

## Research Article

# Generativity in Elderly Oblate Sisters of Providence

Helen K. Black, PhD,<sup>\*1</sup> Susan M. Hannum, PhD,<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Rubinstein, PhD,<sup>3</sup> and Kate de Medeiros, PhD<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County. <sup>2</sup>Postdoctoral Fellow Cancer Epidemiology, Prevention, and Control Training Fellowship, Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland. <sup>3</sup>Doctoral Program in Gerontology, University of Maryland Baltimore County. <sup>4</sup>Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

\*Address correspondence to Helen K. Black, PhD, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250. E-mail: [blackh@umbc.edu](mailto:blackh@umbc.edu)

Received April 15, 2014; Accepted August 27, 2014

**Decision Editor:** Barbara J. Bowers, PhD

## Abstract

**Purpose of the Study:** We explored how generativity and well-being merged in a group of childless older women: African and Hispanic Roman Catholic Religious Sisters, linking two minority identity characteristics.

**Design and Methods:** We qualitatively interviewed 8 Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP), by providing a framework for examining the range of the women's generativity—cultural spheres in which generativity is rooted and outlets for generativity.

**Results:** Early negative experiences, such as fleeing despotism in Haiti and Cuba and racism within the Catholic Church, occurred alongside positive experiences—families who stressed education, and Caucasian Religious who taught children of color. This became a foundation for the Sister's generative commitment.

**Implications:** Findings highlight that research gains from a phenomenological understanding of how religious faith promotes generative cognitions and emotions. Findings also reveal that the experiences of a subculture in society—African-American elderly women religious—add to theories and definitions of generativity.

**Keywords:** Generativity, Religious Sisters of color, Subcultures, Qualitative research

There is little material investigating generativity in the life choices of African-American older women, particular Roman Catholic Religious Sisters (Melia, 1999, 2000, 2002). This article links these two minority identity characteristics in exploring generativity in eight elderly Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP). They are a Roman Catholic religious order founded in the United States over 180 years ago, whose members are women of color. Our research questions are: *How are religious faith and ethnicity linked to generativity?* and, *What is the link between generativity and well-being in the Sisters' lives?*

## History

In the early 1800s, a community of Haitians, who were slaves of Catholics who had settled in Baltimore, worshiped

each Sunday in St. Mary's Seminary chapel. Reverend James Joubert, a Sulpician priest, worried about the Haitians' illiteracy and protecting "slave children" from "Protestant" influences (Davis, 1998; Davis & Phelps, 2003). He chose two young Haitian women, one of whom was Mary Elizabeth Lange, who was born in Cuba of Haitian parents and came to the United States in 1817. The two women had begun a free school in their home and considered consecrating their work to God. Father Joubert recruited two more teachers, and in 1828, the 4 women set up house with 11 girls as boarders and 9 day-students. The next year they took religious vows as OSP, the first religious order composed of Roman Catholic women of color (Batts, 1992; Davis, 1998). The first superior of the OSP was Mary Lange and its purpose was to educate girls of African descent. Female emigrants from Haiti, Cuba, and the Caribbean

joined the Order, and by 1910 the OSP opened schools and orphanages in Baltimore. They eventually founded schools in 18 states and by the 1950s there were over 300 OSP teaching and boarding African American children (Batts, 1992; Davis, 1995).

As one of three distinctly African-American religious orders of women, the Sisters sustained their community since inception despite general poverty (Davis, 1995, 1998). They endured racism and sexism from the public and in interactions with Roman Catholic Church hierarchy (Batts, 1992; Copeland, 1998). In the 19th century, many bishops suggested there was no need for Sisters of color in America, or for poor black children to become educated (Copeland, 1996). Philadelphia's Redemptorist priest John Neumann and Mother Katherine Drexel disagreed. They encouraged the OSP's work by providing the struggling order with funds (Batts, 1992).

### Black Catholicism

Catholicism, as a universal religion, reflects believers' culture, and echoes ethnic backgrounds and communal histories (Davis, 1998). Although black Americans traditionally were members of Protestant denominations, black Catholics were present in America since the 17th century (Craughwell, 2012). Their history reveals origins in Ethiopia, journeying into Haiti, Cuba, and the Caribbean Islands due to slavery, and continuing into the United States from the time of colonists' earliest settlements (Hayes, 1998).

In the 19th century, the OSP constructed a paradoxical American identity. They established a religious order despite hostility from Catholic hierarchy (Davis, 1998). They interpreted the Gospel with a preferential option for the poor (Batts, 1992) which foreshadowed 20th-century scriptural interpretation condemning antisemitism, genocide, and racism (Bonhoeffer, 1963; Cone, 1970; Gutierrez, 1988). They provided education to female children of color during an era of sanctioned slavery. Their Order began while some religious orders owned slaves and Catholic Bishops remained silent on the subject of slavery (Craughwell, 2012; Curran, 1999). The OSP constructed an American identity with a commitment to God, ethnic roots, and the people they served. Today, they continue a tradition of service in education, research, pastoral, and mission work (OSP website).

