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“Turning Points” For Aging Genealogists: Claiming Identities And Histories In Time

Abstract

Based on qualitative in-depth interviews, I examine the use of genealogy with regard to the current historical moment for identities rooted in kin, race, class, gender, nation—and age. Drawing on the concept of “turning points” coined by Anselm Strauss, I explore moments that motivate the doing of family genealogy. First, I suggest that Strauss’s turning points may occur simultaneously and converge like vectors across time. Second, I argue that late middle-age lends itself to “identity extensions”, which I define as a reevaluation of self that acknowledges one or more of the following: the significance of extended kin to one’s identity; reverence for ancestors; a social responsibility to the future. Finally, I analyze how the current era informs a particular generation’s genealogical endeavors. I conceive of U.S. baby boomers’ genealogical projects as an expression of longing for connections in family lives and for a place in social history across the generations.

Keywords

Genealogy; Family history; Identity; Turning point; Aging; Generation; Race; Class; Gender; Baby boomers

Identities imply not merely personal histories but also social histories.[...] Individuals hold memberships in groups that themselves are products of a past

Anselm Strauss 1957: 166

Claiming Identities and Histories via Genealogy

Claiming identities based on heritage is no longer just the preserve of those who have been historically privileged in the United States. Family history or genealogy is a meaningful discourse across stratified inequalities in the U.S., such as class, race, or gender. For example, presidential candidate, Barak Obama, delivered a speech on

race relations and forming a “more perfect union” in America that he anchored in his “own American story” or genealogy (New York Times, March 18, 2008)¹:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.

Obama’s genealogical account contains essential ingredients found in today’s genealogical narrative, where the language of family, ethnicity, race, nation and genes converge to narrate one’s place on Earth and to claim key identities anchored in history. His various claims to identities are complex— favoring neither nature nor nurture in a passage that lays as much claim to his own and others’ experiences as to “genetic makeup” (Nash 2002; Wade 2002). Indeed, as Obama constructs his “story,” he selects and collects vicarious experiences of different eras—from his grandfather’s experience during World War II to his wife’s bloodlines linked to slavery. All these threads inform his idea of himself, his candidacy, and above all, his nation. Indeed, he claims to embody America. Obama’s genealogical construction derives from a memoir he published in 1995, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*; this book was motivated by hearing of his father’s death and traveling to Kenya to learn more about this mostly absent father, and himself.

President Obama’s story highlights the intricate relations between the personal and political, the biological and cultural, past and present, and how a parental death can function not only as a “turning point” for an individual, but must also be understood within a larger socio-historical context. While he highlights that “place” is central to his story by his claim “in no other country on Earth is my story even possible,” elsewhere he also has made the case that “time” is equally vital—that this is “our moment” implying that at no other moment has this story been possible. Above all, he draws upon an increasingly common discourse for constituting identity: genealogy. Thus, this anecdote introduces a cluster of questions relevant to my research: Under what conditions and for what purposes are people moved to research their family history? What motivates people to link biography and history (Mills 1959; Strauss 1959)? How do ethnoracial, class, and gender structures inform these endeavors? How do these motivations and identities relate to and constitute the current era?

¹ This speech aimed to address a crisis in his presidential candidacy when his association with a Pastor Wright who was perceived as a far left, political black radical ultimately led him to “disown” the pastor who had married him.

Given the proclivity to wax nostalgic about a “golden era” in family relations in the U.S., I examined the accounts of everyday genealogists and initially wondered how present concerns guide re-collections of the past and the reconstruction of identities. Similar to the ways a loss triggered Obama’s desire to narrate identities in relationship, “turning points” or “epiphanies” in participants’ lives prompted an interest in ancestors (Strauss 1959; Denzin 1989). Yet those life course events are also used to search for meanings that transcend the individual—from the spiritual to the political—and that are conditioned by the current era, as once silenced voices and viewpoints are increasingly heard and seen. Today, genealogy might be understood as a resource for identity constructions in increasingly uncertain, yet potentially pliable times for individuals and society.

Background Literature: The Growth of Genealogy

Genealogical endeavors have a long history both within and beyond the West—indeed Islam, Judaism and Christianity all sanctify lineage. My focus, however, is on the West. The Bible’s first ten chapters of Genesis represent an early expression of “genealogical thinking” in the West (Bouquet 2000). The anthropologist Bouquet argues that visual representation, in other words, the genealogical diagram developed in the early 20th century, has been crucial for constituting kin and that the genealogical method in anthropology “fixed birth as the defining moment of kinship” (ibidem: 186-7). Bouquet goes on to suggest that the diagram or “visualization undoubtedly facilitated winnowing the social from the biological in kinship studies, and holding the biological referent steady” (ibidem: 187).

American rules for ascertaining biological relations depend, first of all, on how procreation is linked to family; as Schneider (1967/1980) has argued, sexual intercourse symbolically links the domain of blood relations to the domain of legal relations—specifically marriage. Of course, marriage has never been required for procreation—and now sexual intercourse isn’t either. Beyond rules for determining marital and parental relations, amateur genealogists rely on rules associated with historical, legal and social science research. Documentation requires triangulating data, or finding more than one certificate or document (usually three), to legitimate a relationship. To follow these rules, one can claim ancestors as one’s own. Rules of family formation have never been simply “natural” or “biological”; these categories are not only Western, but indeterminate, complex, and power-driven (Edwards and Strathern 2000; Wade 2002). Bouquet (ibidem: 187) rightfully observes that the “the genealogical method” has been “anything but [a] neutral instrument”. This is forcefully illustrated when it comes to ethnoracial, gender, and class relations.

