

The Effect of Suffering on Generativity: Accounts of Elderly African American Men

Helen K. Black¹ and Robert L. Rubinstein²

¹Jefferson Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health (CARAH), Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

²Department of Sociology and Anthropology and Doctoral Program in Gerontology, University of Maryland, College Park.

Background. This article focuses on attitudes to and behaviors of generativity in 6 older African American (AA) men.

Methods. Data on generativity emerged from in-depth qualitative research that explored experiences of suffering in community-dwelling persons aged 80 years and over.

Results. For these AA men, experiences of racism were salient in stories of suffering, and suffering was intricately related to attitudes and behaviors of generativity. We placed men's narratives, showing the link between suffering and generativity, in 3 categories: Generativity is rooted in (a) suffering and in empathy for suffering others, (b) experiences of redemption from suffering, and (c) religious belief that assuages suffering.

Conclusions. These AA men's generative behaviors were shaped by unique life experiences, including experiences of suffering. Bequeathing a legacy to succeeding generations was tied to suffering experiences, to the personal and communal identities that emerged from suffering, to the importance of inter- and intragenerational community, and to what men believed others needed from them.

Key Words: African American men—Generativity—Suffering.

ALTHOUGH generativity was originally explored as a psychological and developmental construct (Erikson, 1963), further research explored generativity as a cultural phenomenon (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991). Culturally, generative actions are context dependent and cannot be separated from personal identity factors, such as ethnicity and gender, and from social circumstances. The perceived needs of future generations also influence what an individual views as important to bequeath.

This article is based on in-depth interviews of six African American (AA) men who were part of a larger study that investigated events of suffering in community-dwelling adults age 80 years and over. Our contribution to the literature on generativity in elderly AA men, a group that has been understudied regarding a variety of lived experiences, shows that experiences of racism were prominent in their stories of suffering. We also explore the significance of macro and micro cultures in experiences of and redemption from suffering that brought about a particular type of generativity in AA men.

GENERATIVITY AND SUFFERING

The modern study of generativity derives from Erikson's (1963) theory of lifespan development, which contrasts generativity with stagnation as one of eight dichotomous stages that adults must psychodynamically address. Erikson initially defined generativity as "an interest in guiding the next generation" which was typically achieved through parenthood. More recent work by Kotre (1984) enlarged the scope of generativity by defining it as "a desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that outlive the self."

Our focus is on generativity shaped by cultural context and manifested in individuals. Peterson and Stewart (1996) suggest that generative attitudes have antecedents in persons' lives and are rooted in family and community ideals. For example, Wickremasinghe (2006) reported that Sri Lankan elders manifest generativity by disallowing their adult children to care for them, encouraging them to achieve their goals without encumbrance. The work of Rubinstein (1987), Goodman (1996), and Goodman, Black, and Rubinstein (1991) on North American childless elderly showed how some social customs marginalized older adults who never bore children, yet idealized childless elderly whose child(ren) predeceased them. In American culture, generativity is shaped through its embeddedness within individualism, which promotes a sense that one must make his or her mark on the world before death (Alexander et al., 1991).

Historical events influenced the individual and cohort development of elderly AA men. Born in the southern United States between World War I and the Depression, some AA men migrated to northeastern cities beginning prior to World War II to find employment (Davis, Grant, & Rowland, 1992). A localized and nationalized racism that was considered normative in most of the 20th century delineated AA men's choices about jobs, education, and careers. In this cohort, color ensured particular outcomes in life and lay at the core of individuals' negative experiences (Black, 2006).

Generativity in AA men is linked to how they internalized cultural standards of their day. Although the cumulative disadvantages of minority populations prevented achievements in many domains (Hannon, 2003; O'Neil,

1987; O'Rand, 1996), the mandate of individualism, which emphasized self-determination, appears to have held sway. For AA men, the cultural ideals of the larger society clashed with the inferior position into which society placed them. Masculinities, or attitudes and behaviors that are viewed as gender appropriate (Sabo & Gordon, 1995), compounded the stress of living in a segregated society. Suffering that resulted from cultural demands and social oppression produced a unique generativity in AA men of this cohort (Black & Rubinstein, 2000; Lawrence, 2006); the impetus toward generative expression occurred because of and despite suffering (Peterson & Stewart, 1996).

For these elderly AA men, coming to terms with a past in which racism was "normative" and masculinities were required but often thwarted produced several phenomena: (a) a singular perception of human nature and life situations (Paris, 1995), (b) a communal identity shared with other AA men (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001), (c) a relative definition of success that took opportunities and restrictions on opportunities into account (Roy & Lucas, 2006), and (d) a unique generativity that emerged in relation to experiences of suffering.

