

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The ten stories: Intergenerational transfer of values

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**Abstract**

**Rationale:** A troubling phenomenon for caregivers of elderly parents is their tendency to tell the same stories over and over. Repeated storytelling raises concerns about cognitive decline and memory loss and is often considered a disturbing harbinger of the possible onset of dementia.

**Purpose:** This research aims to show that repeatedly told stories are important vehicles for intergenerational transmission of values.

**Methods:** Using a narrative inquiry approach, this research involved structured interviews with middle-aged adult children, asking them to tell us the stories they felt they were hearing or had heard repeatedly from their aging parent. Interviews were taped and transcribed, then coded for temporality, purpose and content.

**Results:** Based on 126 stories told to 13 participants, it can be confirmed that there are approximately ten stories that older parents repeatedly tell to their adult children, mostly about experiences in their teens and twenties. The majority of the stories are told for the purpose of consolidating the elder's identity or sharing wisdom with the adult child. Key themes in the stories include seeking a better life, youthful fun, upholding standards, sticking together and doing what's right. These themes reflect the significant events and prevailing values of the early to mid-twentieth century.

**Conclusion:** This research offers a more constructive way for caregivers to hear the repeated stories told by their aging parents and to offer their loved one the gift of knowing they have been seen and heard.

**KEYWORDS**

intergenerational transfer, narrative inquiry, reminiscence, values

## INTRODUCTION

Recent national-level statistics in both Canada and the United States tell us that 25%–30% of people classify themselves as caregivers to elderly, ill or disabled family members or friends [1,2]. While this role can be rewarding in many respects, it can also be challenging and exhausting, especially when layered on top of other responsibilities [3–5]. A troubling phenomenon reported by many caregivers is the repetition of a finite set of stories over and over again. Repeated storytelling can be alarming to caregivers, as it raises concerns about cognitive decline and memory

loss and may be a disturbing harbinger of the possible onset of dementia.

Reminiscing and telling stories is an essential human process that has been recognised since earliest times for its social and personal importance [6,7]. Neuroscientists claim that storytelling has practical survival value for individuals and communities [8], while social scientists point to social and psychological benefits [9,10]. Bohlheimer and colleagues [6] showed that life reminiscence has an effect comparable to that of anti-depressant medication or cognitive-behavioural therapy for overcoming depression among elders.

Storytelling becomes especially important when people become aware of their mortality – when they are ill, suffering or facing death. Reminiscence and storytelling have been described as universal experiences associated with ageing [10–12]. Stories are infused with latent meaning that the teller is seeking to communicate with the listener [13,14]. Autobiographical storytelling often reflects culturally and historically normative events and patterns and may be motivated by cognitive dissonance with contemporary cultural scripts [6,10].

People tell stories as they contemplate their lives for eight specific reasons: to consolidate identity; to solve problems in the present or future; to deal with old hurts or conflicts from the past; to maintain connection with absent loved ones; to teach or inform others; to participate in social conversations, to prepare for death; and to reduce boredom [9,15]. This eight-factor structure has been empirically confirmed using structural equation modelling [16].

The specific purpose of this research was to examine the stories that elderly parents repeatedly told to their middle-aged children in the context of a caregiving role. The hypothesis was that repeated storytelling was a form of inter-generational transmission of values, and that the themes of these repeated stories would substantiate that expectation. The ultimate purpose was to alleviate the burden on caregivers by offering a new and more constructive way to hear the stories that have been heard many times before, and that can be otherwise perceived as alarming.

## METHOD

### Design

The study used a narrative inquiry approach to identify the meaning incorporated in repeatedly told stories from aging parents to their middle-aged children. The narrative approach captured the stories as they were received by caregivers. This choice was made to permit inclusion of stories told by parents who were already deceased, as well as those not capable of participating in the semi-structured interview, thereby maintaining a consistent perspective. It also overcame the tendency when telling one's own stories to curate them for positive effect [10,17,18].

### Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 13 adult children (6 sons and 7 daughters) who acted as primary supporters for aging parents (6 fathers, 5 mothers/2 aunts). Parents ranged in age from 78 to 93, and adult children ranged in age from 51 to 71. Participants were eligible for the study

if they self-identified as a primary caregiver and felt they had repeatedly heard a finite set of stories from their aging parent. Participants were recruited as volunteers to the study through community agencies serving seniors, media outreach, as well as through word-of-mouth.