For example, in the U.S., ethnoracial identities have been engineered to sustain Anglo power—a process that DaCosta (2000) notes results in “the racialization of families,” that is, the belief that all family members must be of one race. Key policies reinforcing this belief and Anglo supremacy in U.S. history include how European Americans 1) constrained African slaves from sustaining family relations, 2) outlawed “miscegenation” or the mixing of the races and framed it as “unnatural”², 3) ensured

² Discriminating terms like “mulatto” or “quadroon” had been recognized and appropriated during slavery but fell into disuse as the one drop rule replaced the institution of slavery in fixing racial bounded hierarchies and whites secured borders with violence (Washington 2000, cited by DaCosta 2000: 61). Also racial borders were secured with the rise of Social Darwinism, and concerns with “racial purity” by “scientists” in the 19th and 20th centuries (Azoulay 1997)

interracial marriage was made widely illegal³, and 4) established birth and marriage certificates, rather than oral traditions, to procure and store established relational legitimacy⁴. Anglo hegemony has, of course, been sustained by countless other policies that sustain ethnoracial boundaries, such as the reservation policies for Indigenous populations and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Such history means that multiple genealogical associations are organized by racial, ethnic, national identities. Yet when genealogical researchers pursue these identities, are they reifying, reproducing or perhaps deconstructing such racial formations⁵?

Patriarchy has clearly curtailed an ample telling of family histories. In spite of the advances in mitochondrial DNA, matrilineal lines remain more obscure as a result of patrilineal naming practices. Implicit in the genealogic template, the patriarchal structure manifest in U.S. history facilitates the identities and relations associated with a father's family line—and are rooted in religious traditions. All the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – constructed genealogy as central to family, religion, and national identities. Delaney (2001) argues that Genesis, and in particular the Abraham story, was not only about launching monotheism, but also monogenetics—that these were correlative constructions. While there is a difference in scale, she observes:

[...]both have to do with origins, or with notions of coming-into-being more generally. Men became symbolically allied with God the Creator, while women became symbolically associated with what was created—namely, the earth. The very notion of paternity, therefore, already embodied authority and power. Creative power is divinity.” (p. 454-5)

Zerubavel suggests that nearly half of all human societies aren't just simply enhancing “fathers' progenitorial legitimacy,” but are “officially promoting absolute female-line genealogical amnesia” (Zerubavel 2003: 68). Consequently, which identities and associated histories are lost, found, claimed and abandoned?

Finally, as indicated in the introduction, class relations, or more precisely elite interests, have been embedded in genealogical practice. According to the anthropologist Auslander (2002), since kinship is foundational to all social relations, descent-based societies have a nearly universal interest in genealogy. Auslander notes that with the emergence of dynastic societies and states, genealogy was monopolized by elites; and finally with the rise of bourgeois democratic society, we have seen a re-democratization of genealogy. He argues that it has been “a pervasive middle class habit for at least a century and a half” (ibidem: 5). While Auslander's pointed claim seems right, so too does Strauss's (1959/2007: 168) observation about the class continuum made about 50 years ago: “Kinship is so entwined with social class that a deficiency of kinship memories means also deficiency of class memories”. Although such memories remain difficult to retain, reconstruct or resurrect for those with less than elite histories, and without

³ Virginia was the first colony to ban Black and white intermarriage in 1705; even in 1957, 30 states had laws against intermarriage—ten years before the Supreme Court overruled state laws against interracial marriage, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* (Azoulay 1997).

⁴ In the Jefferson-Hemings debates, the “white” descendants of Thomas Jefferson rely primarily on the social, rather than biological side of the divide (even rejecting DNA evidence to the contrary), including the legal framework and associated documentation that has served to construct racial and familial categories in our nation's formative years.

⁵ See Hackstaff (forthcoming); see Parham 2008, “Race, Memory and Family History” for more on the politics of ethnoracial identities in genealogy.

comparable resources, there is no question that genealogical activity across class accelerated for the post-World War II “baby boom generation” that was born from 1946 to 1964, and came of age in the 1960s and 1970s.

The US Baby Boom Generation and Social Changes

There has been a genealogical explosion in the United States during the last half of the 20th century. On the one hand, it isn't hard to target technological developments that have made genealogy a much easier endeavor for all. Since the 1970s, the genealogical diagram has been fueled by the tools of the internet—including databases, discussion lists, and software programs that assist individuals with organizing the construction of their “family trees.” The genealogical websites are among the most frequented sites on the net (Auslander 2001); the number of associations, as well as their memberships continues to grow (Worchel 1999). These developments assuredly augment the explosion in activity, yet are less central in my view than the shift in cultural meaning.

What does the flurry of genealogical activity say about U.S. identities and social relations among this “baby boom” generation? This slice of history, and the generation I analyze, reflects a transformative moment in the cultural symbolism of the American nation partially engendered in the 1970s by Alex Haley's book and televised production, *Roots* (1976). This was a narrative that begins with Kunte Kinte—an African captured and enslaved by Europeans—but whose life and the life of his descendants is ultimately a story of struggle, triumph and freedom. Probably no other public event promoted genealogy more than its publication and the subsequent 13-part television series of *Roots*—particularly for the now aging baby boom generation, which constitute most of my sample. This was not a genealogy merely in search of aristocracy, but democracy. Most of the participants in my research mentioned the book or the series, and several respondents mentioned the series as initially motivating them to do genealogy.

Many scholars note that genealogy has become popular because of Haley's text. However, this assertion does not answer a more fundamental question, suggested by Auslander (2002: 7): “Why, after all, were these texts so enormously popular at a particular moment?” Auslander (ibidem) argues that the “mass explosion” of interest in genealogy since the 1970s may be traced to the changing structures and functions of families, such that a ‘cultural imaginary’ that transcends individual experience and symbolizes unity, sameness, and continuity is crucial as families have become increasingly discontinuous, tenuous, fragile, and shorn of material interdependence. Plainly, the changing structure and function of families informs the genealogical practice of the participants in this study. There are, however, additional reasons for why the texts of *Roots* resonated and stimulated many of the baby boomer generation at this “moment” in the U.S.