### Generativity

When Erikson defined generativity in 1963 as "mature individuals' interest in guiding the next generation," his reference group was narrow; he did not include celibate clergy persons in his psychosocial model (Erikson, 1963). Erikson noted that generativity was typically achieved through parenthood, particularly for women. Since that time, research has shown that for childless *and* childless elderly, generative impulses are shaped by cultural mores, have a broad

scope (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991; Alexander et al., 1992; Kotre, 1984; McAdams, 1990; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Rubinstein, 1987, 2014), and are stimulated in childhood and adolescence (Melia, 1999). Older adults whose life stories reveal generative concern for social causes developed their commitment early in life (McAdams, St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Elders demonstrated a wide range of generative attitudes and behaviors. Some physically cared for ill, unrelated peers; due to increased longevity, other elders were caring for the prior generation, such as parents (Black, Santanello, & Caruso, 2014). Rubinstein, in noting decades of interviewing elders, acknowledged the wide range of generative attitudes and behaviors elders illustrated with kin and non-kin, and with persons from previous, current, and future generations. He defined generativity as "one orientation in which people closely connect with others through time" (Rubinstein, Girling, de Medeiros, Brazda, & Hannum, 2014). Rubinstein (2014), echoing Erikson, also noted that "stagnation" is not generative, nor is narcissism.

Despite the scope of research on generativity, there is scant research on the generative attitudes and behaviors of African-American elders. The historical experiences of African-Americans, particularly suffering through racism, engendered concern for the African-American community that "must be passed down five generations." Elders recalled roots in Africa, slavery, upheld African-American ancestors and heroes, and taught the young what they endured in the 20th century. Elders thus bequeathed a legacy of self-insight and continuity; they became the center triptych for ancestors that came before them and the youngsters that succeed them (Black, Groce, & Harmon, 2011, pp. 200–201).

Feminist theory explored women's generativity through their activism from the local to the international level (Cole & Stewart, 1996). African-American feminist theory showed that African-American women engage in activist works that directly aid their communities (Harding, 1991; Hope, 2010). MacDermid, Franz, and De Reus (1998) illustrated Mother Teresa's one-on-one generative expression with the dying poor in India as an exemplar of generativity, but few studies explored issues of generativity with Religious Sisters (Magee, 1987; Melia, 1999, 2000). Melia reported that "highly generative" Caucasian sisters saw examples of generativity arising out of religious belief in their parents and teachers that promoted patterns of generative behavior throughout life. Her study supported research that showed life satisfaction in old age emerged from an ongoing desire to serve others.

Our study provided a framework to examine a range of women's generativity (Rubinstein et al., 2014). We named four cultural spheres in which individual generative actions and cognitions are rooted: (a) history; (b) family; (c) individual characteristics and, (d) manner of relating. Regarding the Sisters, their family history and history of the OSP community was fertile ground in which individual characteristics and manners of relating to others grew.

The cultural spheres framed the four outlets for the Sisters' day-to-day generative concern. Our interest centered on the Sisters as elderly, voluntarily childless, and women of color who articulated the effects of life choices on present day life.

## Research Methods

### Data Collection

This article emerged from an NIA-funded project, "Generativity and Lifestyles of Older Women" (GLOW, R01-AG03061-01A1). It investigated the lives of childless and childless older women ( $N = 200$ ) and their generative attitudes and behaviors in later life. Interviews began in 2009 and ended in 2012. We recruited women through newspaper ads, flyers posted in senior centers, and word of mouth. After being screened as cognitively intact, they were enrolled in the study and a date, time, and place were set for the first (of three) private interviews at respondent's convenience. The Sisters were interviewed in the convent, either in private rooms or in quiet areas within a general room. Each interview session lasted approximately 2 hr in three sessions for a total of approximately 6 hr with each Sister. The University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) IRB approved the ethical conduct of our project. Interviewers gained consent from each Sister at the start of her first interview with a letter of informed consent, which she read and signed. We digitally recorded all interviews with respondents' permission. At the first interview, we collected the Sisters' demographic information and life story. In the second interview, we explored the four outlets of generativity: people, groups, things, and activities under the larger rubric of spheres of generativity: historical, familial, individual, and relational. The third interview queried Sisters about the choice to be childless, and current experiences of childlessness.

Data collected for each sister included: formal ethnographic interviews using an interview guide we created to direct inquiry; targeted and tailored questions on specific topics that develop in reaction to specific responses of informants to interview questions; social network mapping; informal conversations; interviewer field notes and notes created in team meetings. Ethnographic interviews focus on narrative and story-telling, themes, and on language and specific utterances as important forms of communication and inquiry. Interviews focus particularly on the inner meaning and lived experience of informants, usually referred to as the "emic" perspective (Spradley, 1979).