GENERATIVITY, SUFFERING, AND NARRATIVE

One way to find meaning in suffering is by constructing a personal biography. Included in a respondent's story is a reason for why suffering occurred, what was gained from the experience, and how suffering fit into the life as a whole (Frank, 1995; Rentsch, 1997). The wisdom gained from surviving despite suffering is shared through venues such as family stories, practical knowledge, and cultural and religious beliefs. Thus, the suffering narrative itself is considered generative and therapeutic (Blackwell, 2005; Schroots & Birren, 2002).

In suffering narratives, the self is placed in a broad context which acknowledges the link of multiple generations. Personal experiences are offered in a triptych, with ancestors and offspring on either side of the "center" self. The triptych shows the power of unity, the "dangerous memory" of oppressed peoples (Gutierrez, 1987), and the necessity of never forgetting the past. Providing care to living elders targets past and future generations with generative action (Crossley, 2000). Ancestors are acknowledged as the front line of the legacy, and younger generations witness parents' compassion and respect for elders.

GENERATIVITY, SUFFERING, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

An important aspect of African spirituality is survival theology (Berryman, 1987; Paris, 1995). The subject matter of survival theology concerns finding meaning in life in the midst of suffering; one of its tasks is to preserve life-affirming traditions in the community (Lehman, 1980). Survival theology reveals how humans participate in God's work in history by calling into question the economic, social, and

political order that oppresses and marginalizes certain peoples (Gutierrez, 1987; Paris). Practical consequences (redemption occurs in this world and the next) transform survival theology into a theology of hope (Chapman, 1980). Redemption is manifest through acts of "worldly" generativity (James, 1902; McAdams, 2006), such as working for justice in this life, and encouraging the passing on of African rituals, such as libations (Wilmore, 1980).

Witnessing and testifying to suffering and redemption perpetuate the oral tradition of AA spirituality (Pinn, 1995; Raboteau, 1980). Narrative accounts of suffering, redemption, and hope have historical and spiritual significance. Re-counting events of suffering dates back to at least the time of slavery (Cone, 1989; Karenga, 1989). Events of degradation became stories of deliverance by God (Pinn; Stewart, 1835, 1988). Accounts of suffering related to racism are resonant of an historical past and a redeemed future. They are oral documents in which God, the community, suffering, and redemption come together in human history. These multivocal narratives themselves are generative; they extend the self and AA tradition through time (Brandtstadter & Greve, 1994). Through narratives, elders honor ancestors and bequeath roles of repository and narrator of AA history to following generations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our research is situated on social constructionist theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which recognizes experiences such as suffering and generativity as culturally constructed concepts based on cultural meaning and an individual's context. Our research employs three frameworks that reflect social constructionist theory: The first is phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge, which focuses on how people understand and interpret everyday life (Rubinstein, 1992). The second is AA religious studies, which forges links among suffering, survival theology, and the significance of oral narratives in AA history (Pinn, 1995), and reveals how collective memories of oppression and hope inform survival theology and the identity of the AA community (Wilmore, 1989). The third is narrative theory, which demonstrates how individuals' identities emerge from the narrative construction of their lives (Fisher, 1984).

METHODS

Data Collection

The six men whose data form the basis for this article were included in the research study "The Meaning of Suffering in Later Life." In the parent study, data were collected from 120 elders in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area, including 12 AA men, through ethnographic interviews and informal conversation (Reissman, 1997) and were processed through audiotaping, transcription, coding,

and in-depth analysis. Because of space constraints, we used data from the first six AA men interviewed. All AA men showed the commonalities reflected in our themes. Our use of six cases to illustrate findings supports the case study method as a necessary and sufficient means of showing a phenomenon, such as generativity, in its depth (Flyvbjerg, 2006). To paraphrase Eysenck (1976), individual cases demonstrate our intent to learn intensely about a phenomenon. We note that respondents are identified by pseudonyms.

The research team consisted of the Principal Investigator of the project (second author), an anthropologist and gerontologist, and the Coinvestigator (first author and interviewer), a gerontologist and religionist. The team also included a full-time interviewer and transcriptionist who had experience using methods of qualitative research and a part-time interviewer and transcriptionist who was trained in qualitative research methods when hired.

When potential respondents called to request participation in the study, they were told the subject matter, goals, and format of the interview. They were informed that several topics including age, ethnicity, gender, and health (among others) would be explored in relation to suffering and that they could refuse to participate or cease participating at any time before or during the interview.