In *Roots Too*, Jacobson's (2006) analysis of this “particular moment” is suggestive:

Roots is important as a national phenomenon not only because the book and the miniseries were so eagerly devoured by millions across the country, but because, over time, the roots idiom revised the vernacular imagery of the nation itself. (p. 42)

Jacobson proceeds to point out the simultaneous cultural production of the 1976 U.S. bicentennial when “Ellis Island” displaced “Plymouth Rock” as the iconic

narrative of the hyphenated American. This also reflects Mary Waters' foundational argument in *Ethnic Options* (1990). Even as the practice of family history drew on the enormous genealogical success of *Roots*, the post-*Roots* phenomenon among ethnic whites increasingly erased notions of privilege (Jacobson *ibidem*); early "immigrants" were increasingly invested with whiteness and the struggles of whites and people of color were, disturbingly, depicted as equivalent, rather than decidedly unequal (Jacobson *ibidem*).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that "heritage is best understood not as memory but as 'a mode of cultural production in the present'" (cited in Jacobson *ibidem*: 56). Among the baby boom generation, this cultural production encompasses contested meanings of American identities at the national level, situated in the post-Civil Rights era, as African Americans, and subsequently, Chicanos, Native Americans, and women and sexual minorities claimed their rights to produce their own heritage, even as others resisted the claims. So, there is both action and reaction to be deciphered in the motives of genealogists. Indeed, we might conceive of their endeavors as renegotiating the histories marked by the politics of class, gender, race, and other inequalities.

Method: How Interviews Produce Turning Points in Life Stories

This research is based upon in-depth interviews conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2002. I have relied upon snowball sampling (with no more than three links from any one reference) by joining genealogical associations and interviewing member of those organizations. The eleven long interviews averaged three hours each, and a few lasted as long as five hours. I have also conducted five short, informal interviews, generally while hanging out at genealogical libraries.

Yuval-Davis (2006: 201) asserts: "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)." Riessman (2008) argues that interviews themselves should be understood as "narrative occasions" wherein life stories can be co-produced by participant and researcher. My aim has been to elicit narratives from individuals to understand how they realize and forge identities anchored in ancestors—while asking about their current family relations and bonds. Like much qualitative research, my interpretations of these occasions often held unanticipated detours.

My methodological approach draws on grounded theory procedures in that I rely on theoretical sampling, inter-relate analysis and data collection, and analyze thematic issues that arose in the context of the interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Yet, it also departs from classic grounded theory insofar as I presume a less positivist and more constructivist epistemology, as Charmaz (2005) does. Furthermore, my approach draws from a qualified (rather than a radical) constructivist epistemology that reflects Altheide and Johnson's (1994) model of "analytic realism." This methodological model is deeply compatible with constructionist views because 1) it demands that we attend to processes, like historical racial projects, which are transient outcomes of interactions between discourses and institutions; and 2) it assumes that perspective is an ineluctable aspect of our social world—and as such, we must reflexively account for ourselves in the co-construction of interviews and analysis. Thus, my identity as a white, middle-class, married woman with no children in her late forties at the time of the interview is relevant because interaction will be shaped by my own and others' expectations of such a standpoint.

At this point in an ongoing research process my sample can be described as primarily middle to upper middle-class, averaging 60 years of age, and practicing genealogy for as little as two to as many as 25 years, with most located in the middle. Nine respondents are women and two are men. Six respondents self-identify as European American, four identify as African American and one identifies variously as African American, European American and as multiracial. Family structures, ever-changing, are less easy to describe briefly; however, among the 11 respondents, 10 have had children and all have been married at some point, though only four are currently married to their first spouse. One person is currently widowed and six have been divorced; among the six divorced individuals, one has remarried, one has re-partnered and four remained single.

In order to tap the meaning of genealogy in their lives, I asked about the stories in their research that have been meaningful to them, their current family lives and religious belief, their views on DNA, and their secrets and silences. I launched the interviews by asking respondents to discuss the decision to begin doing genealogy and then inquired why at that particular time. I did not initially aim to sample an older age group, yet I began to notice patterns in how respondents talked about genealogy that related to their experience of the life course and was most often spurred by family connections and disconnections. These discussions of motives and meanings related to their views of the life course that reflected Anselm Strauss's (1959/2007) notion of "turning points."

Turning Points and Identity in The Life Course

According to Strauss (1959/2007: 95), "turning points" are "critical incidents that occur to force a person to recognize that 'I am not the same as I was, as I used to be'". Most respondents indicated familiar life course events that prompted the pursuit of genealogy --such as births, illness, deaths, retirement, or divorce. This article aims to illustrate how these events reveal Strauss's typology of turning points, for example, his concepts of "milestones," "meeting a challenge," or being "deceived by events in general." Yet, in addition to simply applying Strauss's typology, I add three arguments. First, I suggest that these turning points may occur simultaneously, and further, may converge like vectors across time. In this way, they reflect the concept of epiphany, proposed by Denzin (1989), that is, as a problematic moment or disruptive crisis when a person's character may reveal itself and new understandings are required; still, they need not regularly attach to a particular life course "stage", and they may be abrupt or cumulative, major or seemingly minor though illuminating, or perhaps retrospectively meaningful moments. Second, I propose an important turning point that I call "identity extensions" which seem to accompany late middle or older ages. These identity extensions attach to "growing older" but not to a specific age or event. Rather, such extensions are a process of realizing that new relational meanings unfold with increasingly finite horizons, a kind of existential crisis that can disrupt a youth's identity and meanings were she or he confronted with a terminal illness. Regardless, such a process means individuals are more apt to address existentialist questions, such as "What is the nature of human life and experience? What is my place and purpose in this larger scheme of things?" and "What is the meaning of my inevitable death?" (Johnson and Kotarba 2002: 4). Third, I analyze how the current era informs this particular generation's genealogical endeavors.

Before proceeding to present this analysis, it's essential to elaborate on how I understand the life course and age-based identity.

The critical incidents that make up "turning points" need not be *naturalized* life stages as we came to understand them in Western accounts of human development in the 20th century. Constructionist insights on the life course reveal not only historical and cross-cultural variations in notions of the life cycle and how people construct meanings at different ages, but also the ways in which we make use of life course stages as resources to make sense of our lives over time (Holstein and Gubrium 2007). As Holstein and Gubrium (2007) explain, to understand stages as resources, scholars must bracket age as a necessary framework for orienting one's findings and only incorporate stages when it is used as a resource by respondents. To some degree this describes my approach insofar as I was not looking for age-related constructions. Yet people in their 50s and 60s were those who were most available to be interviewed, and so necessarily reflect my findings. Furthermore, by the time I came to further analyze my interviews, I had entered my fifties, enabling me to "hear" anew the reflections of everyday genealogists (Denzin 1989). Like Karp's (1988: 728) finding that "events pile up in the fifties making reflection about age particularly likely during this decade," I found there was an age consciousness that was "correlated with age, but not determined by age". While I do not take Western "ages" or "stages" as given, I am suggesting that at this approximate moment in U.S. society, being in one's 50s or 60s tends to produce certain embodied experiences and social relations (Karp *ibidem*); these, in turn, may elicit particular ways of thinking about identity.

