing and Society*. 1991; 11(04):417–442.
- Ajrouch KJ, Antonucci TC, Janevic MR. Social networks among blacks and whites: The interaction between race and age. *Journal of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. 2001; 56(2):112–128.
- Baltes PB. Theoretical propositions of life-span developmental psychology: On the dynamics between growth and decline. *Developmental Psychology*. 1987; 23(5):611–626.
- Barker JC. Neighbors, friends, and other nonkin caregivers of community-living dependent elders. *Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*. 2002; 57(3):S158–S167.
- Becker, E. *The denial of death*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 1973.
- Bengston, V.; Putney, N.; Harris, S. *Families and faith: How religion is passed down across generations*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2013.
- Birditt KS, Miller LM, Fingerman KL, Lefkowitz ES. Tensions in the parent and adult child relationship: Links to solidarity and ambivalence. *Psychology and Aging*. 2009; 24(2):287–295. [PubMed: 19485648]
- Black HK, Hannum SM, Rubinstein RL, de Medeiros K. Generativity in elderly African-American Oblate Sisters of Providence. *The Gerontologist*. 2014 Oct 28.
- Black HK, Rubinstein RL. A death in the family: Death as a Zen concept. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. 2013; 76(1):79–97. [PubMed: 23540160]
- Black HK, Santanello HR. The salience of family worldview in mourning an elderly husband and father. *The Gerontologist*. 2012; 52(4):472–483. [PubMed: 22241808]
- Black HK, Santanello HR, Rubinstein RL. A pragmatic belief system in family meaning-making after death. *Death Studies*. 2014; 38(8):522–530. [PubMed: 24738858]
- Brandtstadter J, Greve W. The aging self: Stabilizing and protective processes. *Developmental Review*. 1994; 14(1):1–29.
- Britton, N. Qualitative interviews. In: Pope, C.; Mays, N., editors. *Qualitative research in health care*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2006. p. 12–20.
- Buber, M. *I and thou*. Charles Scribner's Sons. London, UK: Continuum; 2004. (Original work published in 1937).
- Carstensen LL. The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science*. 2006; 312(5782):1913–1915. [PubMed: 16809530]
- Checkovich TJ, Stern S. Shared caregiving responsibilities of adult siblings with elderly parents. *The Journal of Human Resources*. 2002; 37(3):441–478.
- Cole ER, Stewart AJ. Meanings of political participation among black and white women: Political identity and social responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1996; 71(1):130–140. [PubMed: 8708995]
- Corbett, JM. *Religion in America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; 1990.
- Cox, JN. *Poetry and politics in the Cockney school: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their circle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- Cutler DM, Miller G, Norton DM. Evidence on early-life income and late-life health from America's Dust Bowl Era. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. 2007; 104(33):13244–13249.
- Davey A, Savla J, Janke MC, Anderson S. Grandparent-grandchild relationships: From families in contexts to families as contexts. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. 2009; 69(4):309–323.
- de St. Aubin, E.; McAdams, DP.; Kim, TC., editors. *The generative society: Caring for future generations*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2004.
- Dye, JL. Fertility of American women: June 2004; Population characteristics. *Current Population Reports*. 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p20-555.pdf>
- Eisenhandler, S. *Keeping the faith in late life*. New York, NY: Springer; 2003.

- Eliade, M. *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion*. New York, NY: Harper & Row; 1961.
- Erikson, EH. *Childhood and society*. 2nd ed.. New York, NY: W.W. Norton; 1963.
- Erikson, EH. *The life cycle completed: A review*. New York, NY: Norton; 1982.
- Fingerman KL, Pillemer KA, Silverstein M, Suiitor JJ. The baby boomers' intergenerational relationships. *The Gerontologist*. 2012; 52(2):199–209. [PubMed: 22250130]
- Fingerman, KL.; Pitzer, LM. Socialization in old age. In: Grusec, JE.; Hastings, PD., editors. *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research*. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2007. p. 232–255.
- Fossey E, Harvey C, McDermott F, Davidson L. Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 2002; 36(6):717–732. [PubMed: 12406114]
- Freedman, M. *The kindness of strangers: Adult mentors, urban youth and the new voluntarism*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1993.