As a white woman, the first author approached each respondent anxious to learn from his life and narrative, recognizing each man as the expert on the “truth” of his life. Each respondent approached me as though he were educating me about the story of his life and issues discussed. All respondents had private interviews in their homes that lasted approximately 2 hr each in three sessions for a total of approximately 6 hr. The main tool of the study was the interview guide, which included open-ended questions that spanned three sessions. At the beginning of the first interview, respondents reviewed and signed Thomas Jefferson University’s Institutional Review Board letter of informed consent. The first interview session began with a request to hear the life story. The second interview asked specific questions about suffering. The third session discussed men’s futures.

Data Analysis

After interviews were transcribed, they were analysed using standard methods of qualitative research. This method includes data review, which asks the broad question, “What is in the data?” The next step is large level sorting of each transcript, which codes for themes and topics intraindividually (Mischler, 1986; Silverman, 2001). Appropriateness of large-level codes was discussed in weekly meetings among the team. A fine-grained analysis was also accomplished, which included coding for patterns within respondents’ entire transcript. To attain satisfactory agreement, successive phases of grouping and refining codes were performed. The goal was to understand participants’ meaning in interview

responses. Data used in this article emerged from gross level and fine-grained analysis. As new data were transcribed and themes emerged, they were back-checked selectively or universally with data from completed interviews.

FINDINGS

Experiences of suffering related to racism occurred throughout men’s lives and throughout their interviews. These experiences influenced men’s generative attitudes and behaviors to include a need to “keep up the struggle” that forefathers endured and to protect future generations from similar experiences. Our findings showed that AA men’s generativity was rooted in (a) suffering and empathy for suffering others, (b) redemption from suffering, and (c) religious belief that assuages suffering. All men related one of these themes in their narratives; some related all three. We continue with case examples.

GENERATIVITY ROOTED IN SUFFERING AND EMPATHY FOR SUFFERING OTHERS

Mr. Jenkins is 80 years old and lives in a subsidized senior apartment. He reported that experiences of discrimination were “just normal” when growing up in the south:

Before the start of school, Dad would take us five boys downtown to buy shoes. They wouldn’t let us try them on. You took a string and measured your foot. They said, “If you try them on, nobody else will want them.” Things haven’t changed. Some stores, they act like you might steal something. It’s one of those things I don’t see changing. He’s Black and you have to watch him.

Despite a scarcity of jobs, Mr. Jenkins reasoned that “everybody has to eat and everybody dies.” He worked as a cook before marriage, then attended mortuary college (where he met his wife) to learn embalming. The couple came to Philadelphia with their infant son. When asked if he had ever suffered, Mr. Jenkins recalled his son’s death from pneumonia at age 2, over 50 years previously:

My wife accused me of bringing the germ home from the morgue. She went to Indiana with her family after the funeral. That was a very low point. I closed myself up in the house and drank. The funeral director wanted me to embalm bodies. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get myself together. I took a laborer’s job.

Mr. Jenkins’ present loneliness mirrors the past. Because his middle son passed away two years previously, he has endured a significant depression:

We weren’t on the best of terms. I had to put him out, and we never had a reunion. He liked the fast track. When his mother was sick, I had to tell him to visit her. I always got him a job. I carried him along with me.

Mr. Jenkins’ surviving son is childless, divorced, and “successful.” Although he believes he could ask for help at any time, his son “must check his schedule just for a visit.”

Mr. Jenkins' physical decline worries him. "I'm 80 years old and I see the difference from last year to this year." He believes "[he] will not make it through another year." Likewise "[he] cannot escape these four walls because [he] fears hitting the streets." There were numerous neighborhood shootings in the past year:

I would say I suffer now. I got everything I need, but nobody to talk to. Walls don't answer. Your mind goes way back. And you turn your TV on, this one's killed today. So many were killed yesterday. I get despondent.

Mr. Jenkins reported that suffering "is watching others suffer," including elderly neighbors who "don't have enough to get by." When asked to define suffering, he said: "Suffering is not being able to get medical things you need to stay alive. Not being able to buy food. Or have to choose buying medicine or food."

Despite appearing frail, Mr. Jenkins implements his generativity by volunteering for an organization that works out payment plans for elders' overdue utility bills. As a judge of elections, he knocks on neighbors' doors, encouraging them to vote. As an usher at his Baptist church, he attends Sunday services to "hand out the bulletins, walk them in, help out."

Last Christmas, Mr. Jenkins hoped to begin a romantic relationship with a woman friend and wrote on a greeting card: "You may not be my first love, but you'll be my last." This lady has since avoided him; he thinks his seriousness frightened her. He called this unrequited love "suffering":

It'll never be as it was. Thing is I know her better than I know anybody else. It's better than walking out and meeting a stranger. She wouldn't steal from me; I would trust her in this house anywhere.

Mr. Jenkins' suffering consists of isolation, issues of trust and mistrust, and nearness to death. Two of his sons are deceased and his remaining son needs nothing from him. He places his generative outlet on diminishing hopes for romantic love and in empathy for "the old folks."