At the outset, it is crucial to note how my analysis of identity and becoming a generational elder does and does not draw from Erik Erikson, since it is Erickson's notions of identity, human development theory, and his eight stages of "man" that have been most influential through the 20th century. Identity for Erikson refers to the idea that one has a sense of continuity in oneself and proceeds to act on that basis (1950: 42). Most valuable about his theory are his assumptions that change and growth are continuous in life and not limited to the early years of life; that our social interactions are carriers of culture; and that as humans we are agentic creatures who shape our own lives, even while delimited by the social contexts within which we live. The epigenic elements of Erikson's theory rooted in biology have been rightfully criticized when they suggest bodies are determinative of life stages, or that 'anatomy is destiny' in terms of reproductive sex, or that development can be universalized. It is important to understand bodies as do developmental systems theorists who recognize the simultaneity and interactive ways that the social is incorporated into physiology; as Fausto-Sterling (2000) notes, we must take seriously the following ideas:

...[that] bodily experiences are brought into being by our development in particular cultures and historical periods. But especially as a biologist, I want to make the argument more specific. As we grow and develop, we literally, not just 'discursively' (that is, through language and cultural practices), construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh. To understand this claim, we must erode the distinctions between the physical and the social body. (p. 20)

Thus, we are embodied creatures that are located in time and place and know our own mortality—though when we are likely to experience that mortal horizon is somewhat mutable. Like Kotarba and Johnson (2002), I imagine an "existential self"

that is embodied, always becoming, and reflexive.⁶ Aging is a bodily experience and one that is “real” insofar as appearances and abilities change our ways of being in the world and require adaptation; but equally crucial, it is a social experience that is real insofar as we are “reminded” by others of our place in the age spectrum (Karp 1988).

As we’ll see, my notion of “identity extensions” speaks to the “reminders” that Karp (ibidem) discusses and both reflects and departs from Erikson’s seventh and eighth stages. Erikson’s (1950) “seventh age of man” emphasizes the challenge of “generativity” (and avoiding stagnation) or becoming a mentor or guide to the next generation, which involves becoming less self-absorbed and leaving a legacy to the next generation. As Sorell and Montgomery (2001) argue, this is primarily an androcentric understanding of this life stage because it ignores research showing how women’s lives have generally required that they be less self-absorbed and focused on care of others. While “leaving a legacy” might be interpreted in terms of conventionally male-defined understanding of “legacy,” such as institutional contributions, I would argue that the primarily female family historians below suggest another form of generativity: one based in knowledge constructions as a responsibility to ancestors, injected with sociopolitical and spiritual components. Furthermore, Erikson’s “eighth stage of man,” which emphasizes ego integrity over despair as a final stage of life, is relevant to the degree that we acknowledge, as Kroger and Adair (2008) do, that the maintenance of a continuous identity also involves symbolic connections to others across the generations. In sum, our understanding of genealogists’ endeavors are enriched to the degree we recognize that it is an activity that tends to accompany a “turning point,” “existential crisis,” or “epiphany” of some sort (Kotarba and Johnson 2002; Denzin 1989).

“Milestones” Constructing a Future

According to Strauss (1959/2007: 95) a “milestone” is a “marker of progression or retrogression” that “necessitates new stances, new alignments”. The following example reveals not only a milestone represented by giving birth, but a new alignment, that is, a consciousness of the generational continuity made explicit by genealogical practice. When asked what motivated her to do family history, Abby⁷ says:

I think it was triggered by filling out the baby book of my daughter, who is now 28. And so when she was born, there was just something profound about filling out that tree, that little baby book tree with the mother, the father, and the grandparents. And that just fascinated me. I guess I’d never thought about it before I’d given birth. So at about that same time, um, I saw a class being offered at adult school. And it was a class in genealogy. And it was taught by a Mormon woman, but she didn’t, you know, do the religious thing, she just did the basics. (Abby, European American, age 54)

⁶ Kotarba and Johnson (2002: 8) explain that an embodied self means that “feeling and primordial perception precede rationality and symbol use and, in fact, activate them”; while I might portray these processes more simultaneously, overall the qualities of an existential self align closely with my assumptions. In relation to the existential self as “becoming”, they recognize that possibilities for self-growth are “constantly unfolding”. And, finally, they recognize that the self is reflexive in relation to its emotions, values, creativity, and experienced tensions with one’s society.

⁷ All names presented here are pseudonyms to protect the identities of respondents.

Here, the milestone of motherhood sends Abby to genealogy to create continuity with descendants and ancestors. When she remarks on her fascination with the family tree and states “I guess I’d never thought about it before I’d given birth” we see the marks of a major epiphany—a turning point that forever changes her life. Giving birth was rarely mentioned as a motivator in my particular, older sample. Still, all the parents hoped that their children would eventually perceive their genealogical endeavors as a gift.

This universal account of forging a “gift” among the parents in my sample suggests a “vocabulary of motive” behind their identity endeavors (Mills 1940). Interestingly, the symbol of “gift” may serve to justify what they describe as the “obsessive” quality of their pursuits. In some cases, practitioners seem to borrow time from present loved ones—several noted some scorn or resentment by children—to produce connections to past relations. Yet, it also suggests that relational connections may migrate to the center of self knowledge as adults age in what is a highly, often excessively, individualistic society. The centrality of such connection is only enhanced by the rising rate of death among loved ones as one ages; as Karp (1988: 734) notes, there is a “momentum of mortality experiences in the fifties”.