### Data Analyses

We note that data analysis begins with the first interaction with informant. It occurs simultaneously with data collection. After each interview was completed, the audio file was transcribed in text format. Transcripts were de-identified and entered into the qualitative data management system

*Atlas.ti*, for later coding and analyses. We coded entire transcripts searching for language or accounts related to our "general topics" which were: generativity, childlessness, religious sister of color, and faith in relation to generativity. We also coded for salient cognitions, emotions, or actions that were unique to each of the Sisters, and those that the Sisters seemed to share. We also coded for narrative accounts related to the framework we used—the spheres and outlets of generativity. We developed approximately 30 codes related to both generativity and childlessness. Other codes that were salient in the Sisters' transcripts related to their vocation, continuing commitment to God and the OSP, family, ethnicity, field of study, and activities. The first author created individual case studies by analyzing in-depth, each Sister's case materials. This includes immersion in the entire set of data for each individual: the recorded interview, the transcript, and all related field notes (Yin, 2003). In anthropological research, field notes emerge from a number of sources: description of informant's environment, including neighborhood and dwelling, informant's demeanor and interaction with interviewer. Field notes also are based on interviewers' notes about how a respondent answers or is silent in response to questions. Field notes may spring from a particular interview or group of interviews in which the researcher embarks on a new field of inquiry that is important to the research and should be addressed in remaining interviews. Field notes also pertain to notes taken during team meetings in which a case is discussed. Each team member's opinion of the case or cases, based on his/her area of study, expertise, experience, become part of the general field notes for the case or cases discussed.

The process of immersion reflects a kind of funneling. From the entirety of the data, we seek themes, metaphors, characters, plots, and repeated ideas or notions that clarify and reify a theme. In the case of generativity and childlessness, we used follow-up questions during the interview to explicate a respondent's answer concerning these subjects. After immersion in the data, the research team came to a consensus concerning interpretation of the data. From this deep and lengthy investigation, a case study is constructed.

## Findings

We introduce each Sister in Table 1, noting her age, tenure, self-rated health, and expressive quote.

We organized Sisters' responses to interview questions according to the framework developed in our initial proposal and applied in the interview schedule: the four spheres and four outlets for generativity. Each Sister's narrative disclosed consistency regarding their early decisions to become a Religious Sister. Most Sisters entered the order after high school graduation; advanced education was funded by the order (along with university scholarships). They received degrees (BA, MA, MS, and PhD) in subjects where the OSP most needed teachers (e.g., in science) or in subjects that advanced leadership skills (e.g., canon law).

**Table 1.** Name, Age, Years as OSP, Self-Rated Health, and Representative Quote of Sisters Interviewed

Name	Age	Tenure	Self-rated health	Representative quote
Sister Rita	79	60	Very good Heart attack, stroke, bad eyes	“When I’m not teaching in the city I miss the fussin’ and the cussin’ and the bullet shots.” (laughter)
Sister Margo	84	67	Fair Recent pneumonia	“I’m happy I could teach adults practical skills in order to get jobs.”
Sister Camille	90	70	Fair Hypertension; bone disease	“My parents always taught us, especially regarding race that we shouldn’t belittle anybody and we shouldn’t accept that from anybody.”
Sister Selena	94	75	Very good Physical struggles	“I think my childhood determined my whole life.”
Sister Patrice	84	66	Less than fair Pain, no stamina, going deaf	“The person I most admire was a Sister who was gracious in defeat.”
Sister Giselle	81	63	Very poor Life long illnesses	“Right now I tell my health, ‘You don’t rule me; I rule me!’ I don’t give in to myself.”
Sister Ann	82	64	Good Pain; heart trouble	“I want the story of the OSP to be told.”
Sister Maria	85	67	Excellent Hypertension; glaucoma	“If I had biological children I would have five or ten. Now I have hundreds.”

## The Cultural Spheres

### Historical and Familial (Spheres)

#### Past Generations

The Sisters’ family and ethnic histories reveal extremes of experiences. Segregation, racism, and grandparents’ memories of slavery occurred alongside loving families and within classrooms taught by Caucasian Sisters. We explored the Sisters’ history by asking questions such as: “When did you know you had a vocation?,” “How would you describe your ethnicity?,” and “Do you represent a particular cultural, family, or religious tradition?” Sister Rita answered these questions definitively.

Sister Rita, 79 years old, has taught myriad grades, ages, and subjects during her 60 years as an OSP. She described her ethnicity as “African-American. I have a heritage in French and Haitian. In the French Revolution my people had to flee Haiti. I speak Creole.” She reported her health as “very good” despite having had a recent heart attack and stroke. When asked about her vocation, she said: “I was 5 years old. After school I put my dolls out and taught them what Sister taught us. I wanted to be like her. I’d put on a little veil my mother made me and teach my little doll children.”

The Sisters reported they had been inspired by parents and past generations of nuns to enter religious life. One sister commented, “You have to see that behavior to want to do it.”

Sister Margo, aged 84, held teaching and administrative positions throughout 67 years as an OSP, and continues to do pastoral work at a nearby church. When asked about her vocation, she recalled:

I was inspired by the nuns that taught us. I decided in high school to join that Community. I contacted them

after graduation. They said they couldn’t take me. This was 1944; there was lots of prejudice.