- Geertz, C. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books; 1973.
- Gilman SE. Socioeconomic status in childhood and the lifetime risk of major depression. *International Journal of Epidemiology*. 2002; 31(2):359–367. [PubMed: 11980797]
- Hall, SC. *The book of gems: The poets and artists of Great Britain*. London, England: Bell & Daldy; 1868.
- Hannum SM. *Chronic illness narratives: Conceptualizations of a cancer diagnosis among chronically ill older adults*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. 2013:299. UMI Number: 3563331.
- Hays, M. *Googling God: The religious landscape of people in their 20s and 30s*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press; 2007.
- House JS. Understanding social factors and inequalities in health: 20th century progress and 21st century prospects. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 2002; 43(2):125. [PubMed: 12096695]
- Hudson RB, Gonyea JG. Baby boomers and the shifting political construction of old age. *The Gerontologist*. 2014; 52(2):272–282. [PubMed: 22241809]
- Koropecykj-Cox T. Beyond parental status: Psychological well-being in middle and old age. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2002; 64(4):957–971.
- Kotre, J. *Outliving the self: Generativity and the interpretation of lives*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1984.
- Kotre, J. *Outliving the self: How we live on in future generations*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton; 1996.
- Kotre J. Generativity: Reshaping the past into the future. *Science & Theology News*. 2005 Sep.:42–43.
- Marsh N. Where you are you will find God. *Kairos Journal*. 2014; 25(4):6.
- McAdams, DP. Exploring psychological themes through life-narrative accounts. In: Holstein, JA.; Gubrium, JF., editors. *Varieties of narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2012. p. 15–32.
- McAdams, DP.; de St. Aubin, E., editors. *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press; 1998.
- McAdams DP, Diamond A, de St. Aubin E, Mansfield E. Stories of commitment: The psychosocial construction of generative lives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1997; 72(3):678–694.
- Muhr, T. *Atlas.ti*. Berlin: Scientific Software Development; 2008.
- Pinquart M, Sorensen S. Gender differences in self-concept and psychological well-being in old age: A meta-analysis. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. 2001; 56(4):P195–P213.
- Reardon P. Chronos and Kairos. 2005 Retrieved from: <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles5/ReardonChronos.php>.
- Reissman, C. *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage; 1997.
- Roth EG, Keimig L, Rubinstein RL, Morgan L, Eckert JK, Goldman S, Peeples AD. Baby boomers in an active adult retirement community: Comity interrupted. *The Gerontologist*. 2012; 52(2):189–198. [PubMed: 22391870]

- Rothrauff T, Cooney TM. The role of generativity in psychological well-being: Does it differ for childless adults and parents? *Journal of Adult Development*. 2008; 15(3–4):148–159.
- Rubin, HJ.; Rubin, IS. *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. 2nd ed.. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005.
- Rubinstein RL. The engagement of life history and the life review among the aged: A research case study. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 1995; 9(3):187–203.
- Rubinstein RL, Girling L, de Medeiros K, Brazda M, Hannum SM. Extending the framework of generativity theory through research: A qualitative study. *The Gerontologist*. 2014 Published online.
- Smith, G. *A short history of secularization*. London, England: I. B. Taurus & Co.; 2008.
- Spitze G, Gallant MP. “The bitter with the sweet”: Older adults’ strategies for handling ambivalence in relations with their adult children. *Research on Aging*. 2004; 26(4):387.
- Van Manen, M. *Researching lived experience*. Ontario, Canada: University of Western Ontario; 1990.
- Wenger GC. Childlessness at the end of life: Evidence from rural Wales. *Ageing and Society*. 2009; 29(8):1243–1259.
- Wuthnow, R. *After the baby boomers: How twenty and thirty somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2007.
- Yin, RK. *Case study research: Design and methods*. 5th ed.. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2014.
- Young-Eisendrath, P.; Miller, ME. *The psychology of mature spirituality: Integrity, wisdom, transcendence*. Philadelphia, PA: Routledge; 2000.