“Meeting a Challenge” by Reconstructing A Past

Strauss (1959/2007: 97) argues that meeting a challenge “may or may not be a challenge that is institutionalized,” but describes an experience where “crucial tests are imposed by individuals on themselves” which they must pass or they will need to change direction. Death was a common motivator for pursuing family history among the relatively older age of the respondents in my sample and was often framed as a test or turning point. Iris states:

And it was like ‘wow’, you know, my elder family members just gone in a matter of months. And not only was it the shock of losing your mom, but the fact that I had not asked important questions. So, it was like I am not going to hide, I’m not in the closet any longer as far as my family and who they are. I want to know and I want to know now. So that’s what I did. I started looking for answers to questions and getting answers ...
(African American, age 56)

Losing her elder family members was a “shock” yet also gave Iris the resolve to ask unasked questions and to share unshared identities, including her lesbian identity. Indeed, her mission seemed to be to reverse “passing” and overturn family secrets. Ironically, Strauss (1959) uses an example of “passing” or a strange role handled well as an example of meeting a challenge or passing a self-test; nevertheless, reversing passing also signifies a transformative and courageous moment—one that reflects the enormous struggles and change marking recent decades in the United States. As Iris “meets a challenge” in identity transformation upon the death of her mother and other elders, she simultaneously and not coincidentally reflects the social movement of her times that increasingly rejects passing as “straight”. Yet Iris encounters several turning points at once that impact the meanings she makes of her life—quite like Frances. In short, Strauss’s types of “turning points” are *not* mutually exclusive.

Intersecting Turning Points: When Past and Future Converge in The Present

Frances similarly found the specter of loss motivated her pursuit of genealogy, and family history became a means to “meet this challenge” (Strauss *ibidem*). Her brother’s fatal illness presaged not only her own, but also her nephews’ loss.

What motivated me was my brother’s illness and he, his um...he has a fatal disease, so he got diagnosed with a fatal disease and so we got, but it was slow in taking its course. [...] So I think I did it as an activity to do, to have something to show him and maybe to pass on to his sons, because he was leaving three children – three grown boys actually – was going to be leaving them and I think I just decided that the heritage of – and he might, it would be some comfort to him to feel that his heritage was being passed on, that somebody was paying attention to it and that there would be some good notes for his children, because he knew he was not gonna be able to do it. (Frances, European American, age 61)

Despite the explicit contrast with Abby’s motive located in the birth of her daughter, Frances is implicitly mindful of her family’s descendants; progeny are given the gift of social memory, a place in social and family history.

Although losses are salient as motivators for doing genealogy, there are other kinds of “voids” that signify relational turning points of yesteryear. Indeed, today’s identity developments are necessarily “shaped by previously presented versions and also by understandings which prevail in the wider discursive environment, such as expectations about the appropriate trajectory of a life” (Taylor and Littleton 2006: 23). Thus, Frances speculates that genealogy was also motivated by being single.

And also because I’m not married, I don’t have a partner, I think it was a way for me to feel that I had more family (laughs). I’ve found thousands of people who are my family. When my daily reality is I don’t have any family. And my daughters had left home and my brother was [out east], and my sister is crazy, and my father is so old now. This was something that was something to talk to my father about. [...] because he is 90. And he doesn’t have an ability now to know what’s going on from one day to the next, but he does have a lot of old memories and he loves to be asked about them. [...] I’ve been their link, yeah. This has been something that I’ve mined to give us more in common to talk about. Because other issues are uh, maybe more problematic, you know, politics, religion, and all that stuff, we’d argue about. We can’t argue about this. (Frances, European American, age 61)

Here, Frances reveals a desire for expanding and securing her family, and reflects Auslander’s (2002) argument that the “discontinuous” and “fragile” families of today necessitate a “cultural imaginary” of unity and constancy that genealogy provides. While she jokes about it, she creates a sense of being embedded in symbolic family relations when she says: “I think it was a way for me to feel that I had more family (laughs). I’ve found thousands of people who are my family.” Akin to Denzin’s (1989: 130) notion of an illuminative epiphany, ruptures in Frances’ past family relations are symbolically highlighted, in this image of “thousands” of kin.

Frances’ status as a single, once-divorced woman with grown children may also represent a crossroads described by Strauss (1959) as the turning point of “betrayal”:

This kind of crossroad may not be traumatic, but nostalgically reminiscent, signifying then that the gratifications arising from past decisions are quite sufficient to make past possibilities only pleasantly lingering 'maybes.' Final recognition that they are really dead issues is then more of a ritualistic burial and is often manifested by a revisiting of old haunts—actually or symbolically. (p. 100)

In her desire for “more” family relations, she contends with a “betrayal” by a society that still places great store in people finding support through the marital institution. Frances’s progressive politics affirm postmodern family formations, yet her identity as “single” is anchored in an era when the decline of support from conventional nuclear families has not been adequately replaced by other social formations in the U.S. At the intersection of these experiences—an ill brother and being single with grown children—Frances illustrates how several turning points can occur simultaneously, and further, may converge like vectors across time, as previous turning points regain salience in later life stages.

Finally, in addition to death and tenuous family relations, genealogy served to enliven Frances’s role as daughter to an aging father. Along with charting her relations to the dead, Frances’s inclusive impulse is also an effort to produce feelings, through what Hochschild (1983) calls *emotional management*, that aims to create bonds and sustain her current family relationships; as she states in relation to her father and her brother: “This [genealogy] has been something that I’ve mined to give us more in common to talk about.”

Interestingly, this motive emerges in other interviews, such as with James, a 61-year-old, European American. He states that he was partially motivated to do genealogy to nurture his relationship to his father. He had returned to school and a class assignment required looking at family history and patterns. As he began to uncover the patterns and migrations of his family, he decided to travel to earlier family sites in the Midwest and took a “trip with my father in '93 and '94 and he died in '96.” Further, Barbara, a 57-year-old European American also describes genealogy as a vehicle for communicating with her father who “doesn’t talk much”:

I never talked with my Dad. So this has provided us with something to talk about. And it’s true that every time I ever go down there he says ‘oh I found a little piece of paper...’ And I go into his den and we sit in there...and so he sees it as a way of connecting too. (Barbara, European American, age 57)

These repeated references to genealogy as an effort to forge connection with fathers also reflects the changes in and uncertainty about the status of fatherhood. In an era when men’s power has been challenged by feminists, when breadwinning is broadly shared, expectations of child care from fathers have grown, and “absent” or “deadbeat” dads have been rebuked, these efforts at communication reflect a tenuous but tenacious desire to connect across the distance of gender and/or generation as the baby boomer generation develop into their parents caregivers. When children become their parents’ caregivers, “motivations appropriate to earlier—and usually lower—status must be sloughed off or transmuted, and new ones added or substituted”; as Strauss (1959/2007:104-5) further notes, “strains in family and community life fall exactly at those points where the speed of transition gets out of alignment”, such as passage to old age. Indeed, these efforts by Frances, James, and Barbara signify an identity shift that is anchored in an age when they approach the role of caregiver, if not family elder.