Sister Margo disclosed a consistent irony in the Sisters’ vocation narratives: they were inspired to join religious orders that were closed to “colored” women.

They never acted prejudiced. So when they refused me I was devastated. But I was passionate about entering religious life so nothing stopped me. Later I met an OSP. She wrote an introductory letter for me, and I got one back. I came here in 1944.

Some Sisters revealed childhoods set in revolutionary political environments. Sister Ann, 82 years old, has been an OSP for 64 years. She left Cuba for Florida in 1961, and traveled by bus to the OSP convent in Washington, DC.

I sat behind the driver. I noticed colored people went to the back of the bus. The driver finally gets up, grabbed my arm and pushed me to the back. I heard about discrimination but not about how bad. The colored people put their heads down. At the station, I called the Sisters; they came for me. I prayed not to hate white people.

Sister Ann continued: “After that I cry a lot. And I never forget it. In Cuba it was bad; Castro was a liar. But we didn’t have this type of discrimination in Cuba. In buses you can sit anywhere.”

Sister Selena, 95 years old, was an OSP for 75 years. She described her health as “very good,” and her ethnicity as: “Biracial. My mother was German; my father African-American. My father’s parents were former slaves. They had 16 children. My grandmother said, ‘Don’t ask Grandfather about slavery’. It was too painful.”



Sister Camille also recalled a distant past that was both painful and empowering. At 90 years old, she has been a member of the OSP for “almost 70 years.” She shared the history of her family name:

We were the Kriegs. The Irish Kriegs and African-American Kriegs intermarried. My father owned an estate that belonged to slave owners. We had to furnish the deed or hand it over to the city. We never had a deed! My dad said he would burn it down before giving it up. I was four when we headed west. After we left he set it on fire and hid. When he joined the family we changed our name to Craig.

Sister Camille “never returned to that Southern city” because her father’s “crime was still on the books.” When asked, “Who did you most admire as a child?” Sister Camille replied, “Some older people we lived near had been slaves but they were without bitterness. They were imbued with faith. That was a blessing—to see that kind of faith.”

Like Sister Camille, Sister Patrice, 84 years old and an OSP for 66 years, recounted family stories that were bequeathed from her grandmother:

My maternal great grandmother was a slave on a tobacco plantation. She was 8 and couldn’t pick fast enough; the overseer slashed her wrist with his whip. She ran to the big house; the lady kept her there, and taught her to read. That began my family going from field to house and getting an education. That’s a record in my brain. That’s your key out of this.

The Sisters were asked if they felt they represented a cultural, ethnic, or religious tradition. This was the response of Sister Maria, 85 years old and an OSP for 67 years:

I represent the OSP well. I feel strongly about being a Cuban American. I relate well to African Americans because I’m part of the African race. I am a black Hispanic Cuban.

The Sisters’ generativity was sown in their family and religious histories. In responding to questions about faith and culture, the Sisters shared experiences of ancestors, neighbors, the foundress of the OSP, Sister Lange. The Sisters followed the path begun by these models, and left their own footsteps for future generations to follow.

### Future Generations

The Sisters talked about the future generations in their extended families living in Cuba, Haiti, or distant American states. The Sisters enjoyed being asked to “come home” although age, declining health, and little income made the return difficult. Sister Giselle, when asked if she felt part of family traditions that continue at home, described familial responsibility to future generations:

One niece was doing things she shouldn’t. The family got together and said, “She has to go to another school because we’re losing her.” When she graduated from the other school she was different. My parents didn’t have money to send us to school. An aunt gave it. It was decided as a family.

Similarly, Sister Rita described how she reminded her nieces and nephews of the family’s stake in their education. “I told my niece, who’s 32 and sarcastic, ‘You got an education because the family got together to send you to college’. I preach to all of them (laughter).”

The Sisters’ conceptions of family included other OSP. We asked Sister Patrice with whom she spends holidays: “I prefer to stay with my community. I have my joy here.” Sister Maria answered the same question: “I most enjoy being in my convent. I love my routines.” The Sisters seemed to thrive on routine, and on being accountable for their time and putting it to good purpose. For the Sisters, days were organized into time for daily Mass, community meals, outside ministry, and time alone to work on projects or “private time with the Lord.”

## Individual and Relational (Spheres)

### Self-evaluation

Sisters’ responses to questions such as: *What was your most important life accomplishment?* evoked self-evaluation and assessment as an OSP whose “inner responsibility” was to be useful to the world. Self-evaluation elicited remarks about age, illness, and work yet undone. The Sisters’ primary work was to nourish and sustain those most in need. Credit for achievements was given to God. When Sister Margo was asked about important life accomplishments, she described “reaching thousands of students”:

My ability to give young people a sense of their own value. They are often not aware of their potential. I loved teaching the seminarians in Africa because they were diligent about learning. In Africa, there is disparity between those who get an education and those who can’t.