Like Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Gossage, at age 81 years, has multiple health problems. He named the worst time in life as "being in the army." Returning home on leave also caused anxiety:

I traveled back and forth to Maryland. In Delaware they stopped the bus, said, you have to go in back. I thought, when I get out the army, I'm sitting in the first seat. I don't care what happens. That was a terrible thing.

Mr. Gossage's living room is filled with appliances that he repairs for neighbors. Throughout the past 40 years, family members "down on their luck" have lived with him. Several years ago, he took in three grandchildren after realizing that their mother, his daughter, was addicted to drugs:

When I had my grandchildren, my health suffered. I worried about them, not myself. When they come, the curtain came down. I went to court to get custody of them. Then I brought my daughter here so she'd get off drugs. She did, but after that she took me to court to get back custody. It was

rough her living here, no money, just welfare. I'd tell them one thing, she'd say another. Two people talking to children is horrible.

One of Mr. Gossage's grandchildren, now a grown man, is staying with him "until he finds his own place." I asked Mr. Gossage about this arrangement:

He don't work, number one. The TV stays on all night. The washing machine—he wash all day. He is one reason I don't have no money today. When he left school he worked in the prison. He made money on the side doing wrong. So he went to prison and I used my money to get him out. He didn't pay me back what I put in. I did it for his mother; I didn't want her to go back on drugs.

Mr. Gossage's generativity is created by the context of his children's lives and his neighborhood environment. Homes on his block are boarded, some are drug houses, and others are used by the homeless. Several years ago, he rented a veterans' post to open a soup kitchen that weekly served almost 200 neighborhood needy. He relied on donations, and the rest he contributed

from my own pocket. A lot of old people do nothing. I feel good helping somebody. It makes me forget my own problems. And I can go to very few for help. What keeps me going is the scale, you know, help, not help, help, not help. Everybody have a job and I worry if I did my job 'cause it's gonna help in the end. Like a scale—people do good, people don't do good, but we all have a chance to make ourselves better by the deeds we do.

Mr. Gossage recently closed the soup kitchen due to dwindling funds. Yet, his goals remain shaped by others' needs. He plans to travel to California to lay hands on the seriously ill son of a "good friend" for healing. He is saving to make this trip next spring. Mr. Gossage said he "doesn't worry" about estrangement from one of his daughters and several grandchildren. He is concerned with generative behaviors for which he feels responsible, such as overweighting the "good" side of his scale in order to balance out others' misdeeds and omissions.

Mr. Jenkins' surviving child does not look to his father for help, and Mr. Gossage feels he has already given "too much" to children and grandchildren. Both men find their primary outlet for generativity in neighborhood elders who need and are grateful for their assistance.

GENERATIVITY ROOTED IN REDEMPTION FROM SUFFERING

Mr. Akers is 82 years old and the primary caregiver for his demented wife. When asked to tell his life story, Mr. Akers recalled that his parents modeled loving behaviors despite living in a "hateful" world:

We sat down at our table and love was taught. Not the ruling society. They were taught hate. I think of myself as an American, but I'm not classified on equal ground as an American. Because there were so many roadblocks. And when it's put forward it's all justified.

As a young man, Mr. Akers had dreams of becoming a doctor but delayed studying medicine in order to serve in World War II:

That was the worst time of my life. They said we could finish college and go in as commissioned officers. How our government lies! They placed the Black fellows into one company; we got basic training together. When orders came down, they shot us in different directions. Most of the fellows, I never saw them again.

Mr. Akers reported “immobilizing arthritis” was caused by “sleeping outside” when he was in the army, “and waking up drenched and drying off in the cold. And the same thing every night.”

After the war, Mr. Akers changed his career focus to business. He soon realized that opportunities such as acquiring loans or renting an office were “impossible for a Black man. Doors that were open to others, to find when *you* got to them, they’re closed.” He experienced discrimination in every area of life:

I worked for a small company. I mentioned I wanted my own business. My boss said, “You’ll never be able to own a business like this.” I shrugged, smiled, made no comment. I knew what he meant. In 1960 I left there, purchased a building, and we (Mr. and Mrs. Akers) started our business. We worked 40 years. We survived. Actually we thrived.

Mr. Akers said his most salient characteristic—determination—was honed by his family of origin and by “those who tried to stop [him]”:

America’s culture denies certain people their rights and passes laws to justify it. And having parents that can’t do anything or explain why it’s happening. Segregation forced it on you, and if you fought against it, they’d kill you. It’s more subtle now, but it’s the same. Don’t try to break the system. Some slaves coming over said, I’ll go with you, others took a dive overboard. People take a stand in different ways. Some do nothing. Others get revenge. I take a stand with determination. I will survive and not pass on this hate.