Identity Extensions: Approaching the Role of Generational Elder

In the U.S., life expectancy reached the all-time high of 77.8 years in 2005 (Kung H.C. et al. 2008). For those who were born around 1950, they can expect that their parents are or will be deceased soon, and can expect about 15 to 20 more years for themselves if patterns hold (National Center for Health Statistics 2007). My preliminary sample contained a couple older, and one younger than those born in the 1950s yet at varying rates, they were all confronting the role of generational elder. This demographic context revealed certain patterns in respondents' accounts that underlie what I label as "identity extensions"; I define these as a reevaluation of self as one reaches a generational ceiling that acknowledges one of more of the following: the significance of extended kin to one's notion of identity; reverence or deep respect for ancestors; a social responsibility to the future of history.

The Significance of Extended Kin

Reunions, as gatherings of extended kin, are frequently both a means for doing genealogy and result from doing genealogy. Auslander (2002: 5) points out: "Two of the most important practices through which modern middle class families work to produce this "virtual" continuity are genealogical research and the staging of family unions". Both activities can be traced back centuries in U.S. society, yet they are an increasingly important means for constructing families. According to Auslander (ibidem), reunions have a long history—though their meaning and constitution have changed over time—increasingly becoming focused on family in contrast to an earlier focus on religious revival or community homecomings (Shore 2002 also addresses).

Five of the participants had attended reunions, based on extended kin and/or particular communities. For example, in addition to connecting to her Dad, Barbara who is white also describes how her doing of genealogy has resulted in a touching reunion between her mother and her mother's first cousin; plans are already underway to also reunite her uncle and her mother's first cousin—after an estranged period of more than three decades. Of the five attending reunions, Barbara was the one European American; the other four were African American. While my sample doesn't tell us anything about frequencies in the larger society, it is indisputable that many African Americans find the homecoming or family reunion an occasion of enormous importance for constructing family and community. Auslander (2002) observes that the African American homecoming or family reunion is distinctive in that it is closely related to at least three historical developments: early reunions of African Americans who had been former slaves on a specific plantation, the Juneteenth ritual celebrating the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas in 1865, and finally, the Great Migration of African Americans to the North which resulted in homecomings to the South.

Eve describes how family reunions in the South have brought her "great joy" and that she has invariably received "red carpet treatment." She adds that this "meant a lot as an only child." Katie, also an only child growing up, movingly describes her feelings upon meeting extended family in the South.

It's just pure joy. Just pure joy. And they looked at me, when I went to Arkansas, I had this big smile on my face all the time, they say 'are you happy?' I go, I am so happy. I think it was beyond being an only child and looking...you know, I got to find somebody, it was more than that. It was, I did something that you [ancestors] asked me to do, and I'm so glad I did.

[KH: yeah the reward...] Oh, just listening, this is what...and to be able...because everything that I had regarding how I was connected, I gave it to them. And I said, this is my statement, I said: "To the Walker family. This shared information is an attempt to make a family connection. There may be several errors as well as incorrect information—who am I to come along and tell you? Please feel free to make any corrections. May our ancestors forever smile upon us for this attempt to reconnect." 'Cause it is a reconnection. (63-year-old African American)

Such connections and relational extensions are crucial to many of those doing genealogy, and reflect the significance of extended kin to notions of identity. As we age, not only do we increasingly lose loved ones, but we are also brought closer to our own mortality and becoming ancestors ourselves. This is a function of my sample's age and it also points to the personal transformations triggered by loss and a yearning to bestow meaning on the closing phases of one's life. While there are many opportunities for "existential crises" across the life spectrum, when hearts yearn for meaning and purpose, these certainly multiply with advancing age; as Kotarba and Johnson (2002: 9-10) recognize "the process of self is dynamic and continues throughout the life course" yet the question of "what does all this mean?" becomes more insistent as mortality becomes palpable.

Reverence or Deep Respect for Ancestors

When Katie says: "I did something that you asked me to do," the "you" refers to her ancestors. Listening to ancestors is a claim that is explicitly stated by two respondents and is implicitly suggested by a third; such claims reveal a search for meaning that extends and transcends personal identity. Katie explains:

Because I know that there is a supreme being, and when I say that my ancestors talk to me, you know, I'm really very serious about this. And I know that everybody doesn't hear this. But I know that when you are working through genealogy, and it's very therapeutic at the same time, that things you recognize don't just happen by chance. They are placed there way ahead before you even get there.

She provides more than a few examples of serendipity that, in her view, can only be explained by ancestors' participation in her life. When I ask her why she was chosen, she states:

You know what, I've asked that, and I have no idea why I was chosen, all I can say is I feel very special as being the one. I really feel very, very, very fortunate. Because there are so many good things that I have found about this family in terms of, just like I said, the strength. You know I've...where we've served in the military, we've served, we've bought property. I mean we haven't been little, shoddy people at all, not at all. I'm just like forever impressed; it blows my mind.

Psychological speculations about why she might need to feel "special" are easy to pursue here—one could reference her only child status, her father loss in childhood, her status as adoptee, or her multiple losses in adulthood (including the death of a child). However, there is no denying Katie's reverence for her ancestors—a key dimension of identity extensions.

