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## When life gets in the way: Generativity and the development of non-idealized virtues in women's life stories

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### ABSTRACT

The road to a virtuous life is typically met with roadblocks and detours. Life stories reveal the courses people chart around those roadblocks in their attempts to cultivate virtuous lives in non-idealized circumstances. Life stories feature difficult choices (e.g., between love and work, between pursuing personal interests and caring for others in need) that challenge individuals' attempts to live out the virtues they most value. In this article we focus on the life stories of two women for whom the virtues of generativity and caring for others serve as deeply personal motives that came at a personal cost, notably in the pursuit of other paths of eudaimonic growth. However, these women's virtuous actions were also a source of meaningful redemption when times got tough. Their life stories also reflect how their lives have been shaped by both personal choices and cultural master narratives of gendered ideals for a good life. Overall these women's stories illustrate how non-idealized life circumstances can both facilitate and thwart the development of virtue.

### KEYWORDS

virtue; development;  
narrative; women;  
generativity

Virtue does not develop in a vacuum. Rather, virtue develops within persons who live in the largely non-idealized circumstances of everyday life. Even when circumstances are relatively good, people can expect to face interpersonal conflicts, health problems and social injustices. Thus we take a dynamic, contextualized approach toward virtue development, rather than focusing on how virtues in the abstract are defined and are developed. As a person develops, some virtues develop, others do not and some virtues develop *at the expense of* other virtues. This dynamic emerges within the intersecting contexts of life events, personal choices, personality, motives, values, interpersonal relationships and sociocultural affordances to particular groups. We aim to contribute to the expansion of virtue ethics theory in this direction by examining life stories, in which motives for virtues serve as narrative themes. These themes not only link abstract notions of virtue to lived actions but also link personal ideals of virtue to cultural master narratives of a good life. We focus on the life stories of two women who emphasize the care-related virtue of *generativity*, or caring for others (de St. Aubin, 2013; Erikson, [1950] 1994). We attend particularly to the question of personal choice

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versus master-narrative scripts for women when it comes to the benefits and costs of the virtue of caring for others.

### **Virtue in a vacuum and in actual (non-ideal) lives**

In a tradition since Aristotle, virtues and virtuous lives have been framed as resting on relatively ideal life circumstances, such as the luxuries of material resources and elevated social status. Aristotle recognized this fact, but stuck with his idealistic framework of virtue, attempting to expound an objectivist ideal of virtuous excellence (*arête*) in character and action. In a nutshell, a virtuous life for Aristotle was marked by expert levels of intellectual and practical wisdom, as demonstrated in one's actions. The problems with Aristotle's approach include the fact that expert levels of wisdom are by definition possible for very few people (the 'experts') and the fact that other virtues besides intellectual expertise are necessary for living virtuous lives.

Aristotle does point out, however, that no one is born virtuous. Virtue develops over time. The philosophers Julia Annas and Martha Nussbaum emphasize the developmental nature of capacities for virtue. In her model of 'intelligent virtue,' Julia Annas (2011) frames virtues as akin to *skills*. In her 'capabilities approach,' Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes the role of social contexts in the development of such skills. Nussbaum argues that a good life starts with the individual's being afforded freedoms by society to exercise certain objective, human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). Where capabilities are suppressed systematically (for example, via poverty or sexism), the person cannot be expected to develop in the direction of flourishing.

We are especially interested in the development of virtues under non-ideal conditions, not only those of everyday life but also those of systematic oppression, particularly of women in patriarchal societies. When a person is oppressed, the virtues needed to resist are 'burdened virtues' (Tessman, 2005). Those who experience and resist oppression are burdened because their flourishing is constrained by limits on freedom, material resources, political power and social standing as well as by moral damage to their characters. Although we do not focus on it here, DesAutels has argued elsewhere that there are special psychological and moral burdens not just for those who resist oppression, but also for those who resist abuse or misuse of power more generally, e.g., whistleblowers who resist organizational power or women who resist their harassers (DesAutels, 2009). However, those who experience gender-based oppression or abuse of power may foster their own virtuous development despite non-ideal circumstances. In the present study we focus on the development under non-ideal conditions of a care-related virtue, generativity (caring for and cultivating future generations and society—Erikson, [1950] 1994)—and particularly on the personal concern or motive for acting generatively.

### **The narrative construction of virtue development and generativity**

We take a narrative approach to the study of moral development and to generativity specifically. The narrative perspective focuses on how people construct a meaningful understanding of themselves and others in their life stories—an understanding that inherently involves ethics and cultural concepts of virtue (Colby & Damon, 1992;

Flanagan, 1998; McAdams et al., 2008; Taylor, 1989). By studying people's life stories, we can study 'thicker conceptions of moral personhood' that center on the role of self-identity in the moral personality (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009, p. 241).

The construction and reconstruction of one's own life story is an attempt to showcase how one identifies with particular virtues and strives to put them to action, such that virtues serve as narrative themes. For example, some life stories emphasize themes of eudaimonic growth (Bauer, 2016). These *growth themes* feature the personal importance of cultivating virtues as an effort in self-improvement (Swanton, 2016), particularly by cultivating habits that are deemed virtuous within one's cultural context (Snow, 2016). Such efforts in eudaimonic growth might focus on others' welfare (e.g., care, generativity), one's own wisdom, authenticity, honesty, humane activities, or meaningful relationships. One prominent theme of growth in people's life stories—especially in midlife—is the theme of generativity (McAdams, 2013).