Mr. Akers’ generativity has at least two outlets: One is his devotion to his wife. When asked what gives life meaning, he answered: “To keep myself physically able to care for her. She’s the only one I have to satisfy.” The other is his spiritual legacy:

This country *should* fear terrorism; they’ve instilled so much hate in the good old USA. You cannot keep torturing people then say, my hands are clean. In my family, hate was never taught. My daughter was taught love, not selfishness, never be out to hurt, belittle, or hate anyone.

Mr. Akers feels redeemed from suffering by his ability to “rise above hate.” Despite injustices endured, his generativity bequeaths “love, tolerance, and determination” to his daughter and grandchildren.

Like Mr. Akers, Mr. Thorne, an 88-year old man, revealed generativity by his faith in life itself (Kotre, 2000). When asked to tell the story of his life, he began:

I was the only Black kid on the street. We played ‘til they called me names, then we’d fight. I couldn’t stand being belittled and

called out of my name by nobody. The name they used was n-----. I lost jobs because of this. I figured the boss tried to kick my butt because of my color. But I always got another (job).

Mr. Thorne continued: “I had problems in life because I’m Black so I had to be strong. I’m tough because being Black is tougher, and I’ve learned to deal with it.” He reported that he was ambitious, impulsive, and “worked hard to be rich.” As a teenager, he became a tailor’s apprentice. Because of this skill and a “gift of gab,” he “was never out of a job.” Like most AA men interviewed, he named being in the service as the worst time in life:

Time I spent there was worse than jail. They tell you when to eat, sleep, everything. Shut you down, don’t let you talk. Tell you you’re nothing, a puppet. Worst thing in my life, especially for my race. I was wasted in there.

Mr. Thorne shared how it was to be a Black man living in Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s:

To be kicked down is a hurting thing. Discrimination was my worst part of life. That’s the way the US was. I had mean things happen over the years and it’s because of this (points to skin on arm). People look at you like you’re dirt. That bores a hole in you. If I was crazy like I once was, you wouldn’t be here. Because I got to the point where you don’t want me, I don’t want you. My daughter’s first husband was White. A musician. Didn’t like him; wouldn’t talk to him.

Although Mr. Thorne said it was his son-in-law’s “personality, not his color” that he disliked, he also stated, “It’s all coming out better now. Like I said, if you weren’t right, you wouldn’t be here now.”

Interviewer: How did you know I was “right”?

Mr. Thorne: I know the first second I see you. I figured this is an education for you, too. I was always a teaching person. It’s a great thing for me, helping people.

By mentioning his former son-in-law, Mr. Thorne seemed to say personality is more important than race. Yet, past negative experiences with White folks remain the template for interpreting encounters with them. The quick scanning of situations and the persons involved is necessary in a world where racism has existed “for as long as [he] can remember.” And although he told the interviewer that she was “okay,” he revealed that she had been scanned; it was his decision whether or not she entered his home.

Because Mr. Thorne described himself as religious, the interviewer asked, “Where does God fit into your experiences of suffering?” He answered, “Oh, God in it all the way. He sent her [points to kitchen, where wife watches television] here to help me, get me through hard times, settle me down.” When asked what contributed to his longevity, he again pointed to the kitchen:

I promised her mother on her deathbed. She said, “Will you take care of Pop?” When she died, I brought him here. I bathed him like a baby. I took care of him ‘til he couldn’t do nothing. I’m doing good now ‘cause I’m getting blessed for things I’ve done.

The blessings Mr. Thorne accrued from reciprocal service to his in-laws and “helping people” redeemed him from suffering despite the “hole [those experiences] bore in [him].” When asked what advice he would give to younger generations, he replied:

I don't care how much you get kicked in the butt, you've got to overcome it. You gotta take advantage with whatever you can to stay on top. One thing is you got to believe in something and have a goal in life. My goal was I wanted to be rich. I might not make it, but I still want it. You can't sit back. I've been told, you're never satisfied, are you? I said, when I'm satisfied I'm gonna die.

Mr. Akers and Mr. Thorne experienced redemption from suffering by belief in the karmic justice of life. Both provided future generations to have long-term goals and short-range plans to succeed materially and spiritually. Both saw themselves as educators, teaching others the power of love, toughness, and success as a response to suffering.

GENERATIVITY ROOTED IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF THAT ASSUAGES SUFFERING

Mr. Hill is a 93-year-old married man who bought a plot of land on which he built an apartment house, a garage, and an empty building. He began his story by reporting that he was “blessed” from the beginning. “I was an honor student at C High, graduated in 1932. I applied for a scholarship and got accepted. A patron saw my transcripts and paid all my expenses for college.”