Heather also communicated with her ancestors. When I asked her what was most surprising about doing genealogy, she replied:

Let me just say that probably the biggest thing that I have found is the way the ancestors talk to me and through me, and I'm sure that most genealogists will tell you the same thing. I maintain that we don't choose genealogy. Genealogy chooses us. It's my passion; it's not anything that I have chosen to do. I really believe that the ancestors have chosen me for whatever reason they feel that I'm the one to tell their stories. As a result, it happens all the time that I literally hear a voice or I'll get a hunch about something that makes no sense and every time I follow it, it leads me right to the information I'm looking for. It's as though the ancestors are helping us find them and I think, as I've said, I've talked to so many other genealogists who feel the same way. That we're just a conduit and as long as you leave yourself open. (48-year-old, multiracial American)

Not unlike Katie, one can address the social psychological dimensions of being "chosen"—given losses through death and divorce that Heather has endured. Indeed, at the end of her interview, as she tearfully discusses estrangement from a dearly loved relative, she reflexively admits: "Perhaps [I'm] concentrating on dead folks, [because] they can't reject me." Yet, there is more to this sense of rejection than personal psychology; there is the sedimented history of living in a society that rejects her collective identities—including her African and Native American ancestors, not to mention the problematic category of "multiracial" (Ifekwunigwe 2004).

While Frances does not claim ancestors talk with her, she does convey a reverence or deep respect for forbearers as she describes a kind of resurrection of ancestors. Frances initially claims that she had been doing genealogy for three years, but then adds:

I actually had a stint of interest, um, 20 years ago. I went to Salt Lake [in Utah], but that didn't take me very far. That was because I was more of a feminist interest – my father had told me just a bunch of names of men that were—and his son and his son...and the women were just blanks on the list. And I was so...I went to Salt Lake City and I filled in some missing names. And this was the first experience in reviving people who had almost been wiped out. (61-year-old, European American)

As indicated earlier, because patrilineal systems are widespread around the world, particularly associated with Abrahamic monotheisms, tracing ancestry is much more difficult through the mother's line. Zerubavel (2003) observes:

From looking at biblical genealogies constituting the first eight chapters of I Chronicles, for example, one would never guess that women played even a minor role in such multigenerational processes of begetting. Indeed, in strictly patrilineal descent systems women formally have no descendants. (p. 68)

By tracing matrilineal relations, Frances creates social history where there had been none; in doing so, she enacts a feminist consciousness of her generation, a cohort which insisted that women's historical identities and deeds be rendered visible—not only in her mother's, but also in her father's lines.

Unclear about what "reviving people" means to Frances, I ask her 'Is reviving ancestors for the good of today's family or ancestors?' She responds:

I think that's a great question because I think that's what I was trying to explain. I think that by talking, I think that if people do have a spirit, or if there is anything like spiritual life, it only exists if those people are recognized and talked about. I mean like if we know them, and we can say their names, then they live. And so it's like bringing them back from, from oblivion. And maybe this is why people who are facing mortality are attracted to it—they can think of, look at all those souls who are living just because we're speaking their names. Every time they're spoken they seem to be remembered, just by being spoken they may get remembered.

Her recurrent ideas about “bringing them back from oblivion,” she explains, are partially a result of teaching English to a primarily Asian population. She notes:

I've had lots of students from Korea and Taiwan and Japan and um, I've had lots of talks with them about family life and ancestor worship. And the shrines in their homes for the ancestors, and how many holidays focus on the ancestors, and the photos of the ancestors, and it's just something they...don't even question.

While most of my interviewees did not refer to their ancestors' hand in doing genealogy like Katie and Heather, or discuss resurrecting forbearers by speaking their names like Frances, other research emphasizes a spiritual dimension to doing genealogy. The epitome of spiritual genealogy is the traditional practice required of members of the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) who are required to arrange for *ordinances* to provide the dead (who were not exposed to the gospel) with a means to salvation by providing baptism and marriage through proxy in the Temple (Lambert and Thomasson 1997); this explains Frances's earlier reference to Salt Lake City, Utah where the most extensive genealogical archives in the U.S. are kept in order to track and designate who has had ordinances provided for their post-mortem conversion. A collection of genealogical case studies and a companion to the Public Broadcasting Service's television series on “Ancestors,” the book *In Search of Our Ancestors* devotes an entire subsection to “Providence In Action” describing the ancestors or the divine's hand in serendipity (Smolenyak 2000). Yet, beyond transcending individual identity via spirituality, genealogists also can aspire to political transcendence.

A Responsibility to The Future via History

Strauss (1959/2007: 177) notes: “A social psychology without full focus upon history is a blind psychology”. While Katie, Heather, and Frances convey deeply personal and spiritual accounts for their drive to pursue genealogy—from being single to being rejected and chosen—socially situated concerns that reveal a generational location also emerge in their talk about personal and spiritual aspirations. A generational attunement to how (re)connections have been forged and frustrated through racial and gender formations can be ascertained in their narratives. Underlying this attunement to the struggles for equality associated with “identity politics” is yet another kind of potential turning point: a responsibility to the future via history. As Strauss (*ibidem*: 169) observes: “Each generation perceives the past in new terms, and rewrites its own history”. For older genealogists, their rewriting of history is usually inflected by the social movements of their generation.

It can be argued that genealogy is the epitome of the sociological imagination—linking history and biography (Mills 1959). Family biography brings history to life. Such animated knowledge reveals the complexity of historical events and selectivity of historical accounts. While a few people state they had always liked history, more say that they hated history until they started doing genealogy. Respondents learned how ancestors' lives had intersected with, produced, and responded to historical events. Abby's account is typical:

And to be a good genealogist you have to learn so much, so many different skills, you have to understand history, and politics, and geography, and social customs. If you're gonna make a good guess about what happened to somebody, you better know where people in this area migrated to...and you need to know about, you know, what age did women get married? [...] If you're going to make educated guesses you have to know for that region and for that time and you have to know that kind of stuff in order to know what records to look for. You have to know: could women own property? You know. You have to know: how did someone get naturalized in the old days. There was no INS. You know, how did you do it? And what were the rules then? (54-year-old, European American)

Abby concluded: "I was never interested in history, but now it's totally different." We've already seen that Abby's interest in women's status parallels Frances's concerns with matrilineal relations, reflecting the influence of the women's movement on their cohort. We also see genealogical motivations shaped by the Civil Rights movement.