More broadly, generativity is the virtue of care (Erikson, [1959] 1994). More specifically, generativity refers to the subjective concerns and objective actions that aim to facilitate the welfare of others in society, particularly its next generation (de St. Aubin, 2013; McAdams, 2013). In the present study we target generative concerns as they emerge as themes in people's life stories. (Erikson, [1950] 1994). As a life-story theme, the virtue of generativity serves as an orienting personal value and source of meaning in life (de St. Aubin, 2013). As Erikson predicted, generative concerns are especially salient during midlife, particularly as reflected in midlife adults' life stories (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Peterson, 2002).

Stories of women's lives are in some ways like stories of men's lives, notably in the fact that both include themes of generativity, particularly in midlife and then particularly for those individuals who report higher levels of well-being (e.g., McAdams et al., 1997; Peterson, 2002). However, midlife women tend to score higher than men on measures of generative concern and to tell highly generative life stories (e.g., Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001). As for another gender difference, in contrast to Eriksonian predictions, young-adult women are also likely to score high on measures of generative concerns, and these concerns correlate with well-being, whereas midlife women who score high on generative concerns have been found in longitudinal research to have no higher or lower levels of well-being, perhaps owing to their having to bear the bulk of the work of enacting those generative concerns, e.g., in raising children (Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). Narrative research has also found that generativity continues as a life-story theme for older women (age 65 or older), which helps in their establishing a sense of *ego integrity* (rather than *despair*, in the last of Erikson's stages) as well as a sense of continuity of identity amid the many changes of old age (Melia, 1999). As a matter of growth generally (including but not limited to generativity), midlife and older women focus more on growth than on loss in their life stories—particularly when focusing on agentic themes of controlling their destiny and taking action to steer a new course in the face of setbacks (Burns & Leonard, 2005; on growth and the aging self, see Bauer & Park, 2010).

By using these themes of growth generally and of generativity specifically, individuals attempt to construct a story of a good life of their own—a good life story (Bauer, 2016). A good life story, like the virtues on which it is based, does not develop in a social vacuum. People look to *cultural master narratives* in literature, film, political discourse

and elsewhere that convey cultural models of how to live a good life (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2013). However, cultural master narratives are generally geared toward the groups who hold power in society, making some virtues like generativity difficult to enact for individuals in non-idealized conditions (Nussbaum, 2011; Tessman, 2005).

Generativity functions not only as a theme but also as a broader script—a cultural master narrative that is captured in the lives of moral exemplars like Gandhi, Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. (McAdams, 2006). The generativity script contains six prototypical features (McAdams, 2013; McAdams et al., 1997): an early advantage in life, a sensitivity to the suffering of others, the development of a clear moral framework, repeated redemption sequences (life-story episodes that start bad but end on a positive note), the balancing of narrative themes of agency (e.g., power, mastery), and communion (e.g., love, care) and prosocial goals for the future. Redemption sequences refer to stories in which events start off as bad but end up as good. Redemption and generativity often go hand-in-hand in the life stories of people who have high levels of well-being (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Guo, 2015). People who use redemption sequences frequently in their life stories draw on a cultural ideal of a life that overcomes obstacles, such as changing from rags to riches, ignorance to enlightenment, or sin to salvation—an ideal personified in the cultural master narrative of a redemptive self (McAdams, 2013). Redemption sequences alone (regardless of generative themes) predict adjustment and well-being (McAdams & Guo, 2015), particularly in low points and other difficult life experiences (e.g., Bauer, Graham, Lauber, & Lynch, *in press*; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). As for the balancing of agentic and communal themes, doing so is a primary concern for people in midlife (McAdams, 2013). Plus, generativity itself is not exclusively a communal theme; generativity combines a communal concern for others' welfare with an agentic concern for having an impact on the world—here a prosocial impact (McAdams et al., 1997).

In the life stories to follow, we get a sense for what generative themes and their gendered costs sound like. Despite generativity's virtue, the pursuit of generativity can come at the expense of other forms of eudaimonic growth, such as pursuing a personally meaningful career or living a well-balanced or well-rounded life. Choices in matters of care are limited for women; they are expected to care for others (Tajlili, 2014; Tessman, 2005). Among women, particularly in midlife, who come to regret choices that they have made, those who take correctional action have been shown to report higher levels of well-being than those who do not (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). In the two women's life stories below, we see resilience in the wake of limited choices, through which these women cut new paths of action, steering their own virtuous self-development, however constrained by idealistic notions of virtue.

## Overview and method of the present study

The present study focuses on the life stories of two women in later midlife whom we chose among 100 interviewees in a larger study of virtue development and life stories. These 100 participants were each paid \$100 for the interview and an accompanying personality survey. These participants were randomly selected for recruitment via email from a larger study of nearly 3,000 alumni of a university in the Midwestern US, who had been recruited a year earlier by emails sent to all university alumni (we note that

the university's alumni office, which provided the email addresses, does not have access to the study's data, which are for scientific purposes only). We selected these two women from the pool of 100 for several reasons, most notably because their life stories both had an overarching theme of generativity that was situated in contexts of conflicts and difficult choices that women are especially likely to face. Each of them served as exemplars of using the virtue of generativity to steer their own life courses around the road blocks—notably gendered ones—that they faced in life. Each woman was interviewed separately via Skype at a single sitting by the first author. The interviews lasted between two and three hours. The present study is the first publication to come from the larger study.

The life story interview questions were modified from those of McAdams (2013) to address the topic of virtue development. Questions fell into categories of brief life chapters, key scenes (e.g., high points in life, low points, turning points), life challenges (e.g., loss, gender challenge), personal values and beliefs (e.g., role model, religious and political views) and personal development (notably 'becoming oneself within one's family environment'). Sharon's life story transcript totaled 40 pages of text; Lena's totaled 51. Here we present excerpts of (and brief commentary on) their life stories as they illustrate the role of generativity and related conflicts in women's life stories.