Mr. Hill's past roles as teacher, marriage counselor, and poet remain. His major role is Witness for Jehovah. When asked to talk about experiences of suffering, he said, “The time I really suffered was when I graduated college with honors and no one would hire me. That was a hard time.”

Our interview schedule asks respondents about experiences related to suffering—depression and sadness. Mr. Hill explained how all three constructs came together through experiences of discrimination:

I've seen a lot that made me sad. I've been depressed by being discriminated against. I didn't have opportunities 'cause I was a minority. I couldn't get jobs I was qualified for. I couldn't live some places 'cause they wouldn't have me.

Mr. Hill showed no bitterness with this revelation. In fact, fellow Witnesses nicknamed him “the Smiling Man.” “People know my biggest problem is discrimination. They say, ‘How come you're like you are?’ I say, ‘I drank the Colored water’ [laughter].”

The primary tool Mr. Hill used to counter injustice was religion. As a Jehovah's Witness, he gives meaning to a painful past by focusing on the “new earth” to come:

Most bad things that happened I don't want to recall. I'm waiting for the new system. This thing (points to Bible) can't lie. You're gonna build your home, plant your food, the ox and lion gonna lie down together. (Offers a booklet) See, all Black and White are going to come together. We all one people.

Mr. Hill suggested that empty buildings on his property will be used as a “safe house” where family and other Witnesses will be protected against the “tribulation”:

Jehovah sent me as a model for others. Our best life is ahead and I do all I can to show people Jehovah has a plan for man to live in paradise on earth.

Mr. Hill spends 40 hr a week knocking on doors and offering religious tracts that describe the “new system.” At age 93 years, his generativity includes proselytizing for the new world and taking part in constructing it.

Mr. Wallace is an 82-year-old widower. Although he walks with difficulty because of arthritis, he said he “feels like he's in [his] fifties.”

Mr. Wallace was born in the “backwaters of Florida” and started full time work on the “pogie boats” after completing fifth grade. When asked about the best time in life, he replied: “Christmas and Thanksgiving because we had enough to eat those days.” When asked what it was like coming up, he answered:

Nobody had cars. You got on buses and your seat was in back. Don't care no people was in front, you get back there. I know it was the times. You have to live in the time you live. If I was coming up now, I would have a different chance. See, if you don't know any different, you don't suffer behind it because you think it's the way it should be. If something happened now like then, I'd get my gun and shoot 'em. So they be the one that suffers.

When asked about the worst time in life, Mr. Wallace named serving in World War II:

I was on Iwo Jima. I would sleep with my rifle, my bayonet ready and was still scared to death. We had these tents; you could hear the shooting—whiz, whiz. You can't sleep. But in combat, the White people was going in front of us because they said they had more sense than us (laughs). They in front? Who had more sense?

Although Mr. Wallace “still jumped in [his] sleep from nightmares” 40 years after combat experience, he knew that the war “changed things:”

When I came home I got on the trolley. I had two, three drinks. People were standing in back and there was seats empty up front. I sat down—first seat. Somebody said, “You can't sit there.” I said, “Shit, why not?” I went to sleep. But I was ready. I put my switchblade under my coat. If anybody bothered me, I'm gonna cut their throat. Look, I know how to be scared and I know how to be brave, now I'm both. You be brave and you be afraid and you know how to kill and you're gonna do it.

When asked about the best time in life, Mr. Wallace replied:

Time with my wife. When she got sick, I said I'd never put her in a home. She died leaning on my shoulder. Once I said I'm gonna get up at five a.m. Out of the clear somebody shook me. She still with me, and I'm praying I see her again.

When asked about future goals, he smiled:

Now is a good time. My house is paid off. I have grandchildren I love and daughters that love me. Couldn't be much

better. The only thing I do now is go to church and go to the nursing homes to give communion. I look to the Lord. I say, You promised me this and taught me that, why would I think You'd lie? He never promised me wealth. He said I'm rich because He's rich. I'm not worried about what's on this earth. I'm worried about making it into the Kingdom.

Mr. Hill and Mr. Wallace lived in two worlds during their lifetime: one in which discrimination was "just normal," and the world that was beginning to change after the war. For both men, their religious belief, and the new world it promised, revealed their generativity. This next world would produce the radical transformation of individuals for which they hoped and promoted to others.

DISCUSSION

Experiences of suffering are integrally related to the social context in which our respondents were raised, developed, and are growing old. Their narratives revealed that manifestations of racism that led to suffering shaped a fundamental response (Brandtstadter & Greve, 1994), which was to regenerate, in various ways, the community in which they lived, into a place of safety and belonging. Our themes revealed three ways respondents accomplished this.