When Sister Selena was asked the same question, she replied:

To be a member of this community and help those who need it. In New Orleans I met Cuban people with no money but happy to leave Castro and Communism. People came from Jamaica and were illegal. I was a vice-principal in Miami. I said, “Get the children in, but don’t put names in the book.”

Sister Selena’s response echoed Sister Camille’s memory of her father setting their farm on fire. Both accounts showed pride in rejecting man-made laws and following a “higher” law of social justice. Many Sisters, when asked about accomplishments, recalled their responsibilities as an OSP. Sister Patrice, for instance, talked about her vocation in light of her hearing problems.

I taught first grade through college. Children started picking up on my hearing problems. Then I went on mission appeals, gave retreats. I promoted Mother Lange's canonization. I had to be relieved because of situations where I could not hear. I worked in the library; I could smile at kids or look ugly at them. I got my new assignment this week—"Your assignment is ministry of prayer." I don't minimize prayer. I send out prayer booklets which spreads the Gospel. I'm not ready to be finished, but when I'm finished what God put me here to do, He'll call me home. I'm ready to go.

Sister Maria echoed Sister Patrice. She reported that "living your life as an educator, you change people's lives. But I'm 85. I've been in the convent 67 years. I have a sense of accomplishment, completion, satisfaction. I'm where I want to be." And when Sister Selena was asked about accomplishments in the last 5 years, she smiled. "I haven't done much. I've learned how to live with old age. That's an accomplishment." This accomplishment seems to mean "acceptance of limitations"—like Sister Patrice's hearing loss—that prompts the Sisters to "let go" of things they still "love to do."

Many Sisters discussed the Order's historical progress when naming accomplishments. When Sister Patrice was asked about an important accomplishment of the last 5 years, she said, "Promoting Mother Lange's canonization; bringing it to the level [of attention] we did." Regarding life accomplishments, she continued: "I feel good about what God has used me for in education, religious instruction, friendships." Sister Rita also expressed a sense of pride around life accomplishments: "The school we started in 1829 was closed in the 1970s and we worked to reopen it. We did and it's still open. That was a big historical thing. And we accepted boys. No boys in over 100 years." The Sisters also reported that some of their accomplishments were yet to occur.

## The Four Foci

### Things

We named four outlets of generativity: people, groups, things, and activities. Perhaps because they had taken a vow of poverty, and adhered to the beatitude that blesses "the poor in spirit," "things" emerged as least important in Sisters' narratives. Sisters received a small monthly stipend and were permitted to keep money given as gifts. Healthcare and other necessities were paid for by the community.

When Sister Rita was asked about personal items: "Have you decided who will receive your possessions?" she replied: "At 79 I'm not going to be around too long; I've given a lot away." Similarly, when Sister Patrice was asked what advice she would put in a time capsule to be opened in 100 years, her answer illustrated a common response:

Try to avoid amassing a lot of stuff. Don't hold on unnecessarily. One of the graces that I thank God for is

when I leave an assignment, I don't hold on. I let it go.

Let things go.

Sister Selena explained the Sisters' attitudes toward "letting go": "We try not to get too attached or to accumulate things. At 95 you know you're going to be leaving it soon." Sister Giselle expressed a similar sense of finitude. "God takes you when God wants. So, first you clear out your head and you work from there." Sister Ann spoke of one "very important thing" in the Sisters' lives.

We love this whole place [the convent]. We were able to teach boys and girls here. We built it on aprons, we say, because we sold aprons to earn money to build this house.

The Sisters viewed the convent as a repository of memories, prayers, goals, and ethic of "hard work" and "letting go" that would be bequeathed to future generations of nuns and students.

### Activities

The Sisters held various jobs as educators, administrators, hospice and pastoral counselors, infirmarians, and librarians, along with the sundry tasks involved in ministry. Their schedules did not lessen because of age or ill health and when asked about retirement, one sister commented: "We don't retire; we work until we drop." In fact, the Sisters' work seemed vital to their generativity. Sister Giselle, for instance, "never allowed very poor health" to stand in the way of her goals. She described a particular activity that brought "personal meaning" and "broadened [her] life."

I belong to a group that came together with an Afrocentric perspective for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. I admire the woman who founded it. It took courage in the 1960s. Most African-American priests and nuns are in Caucasian orders. They felt they didn't have support. I started to study African-American history. I write poetry.

Sister Margo described one of her goals "if I ever retire." "I want to work in the Reading Center." She explained why. "An 88 year old man brought his great grandchild to our Child Development Center, then came to our Reading Center to learn to read. I want to help someone like that."

Sister Rita currently writes articles about Black Catholic history and teaches "for fun. Every year different senior centers ask me to do a Mardi Gras. I do a funeral with authentic New Orleans jazz. Some [participants] were bent over, but when the music started everybody got up and danced." She also mentioned a beloved Christmas tradition:

I collect Christmas cards for people who want to send cards but can't afford them. I collect children's clothing for people with grandchildren who can't afford to buy clothes. Sometimes I give things just for fun. One Christmas I gave every family I knew a tin of popcorn,

a gift certificate to Blockbuster, and 2 six-packs of beer. They loved it! I fix up old computers and give them away.