We wish to comment on our approach to the interviews and our interpretation of them (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In conducting interviews, we strove to embody Rogers's (1961) notions of unconditional positive regard, genuineness and empathy. In interpreting, summarizing and presenting the life stories, we took particular care not to divulge the participants' identities—and the identities of their acquaintances. We also strove to present our interpretations in light of both theory and our considered intuition, steered by a compassionate form of discernment. We have changed the interviewees' names for the sake of anonymity. Also, each participant saw a draft manuscript of the present article (with the other participant's story and corresponding information missing) and gave her consent to submit the manuscript to this journal without suggestions for editing.

## Introducing Sharon and Lena

Sharon and Lena both emphasized life-story themes of helping others and making the world a better place—reflecting a personal identification with generativity (Erikson, [1950] 1994). Sharon and Lena persisted in exercising their generative concerns despite considerable challenges in life. They also stood out among our interviewees for their articulation of gender and ethnic inequities, political concern and their personal identification with the virtue of generativity. At the time of their interviews, Sharon was in her early 60s and Lena was in her late 40s. Both were white and of comfortable socioeconomic status (as we interpret their interpretation of their living conditions).

Sharon had a happy childhood until age 10, then moved to a new location as the family endured difficulties, including her father's infidelity. In college she majored in social services. She later launched a career working with children, which she enjoyed until she became 'burnt out.' She endured difficult breakups with two boyfriends, changed her career to legal services, which she enjoyed, and moved to different cities to help care for her sisters and mother, who shared a degenerative neurological disease.

At the time of the interview, she had cared for her sister for 20 years, which required that she quit her career. She remains politically active. She counts her involvement in the converting of a contaminated water source into a state-protected park as one of her 'greatest achievements.' She no longer practices the religion in which she was raised, preferring a more 'naturalistic' spirituality.

Lena had a happy childhood until age 10, but then encountered difficulties with her brothers, one of whom eventually split with the family for religious reasons, which has continued to cause a great deal of stress on the family to the present day. She majored and then got a master's in social work, followed by a career in social services and eventually academic research. She married a man of a different ethnicity that created conflicts within the family and—for her two teenage children—in school and society. At one point in her career, she stood up against fraudulent management and spearheaded the saving of a child-services organization. She practices the religion of her upbringing, but with considerable 'struggle' against its institutional policies and ideology.

We present Sharon's and Lena's stories by focusing on challenges in the following three contexts or domains in life—gender, love/relationships and work. We chose the context of gender because it is the primary context of interest in this article and served as a prominent context in each of the women's life stories. Love and work are two other domains in life that are prominently featured in adults' life stories. We dedicate a section of this chapter to each of these three contexts, with subsections in each section for Sharon and Lena.

The theme of generativity dominated their life stories, cutting across the contexts of gender, love and work. Indeed the theme of generativity surfaced both implicitly (as we researchers interpreted it) and explicitly (as the participants responded to a question at the end of the interview about the 'overarching theme' in their life). Sharon said that her overarching theme in life was 'to help people.' Lena said that her overarching theme in life was 'to do right by others,' 'trying to improve the human condition, to create a more civil society,' adding 'I'm an advocate for the marginalized.'

The structure of this article allows us to focus on *themes* of generativity rather than on the generativity *script* (McAdams, 2013; McAdams et al., 1997), even though both life stories exhibited a generativity script. We focus on themes because, as noted earlier, the *virtue* of generativity is conveyed in narrative themes, whereas the generativity script includes elements that are not so clearly tied to virtue (e.g., perceiving an early advantage in life; redemption's 'getting better' in hedonic affect). Still, [Table 1](#) presents an overview of how these life stories reflect features of a generativity script. Both interviewees expressed an 'early advantage' in their earliest memories (namely, a happy childhood in their first 10 years) and the development of a 'clear moral framework' in the transition to adulthood (namely a commitment to generative, service-oriented ideologies and careers)—two characteristics of a generativity script (McAdams et al., 1997). For space reasons, we note these points here briefly and below illustrate the other features of a generativity script (early sensitivity to others' suffering, repeated redemptive sequences, balancing agentic and communal concerns and prosocial goals for the future) with excerpts from the women's life stories. Furthermore, we organize our summary of their life stories not according to the generativity script but rather to challenges in three domains of life—gender, love and work. Within these domains we show the features of the generativity script as well as

**Table 1.** Examples of features of a generativity script in each participant's life story.

Features of Generativity Script	Sharon	Lena
<i>Enjoys an early advantage in life</i>	Childhood to age 10, with parents and eight siblings 'in a very nice neighborhood with a lot of good friends,' 'wonderful'	Childhood to age 10, with parents and two brothers. Childhood was 'idyllic,' 'without a worry or a care'
<i>Exhibits sensitivity to others' suffering</i>	Based on painful gendered experience, helps others by teaching those who would have it	Takes stance against religious institution's gender discrimination
<i>Develops a clear moral framework</i>	College (psychology major), which 'was pretty formative in my life.' First career in social services, 'working with juveniles,' 'very challenging and rewarding'	College (social work major). 'Involved in campus activities,' 'volunteered in orphanages,' 'loved my teachers,' went on to academic career. Master's degree in social work. 'I'm an advocate.'
<i>Repeated redemptive sequences</i>	Burnt out in social services, changed careers to legal services, relocated, energized in new career. Moved to help ailing sister, enjoyed new location. 'A door closes and another door opens'	Children's ethnic discrimination leads to activism and policy changes. Office turmoil almost derailed a social program and her career, but she turned it around so the program flourished
<i>Managing conflicting themes of agency and communion</i>	Sister diagnosed with degenerative neurological disease, leading to dementia. At the expense of career and relationships, she carries out her generative motives by caring for sister for 20 years	'Feeling torn' and 'Life in [another city].' Inter-ethnicity conflicts in marriage, parenting. Struggles with family-and-work balance, but in the end they work as she carries out her generative motives
<i>Prosocial goals for the future</i>	Goals: caring for her sister, helping others who provide care for disabled family members	Goals: managing children's transition to college, working as advocate for the marginalized

relevant conflicts. Even though we focus on *challenges* in the contexts of gender, love and work, we emphasize the fact that neither participant lamented over these challenges; the redemptive and agentic nature of their generative stories came with an ultimately optimistic tone and sense of being able to overcome the odds and to make the best of life's difficulties, all while enacting their commitments to help others.