Our first theme—generativity rooted in suffering and in empathy with suffering others—demonstrated respondents' identification with others' needs. Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Gossage lived in "tough" neighborhoods where notions of community seemed fractured. In encouraging others to vote and starting a soup kitchen with personal funds, Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Gossage attempted to create unity in their respective neighborhoods by promoting compassion and empowerment. Participating in the research interview to educate others about what it was like to be an AA man growing up in the 1930s and 1940s was another act of generativity.

Theme two—generativity rooted in redemption from suffering—revealed that an important aspect of redemption is self-examination. AA men's self-insight, intensified through a sense of marginality, generated a continuing appraisal of themselves (McAdams, 2006). The men also showed an acute perception about others' intentions as they offered a portrait of discrimination, prejudice, and racism in the first half of the 20th century that, in some cases, persist. Despite the persistence of discrimination, this theme also depicted how men chose love and tolerance rather than bitterness or, worse yet, apathy. Both Mr. Akers and Mr. Thorne clarified that redemption from suffering did not mean they should reject anger—anger was necessary for maintaining vigilance against future oppression—but to reject hatred that precluded self-growth and prevented mentoring a world that remains racially divided (Rivers, 1998). Both men believed that just as suffering is endured communally, it is redeemed through bearing witness and testifying to ancestors' struggle, nourishing youth with realistic goals, and suggesting "power from the periphery" (Jett, 2002; Mathews, 1997).

Theme three—generativity rooted in religious belief—showed that just as men bore witness to a segregated world, they testified to their hope that in the next world "all would be one." Their hope did not permit passivity, but a social and religious consciousness that prompted Mr. Hill, at age 93 years, to actively proselytize, and Mr. Wallace to shape earthly work around "making it into the Kingdom." Both men showed how religious consciousness is integrally related to generativity. Suffering and the lamenting of suffering are joined to biblical promises of an end to oppression in this world and the next (Wilmore, 1989).

Our research shows that suffering neither transcends its context in history nor transcends the identity factors that come together in our respondents, such as age, color, race/ethnicity, geography, and gender. Yet, what has been carved out by suffering can be filled only by hope. These men's response to suffering, on the whole, was to become educators, combatants, and believers in activism and hope. "Telling their story" in the research interview was one way to achieve this.

Our discussions of race and suffering emerged from interracial dialogues between elderly AA men and a younger, female "intimate stranger" on the shared stage of the interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). The characteristics of age, race, and role made for complex interactions between interviewer and respondent. Because the interviewer took the role of student, and identified the respondent as instructor, some of the power issues seemed displaced. We believe the fit of in-depth qualitative interviewing to the men interviewed and to issues investigated was central to our findings. We suggest that our presentation—an analytic and descriptive article in which men were not compared with other groups, and whose strong voices determined the path our findings took—was also significant.

FUNDING

We are very grateful to the National Institute on Aging for supporting the research on which this paper is based.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Messrs. Jenkins, Gossage, Akers, Thorne, Hill, and Wallace, who, with warmth and good humor, welcomed us into their homes and shared their life stories. We also thank Jennifer Rhoades and Abby Schwartz for their research skills. H.K.B. undertook all the interviewing, development of the paper concept, cases, findings, and discussion. R.L.R. contributed material to the theoretical portion and methodology. The paper also developed in the context of long-term discussions by the authors about the topics of the paper.

CORRESPONDENCE

Address correspondence to Helen K. Black, PhD, Jefferson Center for Applied Research on Aging and Health (CARAH), Thomas Jefferson University, 130 South 9th Street, Suite 515, Philadelphia, PA. Email: helen.black@jefferson.edu