Like several Sisters, Sister Patrice said that she “struggles” with “where I am physically.” Yet her health problems do not interfere with her desire to be generative. “As long as I’m on ten toes I know I’m not dead. God hasn’t called me home yet, so there’s still something I can do.”

### Childlessness

Childlessness has been discussed as a contrast to generativity and a possible source of regret in old age (Alexander et al., 1992; May, 1995). We asked the Sisters about the advantages, disadvantages, or regrets about childlessness, who or what would outlive them, and who would remember them after they passed. We asked Sister Rita if she ever felt at a disadvantage because of not having children:

I knew that if I became a nun I wouldn’t have a family, so, no. It was one or the other. If I had not entered the convent, I was going to get my Ph.D. When you’re childless people say, “Who will care for you when you’re old?” No. *That’s not the purpose of having children.* [authors’ italics]

Sister Giselle looked at the question of childlessness in another way, describing a sense of devotion to *all* children and to their future:

I did not have physical children, but I have hundreds of children. It’s more to having children than the physical. I have younger friends; they are my children. I pray about them, worry when they don’t call. But there is no possessiveness in my attachment to them.

When asked about regrets concerning childlessness, Sister Maria joined childlessness and her generativity toward younger nuns. She said she had “dreamed of children” when young:

Then I fell in love with the Lord. It wasn’t difficult because I had an interior conviction that was for me. Now we have three Nigerian Sisters and I’ve taken to them. I counsel them, love them. They call me mother but I’m not trying to be their mother. They count on me to be there for them; that’s because of the adjustment. We’re all Africans, but it’s a different culture than African-American.

Sister Maria’s behavior with the Nigerian Sisters was not based on maternal need, but on understanding the difficulties in learning the ethos of an American convent, despite sharing the same faith.

When Sister Selena was asked if she thought of marriage and children, she said: “It wasn’t my calling. I dated, but it was never serious.” When asked if she regretted not having children, Sister laughed.

When you teach in a boarding school you have a maternal attitude towards the children; I’m sure I acted like a mother to them. I don’t think of myself as childless except that I know I’m not a parent.

Sister Giselle had this response to the same question: “I wanted to be a nun and nuns don’t have children.” Thus, the Sisters eliminated biological generativity when they chose something they wanted more—the religious life. This act of choice is significant in having a sense of satisfaction in later life (Feldman, 1981).

### Generativity

The Sisters’ general life path and specific goals were realized through generative outlets. Desire for education came from the “strong foundation” of families and teachers, and awareness that to give knowledge they must own it themselves. Generativity was a by-product of their experiences and choices *throughout* life, rather than a conflicted stage needing resolution in mid-life. When asked what aspects of her life will outlive her, Sister Maria projected a sense of continuity:

I have 14 years to go to be a centenarian. My community will be around after that. We’re upbeat now. More girls are entering and your future is your new members.

When asked the same question, Sister Ann also mentioned the Community’s future: “We have sisters in Costa Rica, Africa, and Santo Domingo.” Sister Rita agreed. “My Community and my history will outlive me. And doing things to help my Community: teaching, fundraising.” When Sister Rita was asked if she wondered if someone would remember her when she was gone, she replied, “. That doesn’t even come to my mind.” Sister Patrice answered the question about being remembered this way:

I hope the children in my family remember me, and the people I taught and worked with. But eventually I will be forgotten and it’s okay. If I have done good, then the good will live on in others. And they will do good to others and that’s how it continues. God will take care of the remembering.

Being “remembered” was not a priority with the Sisters. When Sister Ann was asked this question, she said: “I want to be remembered as a human being who had love for other human beings.” And Sister Margo offered this advice to future generations: “Work hard to advance as citizens in this world and in your faith. But realize there’s another world we go to so be prepared in both areas.” Just as Sister’s advice linked her generation of Sisters with those who followed, it also revealed that the breadth of her generativity included this world *and* the next.

### Discussion

This paper explored a way in which generativity is expressed by a particular cohort, cultural, and religious group: eight

Oblate Sisters' of Providence. Their answers to our internal questions: *How are religious faith and ethnicity linked to generativity?* and, *What is the link between generativity and well-being in the Sister's lives?* revealed that research can gain an emic understanding of generativity from: (a) particular groups, in this case Religious Sisters of color and, (b) a phenomenological understanding of how religious faith promotes highly generative cognitions and emotions. The Sisters' reported that the models for living a productive life were their inter-racial and inter-ethnic parents, and Caucasian Religious who "dedicated their lives and work to teaching children of color" (Sister Patrice). Education was the keystone on which the Sisters' goals—honing skills with academic learning, educating the marginalized, and using talents to serve God through serving others—were built. Generativity was constructed into the meaning and purpose of their lives.