### Challenges owing to gender

We asked the interviewees two questions specifically about gender. First was a 'gender event' in which 'other people have treated you unfairly or differently on account of gender. Second was a 'gender-based life challenge.' We note that both interviewees referred to gendered events throughout their interviews, not merely in response to the questions explicitly about gender. Gender also played a prominent role in their description of role models in their lives.

#### Sharon

A gender event came immediately to mind for Sharon: her first menstruation. She said:

[I] had no idea what was happening. My mother, growing up Catholic, and she was a very devout Catholic throughout her whole life, never talked about anything involving being a woman, any sex, changes in your life, even being pregnant. She never talked about anything. And I thought I was dying. No lie.

Eventually she mentioned the event to her mother:

And she's like, 'Oh, didn't you learn about this in Girl Scouts?' And I'm like, 'Well, I quit when I was a Brownie, so no.' And she's like, 'Oh, well, this is something that you're going to have every month.' And I almost fell over, I'm like, 'What?' I had no idea. And I think for any woman going through this who is not prepared ahead of time it's a ... I don't know what you'd call it. A sin? I don't know. But I was not prepared at all. ... Anyway, so I made sure to tell my younger sister. There were [others] too.

In this event, Sharon framed an early memory of gender in terms of stumbling onto an awareness of gender—and then from a position of ignorance that could have been prevented. The religious context is not insignificant for Sharon's self-identity. She at her young age interpreted this biological event as a 'sin'—not merely a personal transgression (which would be unwarranted in itself) but more gravely a transgression of ultimate concern. Also on the topic of gendered identity, she marks this event as a kind of transition from being a tomboy to not being one. This transition is tied directly to her perception of how boys perceived her. She noted that her relationships with boys became more distant after this event. However, she also displayed an early sensitivity to others' suffering (see [Table 1](#)) by wishing to prevent other girls from enduring the same ordeal that she did. Furthermore, despite this emotionally and interpersonally difficult event, Sharon frames the memory in terms of generativity and redemption: She learned a lesson that she used to improve other girls' quality of life.

For the gender-based life challenge, Sharon describes an event while working with a social services organization. A 13-year-old girl 'had been abandoned by her mother,' was pregnant and was living in a facility that was set on fire by an arsonist. The girl wanted to get an abortion, but the county's social services would not pay for one. Sharon said:

I tried to contact these services and see if they would help her with an abortion because there was just no way. Even her mother would not, her mother was just like, 'No, no, no.' Her mother had her own issues, couldn't deal with this girl. [... this] was a real eye-opening experience and case for me about the limits of what the system can do.

Sharon's experience trying to help this girl ties to Sharon's efforts to work within the political system to change people's lives for the better. In this case, things did not work out.

Sharon's role model was her sister, the one for whom Sharon eventually dropped everything to provide care. Sharon described her as 'very smart' and continued:

We've always been close and I've always looked up to her, she's three years older than me. She was always like a liberated woman ... went to [the same college], I pretty much followed in her footsteps. We were always pretty close. And even after she graduated ... she got her master's [at the same college], also, so she was there pretty much the whole time I was there.

She concluded the role-model question with the idea that long-term illnesses happen to people regardless of how virtuous or admired they are.

### **Lena**

Like Sharon, Lena describes a gender event from her childhood. She begins:

There are so many events as a woman, right? ... I was 12, and my dad was an usher in the church. And only men could be ushers. And I said, 'But why can only men be ushers? Basically you escort people to their seats [and] facilitate the communion line and you distribute baskets. I don't understand why only men can do that.' And my dad was like, 'Well, it's just what men do.' And I was like, 'But that doesn't mean a woman can't do it.' And so I petitioned the church [and] I went to the priest and I said, 'I see no reason why I cannot be an usher.' And my mom went with me and I set off this huge firestorm. And I said, 'I'm not gonna take no for an answer. These are the five things they do, I could do those just as well, and I'd like to do that as part of the church.' ... Well, it took a while but I did become an usher at age 14. And that's the story. The meaning behind it is that I have always fought for women's rights. ... I think it caused some consternation for [my dad], but yes, I think he was proud.

In this event Lena linked gender discrimination in a religious context to gender discrimination at work. Notably, she linked this discrimination to her overriding life theme of generativity, specifically in the form of fighting against injustice. In doing so, she displayed an early sensitivity to her religious institution's social injustice—and ended it with a redemption sequence.

Pay discrimination was Lena's greatest gender-based life challenge.

I have done the same job as men have done. I, in fact, today just turned in my dossier. My section chair is trying to get me promoted early because he thinks I have deserved it and earned it. ... Only to find out just a couple hours ago that [the university at which she works] doesn't really think I'm quite there yet. And I kind of sat there and I thought, '... I wonder if I was a man with that resume.' I have [dozens of] publications. I have [millions of dollars] in grants. ... I've given keynotes all over the world. ... I just sat there and I thought, 'Are you kidding me?' ... There was that twinge in me that thought ... how particularly white men, and I consider myself privileged as a white female in comparison to others, but how white men, they do what they want.