REFERENCES

- 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.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Berryman, P. (1987). *Liberation theology*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Black, H. K. (2006). *Soul pain: The meaning of suffering in later life*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Press.
- Black, H. K., & Rubinstein, R. L. (2000). *Old souls: Aged women, poverty, and the experience of God*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Blackwell, E. (2005, Winter). Redemption. *Northwestern Magazine*, 1–3.
- Brandtstadter, J., & Greve, W. (1994). The aging self: Stabilizing and protective processes. *Developmental Review*, 14, 52–80.
- Chapman, G. C. (1980). Black theology and theology of hope: What have they to say to each other? In G. Wilmore & J. Cone (Eds.), *Black theology: A documentary history, 1966–1979* (pp. 193–219). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Cone, J. (1989). Black theology as liberation theology. In G. S. Wilmore (Ed.), *African American religious studies* (pp. 177–207). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Crossley, M. L. (2000). Narrative psychology, trauma and the study of self identity. *Theory & Psychology*, 10, 527–546.
- Davis, K., Grant, P., & Rowland, D. (1992). Alone and poor: The plight of elderly women. In L. Glasse & J. Hendricks (Eds.), *Gender and aging* (pp. 79–90). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.
- Eysenck, H. J. (1976). Introduction. In H. J. Eysenck (Eds.), *Case studies in behavior therapy* (pp. 1–15). London: Routledge.
- Fisher, W. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 52, 347–367.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 219–245.
- Frank, A. (1995). *The wounded storyteller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goodman, M. (1996). Parenting in later life: Adaptive illusion in elderly mothers of one child. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 10, 295–312.
- Goodman, M., Black, H., & Rubinstein, R. (1991). Paternal bereavement in older men. *Omega*, 33, 303–321.
- Gubrium, J., & Holstein, J. (1997). *The new language of qualitative methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gutierrez, G. (1987). *On job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Hannon, L. (2003). Poverty, delinquency, and educational attainment: Cumulative disadvantage or disadvantage saturation? *Sociological Inquiry*, 73, 575–594.
- Hart, H. M., McAdams, D. P., Hirsch, B. J., & Bauer, J. J. (2001). Generativity and social involvement among African Americans and White adults. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 35, 208–230.
- James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: New American Library. [1958 ed.; copyright 1905].
- Jett, K. (2002). Making the connections: Seeking and receiving help by elderly African Americans. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 373–387.
- Karenga, M. (1989). Black religion. In G. S. Wilmore (Ed.), *African American religious studies* (pp. 271–300). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kotre, J. (1984). *Outliving the self: How we live on in future generations*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kotre, J. (2000). Generativity and the gift of meaning. *Generations*, 23, 65–71.
- Lawrence, V. (2006). Concepts and causation of depression: A cross-cultural study of the beliefs of older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 46, 23–32.
- Lehman, P. (1980). Black theology and Christian theology. In G. Wilmore & J. Cone (Eds.), *Black theology: A documentary history, 1966–1979* (pp. 193–219). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Mathews, R. (1997). Using power from the periphery: An alternative theological model for survival in systems. In E. M. Townes (Ed.), *A troubling in my soul: Womanist perspectives on evil and suffering* (pp. 92–108). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- McAdams, D. (2006). The redemptive self: Generativity and the stories Americans live by. *Research in Human Development*, 3, 81–100.
- Mischler, E. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Neil, T. D. (1987). *Disciplined hearts: History, identity, and depression in an American Indian community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- O'Rand, A. M. (1996). The precious and the precocious: Understanding cumulative disadvantage and cumulative advantage over the life course. *Gerontologist*, 36, 230–238.
- Paris, P. (1995). *The spirituality of African peoples*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Peterson, B. E., & Stewart, A. J. (1996). Antecedents and contexts of generativity motivation at midlife. *Psychology and Aging*, 11, 21–33.
- Pinn, A. B. (1995). *Why, Lord? Suffering and evil in Black theology*. New York: Continuum.
- Raboteau, A. (1980). *Slave religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Reissman, C. (1997). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rentsch, T. (1997). Aging as becoming oneself: A philosophical ethics of late life. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 11, 263–271.
- Rivers, C. (1998). The oral African tradition versus the ocular Western tradition. In D. L. Hayes & C. Davis (Eds.), *Taking down our harps* (pp. 232–246). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Roy, K., & Lucas, K. (2006). Generativity as second chance: Low-income fathers and transformation of the difficult past. *Research in Human Development*, 3, 139–159.
- Rubinstein, R. (1987). Childlessness: Theoretical perspectives and practical concerns. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 4, 1–14.
- Rubinstein, R. (1992). Anthropological methods in gerontological research: Entering the world of meaning. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 6, 57–66.
- Sabo, D., & Gordon, F. (1995). Rethinking men's health and illness. In D. Sabo & D. F. Gordon (Eds.), *Men's health and illness: Gender, power and the body* (pp. 1–21). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schroots, J., & Birren, J. (2002). The study of lives in progress: Approaches to research on life stories. In G. D. Rowles & N. E. Schoenberg (Eds.), *Qualitative gerontology: A contemporary perspective* (pp. 51–65). New York: Springer.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing, talk, text, and interaction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stewart, M. (1835, 1988). Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart. *Spiritual narratives, the Schomburg library of nineteenth-century black women writers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wickremasinghe, N. (2006). *Sri Lanka in the modern age: A history of contested identities*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Wilmore, G. (1980). The new context of Black theology in the United States. In G. Wilmore & J. Cone (Eds.), *Black theology: A documentary history, 1966–1979* (pp. 602–608). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Wilmore, G. (1989). *General introduction to African American religious studies* (pp. xi–xxi). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Received May 2, 2008

Accepted September 10, 2008

Decision Editor: Kenneth F. Ferraro, PhD