The Sisters were raised and developed at an historical time when they confronted the double assault of racism and sexism. The period between 1954 and 1968 marked great changes in American Society regarding race relations (Copeland, 1996; Davis, 1998). Change also "blew open the doors" of the Roman Catholic Church in 1962 with Vatican II (Weigel, 2012). Requests came from Bishops throughout the country for the Sisters we interviewed to integrate Catholic schools in the South (Sister Rita). From the liberation of Black consciousness sprang councils and conferences for Black Catholic Religious that some of the Sisters attended. Discussion of the Sisters' generativity in old age must be tied to the cultural and political events of this era that raised awareness about the link between their faith and ethnicity (Copeland, 1996) that spurred creative growth (Sister Giselle).

In later life, the Sisters recognized that the work they did for little or no pay was now being done by lay persons. The Sisters applauded "the young people" who work with the poor and disenfranchised. Sister Camille commented: "Young people have opportunities to do public service for their livelihood. But that would be the difference (between us). I've been doing the same work but not for the same reason." Perhaps this "different reason" prompts the Sisters to work into their eighth and ninth decades despite health problems. In human services, where problems of poverty, illness, and victimization are treated but not cured, staff burn-out is common. The Sisters have worked throughout their lives in this arena and plan to work "until they drop." Their zeal does not always achieve a favorable outcome, nor are community goals always reached. For instance, Sister Patrice noted that work on behalf of Mother Lange's canonization "is not successful." She added, "But God doesn't ask for success, God asks us to do the best we can."

All Sisters interviewed, even those with severe health issues, were enthusiastic about achieving their goals. Some were taking a class or teaching a course in subjects such as African-American History or the History of Jazz. Other Sisters were learning new crafts; one Sister "loves to sew,"

and sells items to make money for the convent's upkeep. Some Sisters were communicating their life experiences by writing a book of prayers or poetry, or the history of the OSP. When asked about her favorite activity currently, Sister Patrice said, "Being, just being," revealing a fundamental component of generativity as a belief in life itself.

The Sisters understood they may not have enough time left to accomplish their goals. Sister Giselle, when asked about experiences of loss, said, "I feel sad, but we're here just for a minute. You're never really gone because your spirit lives on." Despite being here for "just a minute," each minute seemed significant to the Sisters. All of them have taken part in forecasting their Community's "Strategic Plan for the Next Ten Years."

In light of the lives and work of the OSP, perhaps Fehrenbach's (2006) notion that "generativity is directed at the soul, at bringing the soul to life" is appropriate here. When young, the Sisters' parents and teachers realized that nurturing body, mind, and soul was crucial to becoming a generative adult. Thus, the Sisters' generativity began decades before mid-life, usually in childhood. Our research echoes Melia's (1999, 2000, 2002) work on Caucasian Religious Sisters, as well as her question about whether the "experiences of a subculture in society—elder women religious—have relevance to the ongoing theoretical debate about generativity." Like Melia's Religious Sisters, the OSP meet at the nexus of this debate as exemplars of generative lives, and evoke thought on current gerontological topics: self-rated health as predicting longevity; rapidly changing subcultures, inclusion of understudied populations in research, and the entwining of cultural, political, and social issues (Aldwin & Gilmer, 2013; Cohen, 2000; Gelder, 2007) with faith in God and in life itself, perhaps placing their generativity in the realm of a spiritual activism or social justice.

Key cultural ideas have been tied to generativity, such as beliefs about the nature of the self, the meaning of death (Alexander et al., 1991), the terror of annihilation, and despair over human "littleness" (Becker, 1973). For the OSP, human "littleness" through poverty, humility, and routine brought contentment (Bryant, 2003). Being remembered had little importance because, as Sister Patrice said, "God will take care of the remembering." The Sisters' legacy is a lesson on how to live life well, well into old age. The Sisters overcame the finite boundaries of the self as they: (a) lived life in service of what is immeasurably bigger than the self; (b) experienced gratitude for every second of each life stage and, (c) recognized that finite boundaries are permeable due to belief in an afterlife.

Some persons might speculate that certain persons, such as the Religious Sisters discussed in this article, and social workers, teachers, and counselors, for example, might belong to "generative professions." We suggest that persons in any profession may be highly generative. Phenomenological studies, where persons disclose the meaning of generativity, are crucial to research on this



subject. We hope that future studies will investigate the unique ways that elders are generative whether or not they are parents or in “generative professions.”

## Funding

The research was supported by the National Institute on Aging (R01AG030614). We are extremely grateful to NIA for its support of our research. We additionally thank the National Institutes of Health for its current postdoctoral fellowship support of Susan M. Hannum (T32 CA009314).

## Acknowledgments

The data discussed in this paper were gathered in a research project called, “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Women” (R. Rubinstein and K. De Medeiros, PIs).