I've been thinking a lot about Hillary [Clinton (the interview was during the 2016 presidential campaigns)], because ... people are like, 'Well, she's just harsh.' And then I'm like, 'Yeah, but if she was soft you'd say she's a soft woman.' She can't win because you call her a bitch otherwise or she's ... too soft. So she's ... trying to be somewhere in the middle and she can't win. And I think that actually exemplifies how a lot of women feel in this career. You have to tread in a different way than my male counterparts have had to.

Here Lena points to injustices that are widely experienced by women in patriarchal cultures. In the US, women make 79 cents for every dollar men make (Sheider & Gould, 2016). They also find that often no matter what they do, they 'can't win.' One of the markers of being oppressed, in this case of being oppressed as a woman, is the experience of double binds. Marilyn Frye (1983) summarizes this aspect of oppression:

One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found 'difficult' or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's

livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean bitter angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and murder.

In addition to the double bind of personality characteristics, Lena describes another double bind in her life that is common to women: The impossible expectation of having or doing it all. The hurdles are higher for women with regard to pay, yet the belief that women can and should ‘have it all’ persists (Tajlili, 2014). In response to the interview question about an ‘insight or realization event,’ Lena talked about living up to her mother:

She was this, and that, and whatever else, and then she did all this. . . . She really made a kind of like a career [of volunteering.] And yeah, she was always there for me. And I guess the insight . . . that I regularly have is that you can’t be her. . . . I have the desire to be very involved in my kids’ school and their activities, and I do quite a bit. But sometimes . . . I find myself trying to measure myself up to my mom and everything that she did. She baked the cookies, and whatever. She made all our clothes, she’d knit, she’d this, she sewed, and then she did all of this wonderful volunteer stuff in the community. So there’s regular occasions where I have these insights that . . . she didn’t have a career. I mean she didn’t have to give at least 40 to 50 hours of her week to an institution, to an organization for payment, right?

Even though Lena knows conceptually that her mother did all that volunteering while not having a paid career, Lena still falls into the trap of feeling that she should be able to volunteer to the extent that her mother did. This trap or hurdle ties in with the cultural master narratives, and well-researched biases promulgated by these narratives, around mothers and work. The Center for Worklife Law describes the hurdle faced by mothers in the workplace as the ‘Maternal Wall’ (retrieved from <http://www.genderbiasbingo.com>). Good moms don’t work; good employees aren’t moms. Later we examine Lena’s struggles with work–life balance, part of which was an extension of gender issues in society.

However, Lena’s mother far from served exclusively as a source of unrealistic ideals. Lena chose her mother as her role model:

She’s remarkable, she’s smart. But the values she instilled in us were, to be honest, to work hard, to believe in ourselves, to give. She’s a giver. And to be straight, you know, just to be a straight shooter. . . . I think she is who I am today. I think she always taught us to be humble but to aspire. To never brag, but to be proud of ourselves. . . . Yeah, she’s just remarkable. I mean she’s not without her own failings. . . . Because I think there are probably things about my marriage that emulate hers a little bit that I’m not terribly thrilled with. I’m not sure I’m as good of a compromiser as I should be in my personal life. I think it’s great not to compromise when you’re doing advocacy, but you have to know how to compromise in other parts of your life I think, and my mom’s not good at that. . . . But she’s . . . you know, anybody that tells you that, ‘You can be whatever you wanna be,’ to me, that’s the biggest gift you can give your children.

Lena’s mother played roles of mostly inspiration and support but also ongoing conflict in Lena’s life story.

Finally, in response to the question about ‘becoming yourself while growing up in your family,’ Lena frames an internal struggle in terms of gender—at least in part. She said:

I have always been very intimidated by my position in the family, my gender in the family. Even though I had a mom who was very supportive . . . my brothers are brilliant. To be the third child, but to be the one who has to work the hardest to do even somewhat as well as they did is really, really hard. I don't know if gender ever came into the mix for me. But you know when you have a brother who again gets a perfect SAT, and blah, blah, blah, and was brilliant, has a photographic memory. . . . And then you have your next brother who's charismatic but also brilliant. And then I come along . . .

And I just remember thinking, 'I'll never be as good as them. You just never will.' And I remember my mom saying, and probably my dad, too, 'You just have to be the best that you can be. You're not competing with your brothers.' And I remember actually my oldest brother, when we were talking, he would say, 'You have many attributes that I wish I had. You can form relationships, I can't. You can work with people, I don't.' And so I actually kinda see myself now as brains are a dime a dozen. Do I wish I had a little bit more intellectual capacity? You bet. Do I wish that I didn't necessarily always have to work as hard? Uh-huh. But . . . *watch out for a woman who has above average intelligence and a work ethic.* And that's who I think I am. (emphasis added)

In this response, Lena framed a sense of intellectual inferiority in her youth in terms of gender. While she also said, effectively, that the issue is a matter of upward social comparison within any domain of abilities, the lesson she takes from this story is in terms of gender.

### Challenges in relationships

The interviewees described challenges in relationships in response to just about every question in the life story interview. Only two questions dealt explicitly with relationships: a major life decision in relationships and an interpersonal loss. In addition, both Sharon and Lena described relationship challenges in responses to questions on their 'greatest life challenge,' low points and personal development. Sharon's relationship challenges took on an either-or quality at which point her life course took one direction or another. In contrast, Lena framed her relationship challenges mostly as matters of personal efforts toward balance. Yet both Sharon and Lena narrated their personal paths of cultivating the virtue of generativity amid these challenges.