A responsibility to the future via history, the third dimension of identity extension, has already been manifest in Katie's narrative about listening to ancestors. The legacy of racist stories forged by European American acts of commission and omission seems to fuel a social responsibility to refute a received notion that African Americans are "shoddy people." Given the lack of authority accorded African American voices by majority European Americans, it is not surprising that Katie might want to draw upon a higher authority to validate her experience.

In contrast to European American respondents who were fascinated even stunned by histories that they had not learned about in school regarding ethnoracial relations, African Americans explicitly critiqued educational institutions presentation of "history"—the silences and distortions. Essentially I heard of desires to re-tell history. For example, 76-year-old Eve notes: "The way it was taught to me in school, I didn't believe it anyway." She elaborates, saying: "You're really finding yourself getting into these books and the history to see...but then you have to be careful whose perspective you're using." And as 56-year-old Iris describes her desire to incorporate more story telling and genealogy at family reunions, she explains: "Part of our issue right now is that we do not have a written history. Everything that's about us has been written by someone else, so it doesn't really reflect us, you know." Here and elsewhere, Iris reflects the notion of a "diffuse resentment" that she, and more accurately "we" have been "deceived by events in general" (Strauss 1959/2007: 101). As African Americans, Iris and Eve are attuned to the constructiveness of history and the power associated with who gets to construct history. Their personal turning points, then, become occasions not only to narrate new identities, but to tell new histories from standpoints previously rendered invisible and still marginalized.

Conclusion: Genealogy for A Generation Conscious of Its History

This article explores the epiphanies or turning points in identity revealed by committed, everyday genealogists. But it also tries to locate these developmental events in relation to a specific generation within a particular era. In this, it aims to answer Strauss's call to understand identity in terms of history. Given the substantial changes in family lives in the last several decades—recorded in the statistical stories of divorce, single parenthood, gay marriage, cohabitation, step-parenting, reproductive technologies—and my previous work on the cultural meanings of marriage and divorce, I wondered whether family genealogists are seeking stability and constancy.

Many scholars observe that a postmodern era of ceaseless change, fluidity and fragmentation seems to foster nostalgia for a past when identities were anchored to communities and community to a place, and families, as many imagine, were more reliable, stable, and unified (Harvey 1989; Skolnick 1991; Coontz 1992). Speaking of a desire for historical continuity in a context of flux, Harvey (*ibidem*) argues:

The irony is that tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche [...] The photograph, the document, the view, and reproduction become history precisely because they are so overwhelmingly present. [...] Through the presentation of a partially illusory past it becomes possible to signify something of local identity and perhaps to do it profitably. (p. 303)

Furthermore, Harvey asserts, the pursuit is heavily laden with nostalgia, suggesting genealogists are yearning for a past 'golden era' of family relations.

There is no doubt that profits are being made in the genealogical industry, past families are being romanticized, traditions are being "invented" and sold, and finally, that respondents' longing for belonging speaks to disruptions in our families today. In our "search for secure moorings in a shifting world" (Harvey *ibidem*: 302), genealogical charts do provide a sense of constancy. We see longing for family connections expressed to varying degrees in the words of Frances, Iris, Katie, Heather, Eve, James, and Barbara. And, doing family history extends many respondents' families and communities quite literally through reunions. Yet, nostalgia for an illusory past and the commodification of tradition may be too limited an explanation for why genealogy has become salient in family lives. For the committed genealogist, it does not take long to learn about the disruptions, fragmentations, family secrets, and silences that attended family lives in the past. Only one interviewee was not motivated by the secrets and mysteries in the doing of genealogy. And, subsequent 'discoveries' tend to challenge nostalgic notions of families past where both shame and dignity are lodged. Further, nostalgia for times past may carry different meanings depending on one's location within the shifting boundaries of ethnoracial, gender and class hierarchies. Thus, nostalgia for an earlier era among European Americans can disguise nostalgia for greater privilege in an earlier American era—an unlikely longing among African Americans. In contrast, among African Americans nostalgia might express itself as a longing for how things "might have been" as demonstrated by Toepke and Serrano's (1999) video "The Language You Cry In: The story of a Mende song"; this reveals how youth learn to listen for ancestors talking from the grave and shows how a song from the 18th century stores social memories and becomes a key link for family relations.

In addition, then, to a longing for belonging in a world of uncertain family relations, to understand how genealogical endeavors beckon at this time, it is crucial to consider the race, class, and gender politics constituting and constituted by the now-aging baby boom generation. I suggest that the notion of “identity extensions” can help us see the meanings of genealogy in terms of age and generation and the likely epiphanies these elicit. In relation to age, identity extensions are meant to capture a probable “turning point” in the later life cycles as aging individuals move toward the role of “generational elder” and the keeper of stories; the role assumes a responsibility to the future via history and a deep respect, even reverence for forbearers. As Karp (1988) argues, from bodily aches to youth’s perceptions of the decade, the fifties are full of reminders that confirm time is finite and embracing life cannot be delayed. In relation to generation, these extensions reflect aspirations by a specific cohort that has witnessed an era of productive social movements—from Civil Rights for disadvantaged ethnoracial groups to the rights of women and sexual minorities; thus, identities are claimed and elevated as the dialectics of race, sex, and class politics are played out in the struggle for and resistance to greater justice, including in the realm of storytelling.

Genealogy may be perceived as a pastime of the leisure class, and even the retired class, but it should also be recognized as a story of identity that has been increasingly democratized in U.S. society—akin to President Obama’s testimonial. Not unlike Jacobson’s (2003) account of the shift toward “Ellis Island” as the all-American story, Obama’s story appropriates and aims to rework this narrative, by extending his relations to “three continents,” by identifying with “every race and every hue”, by leading us to conclude that “this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.” Obama provides increasingly permeable and inclusive criteria for the “politics of belonging” in the U.S. (Yuval-Davis 2006). Further, he symbolizes a *social turning point* in the U.S. when citizens of marginalized identities increasingly, if tenuously, find themselves at the center of making history.

The democratization of genealogy could lead to a democratization of history. Quoting Stuart Hall, Nash (2002) notes: “Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity”, identities appear instead as “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (cited in Nash 2001: 48). As we’ve seen with the family historians presented here, genealogy enables many to reconstitute the politics of their generation and reposition themselves and others in “the narratives of the past” as they approach the role of generational elder.

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