## References

- Aldwin, C., & Gilmer, D. (2013). *Health, illness, and optimal aging: Biological and psychosocial perspectives*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Alexander, B., Rubinstein, R., Goodman, M., & Luborsky, M. (1991). Generativity in cultural context: The self, death and immortality as experienced by older American women. *Ageing and Society*, 11, 417–442.
- Alexander, B., Rubinstein, R., Goodman, M., Luborsky, M., Rubinstein, R., Goodman, M., & Luborsky, M. (1992). A path not taken: A cultural analysis of regrets and childlessness in the lives of older women. *The Gerontologist*, 32, 616–626.
- Batts, D. (1992). *Persons of color and religious at the same time*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Black, H. K., Groce, J., & Harmon, C. (2011). *From zero to eighty: Narratives of racism, suffering, survival, and transformation*. Bloomington, IN: IUiverse.
- Black, H. K., Santanello, H. R., & Caruso, C. J. (2014). Managing threats against control in old age: A narrative inquiry. *Nursing Research*, 62, 430–437.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (1963). *The cost of discipleship*. New York: Scribner.
- Bryant, S. (2003). Physical, psychological and social adaptation of African-American nuns to their religious communities as they age: Implications for aging in place. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 14, 35–54.
- Cohen, G. (2000). *The creative age*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher.
- Cole, E. R., & Stewart, A. J. (1996). Meanings of political participation among black and white women: Political identity and social responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 130–140.
- Cone, J. (1970). *A Black theology of liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Copeland, M. S. (1996). A cadre of women Religious committed to Black liberation: The National Black Sisters' Conference. *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 14, 123–144.
- Copeland, M. S. (1998). Method in emerging black Catholic theology. In D. L. Hayes & C. Davis (Eds.), *Taking down our harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (pp. 1–14). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Craughwell, T. J. (2012, February 5). History of African-American Catholics. *OSV Newsweekly*, pp. 7–12.
- Curran, R. E. (1999). Splendid poverty: Jesuit slave holding in Maryland, 1805–1838. In R. M. Miller & J. L. Vakelyn (Eds.), *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on church and culture* (pp. 125–146). Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Davis, C. (1995). *The history of Black Catholics in the United States*. New York: Crossroad.
- Davis, C. (1998). God of our weary years: Black Catholics in American Catholic History. In D. L. Hayes & C. Davis (Eds.), *Taking down our harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (pp. 17–46). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Davis, C., & Phelps, J. (2003). *Stamped with the image of God: African Americans as God's image in black*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Fehrenbach, P. (2006). *Soul and self: Parallels between spiritual and psychological growth*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Feldman, H. (1981). A comparison of intentional parents and intentionally childless couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43, 593–600.
- Gelder, K. (2007). *Subcultures: Cultural histories and social practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Gutierrez, G. (1988). *A theology of liberation. Revised edition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Harding, V. (1991). Community as a liberating theme in civil rights history. In A. L. Robinson & P. Sullivan (Eds.), *New directions in civil rights studies* (pp. 17–29). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Hayes, D. L. (1998). Introduction. In D. L. Hayes & C. Davis (Eds.), *Taking down our harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (pp. 1–14). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Hope, S. (2010). *Relationships Between Race, Generativity, Activist Identification, and Activism for Midlife Women*. (Unpublished thesis). University of Michigan.
- Kotre, J. (1984). *Outliving the self: Generativity and the interpretation of lives*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- MacDermid, S., Franz, C. E., & De Reus, L. A. (1998). Adult character: Agency, communion, insight, and the expression of generativity in mid-life adults. In A. Colby, J. B. James, & D. Hart (Eds.), *Competence and character through life* (pp. 205–229). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Magee, J. J. (1987). Determining predictors of life satisfaction among retired nun: Report from a pilot project. *Journal of Religion & Aging*, 4, 39–49.
- May, E. T. (1995). *Barren in the promised land: Childlessness and the pursuit of happiness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (1990). Unity and purpose in human lives: The emergence of identity as a life story In A. J. Robain, R. A. Zucker, R. A. Emmons & S. Frank (Eds.), *Studying persons and lives* (pp. 128–200). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- McAdams, D. P., & de St. Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62, 1003–1015.
- McAdams, D. P., St. Aubin, E. D., & Logan, R. L. (1993). Generativity among young, midlife, and older adults. *Psychology and Aging*, 8, 221–230.

- Melia, S. P. (1999). Continuity in the lives of elder Catholic women religious. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *46*, 175–189.
- Melia, S. P. (2000). Generativity in the lives of elder catholic women religious. In T. J. Owens (Ed.), *Self and identity through the life course in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 119–141). *Advances in life course research*, *5*.
- Melia, S. P. (2002). Solitude and prayer in the late lives of elder Catholic women religious. Activity, withdrawal, or transcendence? *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, *13*, 47–63.
- Rubinstein, R. L. (1987). Childless elderly: Theoretical perspectives and practical concerns. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, *2*, 1–14.
- Rubinstein, R. L. (2014). *Personal correspondence*, January 15.
- Rubinstein, R. L., Girling, L., de Medeiros, K., Brazda, M., & Hannum, S. (2014). Extending the framework of generativity theory through research: A qualitative study. *The Gerontologist*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnu009
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Weigel, G. (2012, October 10). Vatican II's Golden Anniversary. *First Things*.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.