#### Sharon

Sharon's overarching theme in her life story is helping others, which she has lived out in both her work and her family—most prominently in recent years helping her older sister. In response to the question on life's 'single greatest challenge,' Sharon said that 'the biggest one would be my older sister's . . . dementia.' Sharon's family discovered the illness some 20 years prior to the interview. A 'huge snowfall' had hit, and the neighbors said that she did not shovel the driveway and that they had not seen Sharon's older sister, who 'was living alone.' They called the police who found the sister in the house, 'with garbage because she wasn't cleaning up after herself or taking care of herself.' She was eventually diagnosed with a degenerative neurological disease that causes dementia. Later the siblings realized that their mother had the same illness, but the mother died of cancer without having been diagnosed with the cause of her dementia.

Sharon also described her sister's illness in response to the interview question of a low point in life:

The past 20 years have been a low point. . . . We knew my sister . . . had this dementia. She started in her late 30s, but we got the diagnosis when she was 44. . . . Because we found out that it was genetic through our whole family and there was a second sister who is five years younger than me displaying the same signs, although she was older at the onset of her symptoms than my [older] sister. . . . And now another sister has it and now we know it's a specific gene and people can be tested, so we know other members of the family have it.

She had originally thought that her sister would have the illness for about eight to 10 years. As of the interview, she had been caring for her sister for 20 years, eventually quitting a career that she loved to do. She described this period as 'my biggest chapter and my biggest heartache in my life.' At the time of the interview, her sister had been functioning for years now 'at like a one-year-old level.' Most of the time her sister is 'pretty mute. She doesn't really say much. She can sing, especially Beatles' songs. Yeah, she knows music and she loves Paul McCartney and The Beatles and all that stuff, so we play that a lot,' ending a painful story on a pleasurable note, consonant with her tendency to interpret difficult life events with redemption sequences.

In response to a question about 'a particular point when you said to yourself, "I need to forge my own path"' in life, Sharon responded:

There may have been a point when that could have happened. But when my [older] sister got sick . . . everybody but my youngest sister [who was in high school] was married . . . I was the only one at that point who wasn't tied down with family and young kids, I was the only one at that point who could easily uproot . . . so I went and stayed with her. And that's been probably the most defining moment of my life up to that point. . . . I was 41. So it was the biggest thing. And so to look at getting married and having kids, it was not going to happen for me.

Never throughout the interview did Sharon frame her decision to provide care for her older sister—or her other sister or her mother (see below)—as a *decision per se*. Rather, she framed these decisions as a matter of circumstance: Her sister fell ill, and her other siblings' life conditions prohibited them from taking on the task of being the primary caregiver, as Sharon told the story. Here we see Sharon fulfilling the cultural master narrative of woman as *assumed* caretaker (Tronto, 1993): If not she, then who? In any case, the theme of generativity for Sharon is a matter of action, not mere ideology.

In the early years of caring for her older sister, she also took on the caring for a younger sister who had the same disease, around the time that her family got the diagnosis that her sisters' degenerative neurological disease was genetic.

So we decided that we would [move to her younger sister's city]. I would quit my job, and I had been 12 years with this firm, very successful. But I had decided that . . . this was what needed to be done at this point because there wasn't anybody else to step in and help my younger sister. We were already sending her money to help pay her rent. . . . But then with my [older] sister full-time, I had no idea really what I was getting myself into.

Here we get a snapshot of Sharon's tendency and capacity to drop everything to help her family. We note also that, despite the difficulty of this and other narrative episodes, she conveyed events as though she took them all in stride—recalling her primary, self-stated virtue in life: patience. The time with this younger sister was difficult physically

and emotionally, yet she notes how much she enjoyed living in that part of the country. She concluded the above episode by saying, ‘A door closes and another door opens’—yet another redemption sequence.

In addition to the challenges surrounding her family’s illnesses, Sharon described a few other challenging situations in relationships with boyfriends and her father. In response to the interview question about major life decisions in relationships, she said:

Well, when I was 30 I had my last very serious relationship and almost got married. And we were together for about two and a half years. I found him cheating on me. ... And I don’t know if he was threatened by me going back to school or what was going on, but we had kind of grown apart. So it was really ... it was a quick decision to break up because he was cheating on me, but it had been oncoming for several months. ... And it turns out it was a blessing in disguise.

Again we see the narrative tone of redemption in Sharon’s life story.

With regard to her father, Sharon described the time she had discovered that her father, who has since died, had lived with a woman other than his wife and had had other affairs over the years. She said:

Finding that out ... was devastating to me, with my relationship with him. And I was a typical girl where I always looked up to my dad and he could do no wrong. ... But finding out what was really going on really went from here in my estimation of men in my life to the gutter, he was down in the gutter. ... And so finding out about him, I think, has lowered my feelings towards guys in general. I’m just like, ‘If I can’t trust my dad, who else can I trust?’

At this point Sharon has provided two stories of her parents—one in which her mother did not teach her about menstruation, and another in which her father betrayed her mother and children.

What these stories might say about Sharon’s development of personality and virtues is difficult to say beyond mere speculation. However, we do know that, despite these betrayals, Sharon went on to live a life of caring for others. She ends her interview with a story about how she is working with a national health service on research and creating videos on the process of home health care for disabled individuals. Not only does this story serve as a broader redemptive sequence in the arc of her 20 years of caring for her sister, this story also features the prosocial goals of a generativity script (see [Table 1](#)).

### **Lena**

Lena chose her wedding day as her high point in life, despite being hesitant to do so, because doing so was ‘cliché.’ (Indeed it is one of the more common topics for high points.) Despite this high point and the fact that she and her husband were still married, she responded to the interview question about the ‘single greatest challenge you’ve faced in your entire life,’ by saying, ‘I think having a successful marriage is the most difficult challenge.’ She immediately followed by saying:

I did not appreciate the difficulties of having a cross-cultural marriage ... I underestimated what that would entail, what that could mean, how we might view the world a bit differently. I underestimated how my childhood and his childhood were so very different.

With that, while we parent actually very similarly . . . co-parenting has not been that much of a struggle . . .

Sometimes I have not given everything that I can to my marriage. It's hard to be a mom and to give everything you can to your kids, right? You view them as needing more than maybe your spouse. And from a career standpoint, I'm very career-oriented, but at this point, too, I'm also the only person that is working. So I feel a lot of extra pressure around, you know, sustaining a certain financial, you know, income just because we have a kid in college and another one coming along the way.

In this excerpt Lena pointed to numerous facets of her life, dynamically interacting to create the background and reasons for her life's greatest challenge of a successful marriage. On the relatively smooth-going side, she noted that her husband and she approach parenting on the same page. On the challenging side, she lists their different cultural backgrounds, the pressures of balancing time and effort in the domains of work and family, the financial challenges of sending kids to college, an admission of intermittent selfishness, the ebb and flow of stresses in a married life over the years, and the striving for an 'authentic' and 'healthy' relationship. The ideal expressed here of 'having it all'—and the stresses of trying to balance a life to have it all—runs throughout Lena's life story. We return to the work–life balance issue in the next section.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges to marriage, Lena said that the relationship between her mother and husband has been a consistent source of struggle. 'I feel like I am just squished in the middle [like] the piece of meat between two pieces of bread, and it's Wonder Bread. And it's very squishy. And I just keep getting squeezed.' She described how this dynamic presents her with an ongoing struggle: This 'issue in my life has been the most difficult issue to navigate. . . . And it has continued for 22 years. And they're both good people. I love both of them dearly.'

Her children's ethnicity has led to discrimination at school. In response to the interview question about a 'social justice challenge,' Lena said:

I parent two kids who identify themselves as Mexican-American, right? So how they navigate the world is so very different than how I ever thought my kids would have to navigate the world. That's hard for me. It's hard for me to hear my son say to me, 'I don't like the police. I'm afraid of the police . . . I look Mexican.' And that's not a good thing when it comes to relationships with authorities. . . .

[It] made me think about how my children do navigate this world. And . . . how U.S. policies [. . . have] set up this feeding system to incarcerate children of color. And not just children of color . . . I can't be in the field that I'm in and not realize all the social injustices that exist based on race, and ethnicity, and wealth, etc., but boy, I did not realize the deep-seated policies . . .

[My] kids will tell me . . . they're happy I'm their mom because they know that I will fight for them . . . and that I'm a very good advocate. And when I have seen injustice in their lives . . . I have made [people] re-think their decisions based on what I thought were discriminatory policies and practices that were impacting my kids. So then I've been successful on every front because I'm tenacious.

Here we see how Lena's intellectual, professional and societal concerns for generativity merge with her personal, family struggles. We also see the narrative tone of redemption.

Despite these and other challenges in her family life, Lena presented a generally positive portrait of her relationships with her parents, her husband, her children and one of her brothers. She said that her current life chapter—her children’s ‘transition to college’—was going well. Her older child is in college, ‘so now we’re just in this transition period. We’ve got a junior in high school and we’re just trying to enjoy the couple of years that we have left with him. And soon we’ll be empty-nesters.’

## Challenges at work

Interviewees described challenges in their work lives in response to the question of a major life decision in one’s work life but elsewhere as well. Notably, both Sharon and Lena focused on work challenges in response to the question about a ‘social justice challenge.’ Both Sharon and Lena had careers that were directly dedicated to overcoming social injustices. As with her relationships challenges, Sharon framed her work challenges as either–or decision points, revolving primarily around family illnesses. As with her relationship challenges, Lena framed her work challenges largely as a problem of life balance (balances with family or with personal health), with one important exception.

### Sharon

Sharon noted that she had made several major decisions in her work career. In response to the interview question about a major life decision in her work life, she focused on a decision not only that involved several challenges that she was facing in her relationships but also that led to a subsequent major decision in her work life:

I’ve had many different jobs in my life, but I guess the big one was when I left being a [social services worker] after 10 years ... I was pretty burnt out at this point ... I was going through a lot of interpersonal stuff [with an abusive boyfriend and] we had had an intervention with my mother for her drinking [which eventually was discovered to have its roots in her neurological disease].

And I decided ... because my dad wasn’t home at that time, he was living with a mistress [and] wasn’t dealing with my mom’s problems ... ‘Okay, if I’m leaving [my career], then I’m just going to go back to [hometown] and help out with my mom’ ...

And ended up being better because I went to [university] for [training for legal profession]. And you know how you shut the door and another one opens? ... It really opened up a whole new world to me because becoming a [legal services professional] and going to [another state] was ... wonderful ... for 12 years at a firm that had national clients [and I] got to work on some pretty big cases.

In this episode Sharon anchors several of the relationship challenges mentioned earlier. Also we see the pattern of redemption sequences that characterized how Sharon narrated the difficult events in her life.

Finally, this excerpt showcases how several events in her life that were mentioned earlier coincided in this major life decision. We see also a feature of self-narration that is common: While people can abstractly differentiate life domains like love and work, people tend to narrate them together—a fact that reflects the overarching concern that

people have for balancing love and work in their life (and thus their life stories), especially in midlife (McAdams, 2013). Unlike more ideal circumstances, a *balance* between work and family concerns was not an option in Sharon's story: It would be work or family. The situation as she interpreted it was grave and demanded her physical presence, so she decided to quit the job, move and help the family. As told earlier, she did the same thing when her older sister develops her illness.

### **Lena**

Another theme throughout Lena's life story was *balance*. Earlier we saw her attempts to balance conflicts among family members. Here we focus on her striving toward work-life balance in two ways: between work and family and between her 'workaholic' tendencies and her health.

'I've always had a hard time balancing work and family,' she said when discussing a major life decision at work. 'I always have, it's been a point of difficulty in my marriage, that's the truth.' The major decision came from a period of an intense project at work.

I felt like I had the weight of the world on me, right? Because I had all these people that were counting on me ... I literally was getting four hours of sleep a night ... I had all these contract deliverables that were due, it was crazy, and I had to write this proposal ... I'd work until about 3:00 in the morning. I'd get up at 7:00 and I'd go again ...

I remember going to bed, and I remember feeling my heart. ... And I thought, 'Are you trying to kill yourself? I know you love your work and I know you're really impassioned by it,' but I laid there in bed saying, 'You're not Wonder Woman, you're not Superwoman. And if anybody died, if you die in this, they'll just find another body to replace you. The only people who will be impacted for the long-term was your family, who you say you care about.' ... So I saw my life flash in front of me. ... So it was that moment, it was June 28th at 3:00 in the morning [time zone], and I said, 'You need to reevaluate how you operate.'

So I've done a pretty good job. You know, I mean I have. My team says, 'You look much more relaxed,' I am. I take my computer home maybe because I surf and do stuff, but I don't really work at night anymore. I went on vacation for 10 days and I didn't check any email ... I'm much more balanced.

Lena described a difficult yet fortunate set of circumstances with regard to her work-family balance:

It's so hard to be a two-parent working family. ... How do you balance being a mom, a wife, and a really productive person who is not just going to a job but really wants a career? And there's a distinction for men and women ... I don't think I navigated [these years] all that well ... I'm thankful that my employers were very flexible. I didn't have to put my kids into daycare until they were nine months old ...

And I know that there were tradeoffs ... things I gave up by doing it, but I wouldn't change it for the world ... I mean I think they would've been fine if they had been in daycare five days a week, too, but I think you never get back those days and those precious moments, and I got to share many of them so I'm thankful ... I stayed with the same non-profit for 18 years. I climbed the ladder and made it to kind of the director of the division.

In this narrative Lena describes the personal effort and institutional support that constitute relatively ideal circumstances. Even in such a setting, she describes work-family balance as extremely difficult.

Overall, Lena's work stories focused on her dedication to the generative causes of her work as well as to balance between work, family and personal health. As she herself claimed, Lena has been fortunate even to be in the position of being remotely able to pursue a personally meaningful career and to balance it with the rest of her life. However, we wish to emphasize how difficult for Lena this balancing act has been—the anxiety, the interpersonal conflicts, the health risks—given that the impossible ideals of such a balancing act that come from cultural master narratives of a woman who 'has it all.'

## Discussion

The life stories of Sharon and Lena feature themes and scripts of generativity, along with the attendant conflicts that this theme both partly presented and partly resolved. As a form of the virtue of care that is especially salient in midlife, generativity requires not only commitments to communal concern but also the personal agency to take on the long-term project of helping others (McAdams et al., 1997). Thus the exercising of generativity inherently involves a balance or integration of agency and communion. However, here it is important to distinguish agency and communion from work and family. For both Sharon and Lena, their work lives—and not just their family involvements—were also venues for generativity. Thus, while both Sharon and Lena could exercise agency and communion through their generative acts, they each struggled in different ways with gendered predicaments. Sharon readily fell into the role of caregiver, which precluded paid work and an enjoyable career, resulting in 20 years of caring for her incapacitated sister, who had always been a role model to Sharon of a 'liberated woman.' Lena also fell into the role of primary caregiver for her family, struggling to 'have it all' (Tajlili, 2014) according not only to the cultural master narrative that women should have highly successful careers and families but also to her family's master narrative of her super-volunteer (but non-paid-working) mother.

Despite coming from materially comfortable circumstances, both interviewees faced unforeseen challenges and systematic injustices owing to their gender—conditions that forced them to make decisions on which of their personal virtues they would pursue. Through difficult decisions and sacrifice, both made tremendous efforts to live out the defining virtue of their lives—contributing to the welfare of others—even if the way or form in which they did so was not of their initial choosing. Where mistakes were made, in their eyes, they took corrective action, which may well contribute to the fact that they expressed a sense of meaningfulness in their life courses, as found in previous research on choices and regrets in midlife women (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). In the end, they lived out the motives for virtues with which they identified most, cultivating their own paths of virtuous development in the non-idealized circumstances of actual lives.

We hope that these case-study summaries shed light on what virtue development sounds like in the gendered, non-ideal contexts of women's lives. We find in these stories the prototypical generativity script (McAdams, 2013) of early advantage and recognition of others' suffering, the development of a clear moral framework (centered on generativity) around in their early twenties, repeated redemptive sequences, the balancing of agency and

communion, and prosocial goals for the future. Returning to the idea of balancing agency and communion, both Sharon and Lena portrayed this balance as coming through a path of considerable struggle (just as in almost all the life stories of midlife participants in the broader study). Their overarching theme and life motivation of generativity resolved some problems and created other problems—pointing to the facts that generativity is not an unalloyed good, just as virtues in general do not function as pure or perfected goods (Swanton, 2016). For both Sharon and Lena, a career of generativity resolved a deep conviction that their families and the world needed help and that they could do something about it. For Sharon, the needs of her family were so dire that she sacrificed a personally meaningful career. For Lena, the ideals and prejudices of those around her presented an ongoing source of frustration and anxiety. We emphasize the specifically gendered conditions of their struggle—having to provide care for others in ways that the men in their lives were not remotely expected to provide or sacrifice. And yet, despite these highly gendered, ‘burdened virtues’ (Tessman, 2005), these women successfully lived out their most cherished virtue—generativity—with a view of the future that they could have a positive impact on those who are disadvantaged or otherwise suffering.

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