### Data collection

Data were collected through telephone interviews by a single trained interviewer. The semi-structured interview was designed to elicit the ten stories with as little interference as possible. Caregivers were asked to relate the stories they felt they had heard repeatedly from their aging parent. Interviewees were invited to prepare for the interview by making some notes about the ten (plus or minus) stories they wished to tell, and as far as possible to tell the stories as their parent would have told them. The calls were recorded and transcribed verbatim as qualitative data. Field notes were kept to add information about the emotional tone of the interview and interviewer observations, as well as any other details that the transcript would have been unlikely to capture.

### Data analysis

From the verbatim transcripts, minor editing was undertaken to smooth out the narratives and create coherent story sets. These story sets were returned to the interviewee for member-checking, and once verified were entered in the data set, along with demographic data associated with each story: role of the storyteller (mother or father), role of the interviewee (son or daughter), parent's and child's date of birth and country of origin.

Open coding was initially conducted in an attempt to capture the themes embodied in the stories, with particular attention to characteristics such as sensory vividness, emotional intensity, repetition within and between stories [19]. The constant comparison method was used to collapse categories and resolve themes. Coding was verified by at least one additional researcher, who was not only oriented to the emerging coding structure but also encouraged to challenge it and add to it. The final coding structure is diagrammed in Figure 1.

A second layer of coding used a priori codes to observe whether stories conformed to the eight purposes of reminiscence outlined above [15]. Specific guidance for coding these 8 purposes was derived from the Reminiscence Functions Scale [16].

A third layer of coding sought to confirm the finding in the literature that the majority of stories told by elders as part of life review emerge from the 2nd and 3rd decades of life [18].

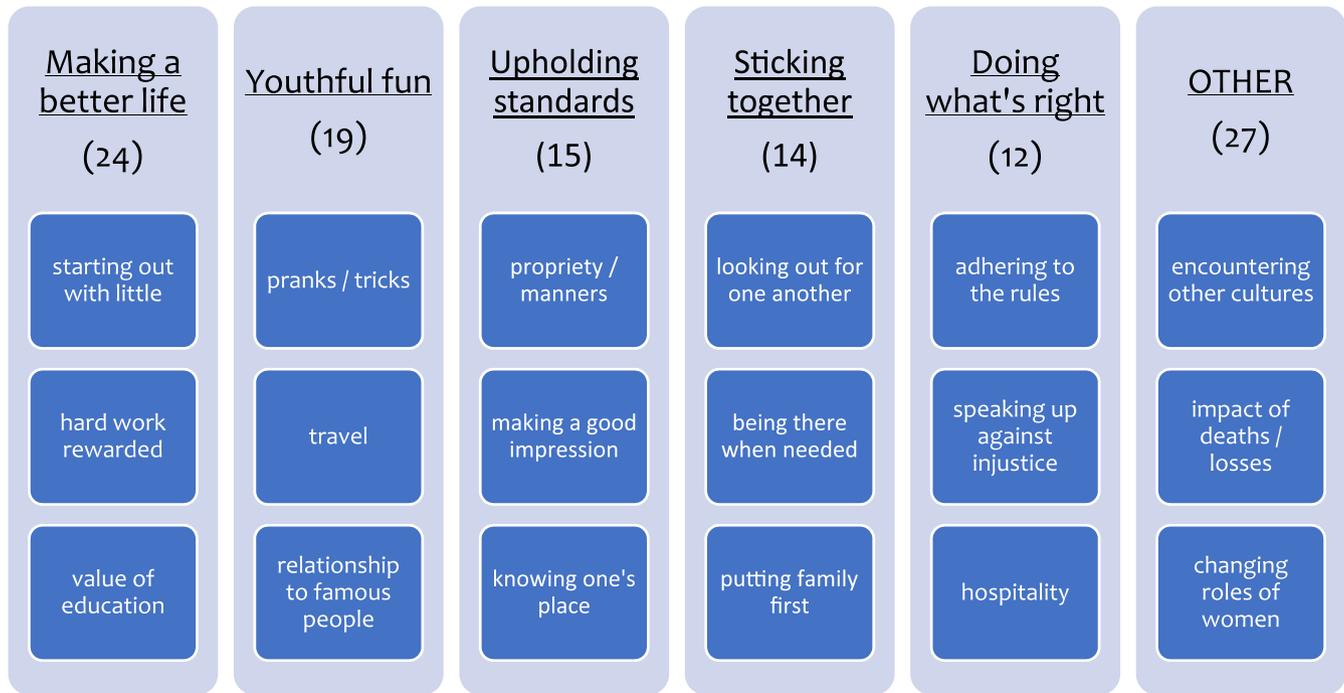


FIGURE 1 Coding chart for themes from ten stories

The study was conducted in compliance with ethical approval granted by Queen's University Health Sciences Research Ethics Board.

## RESULTS

Interviews with 13 participants produced 126 stories, which served as the data for the study.

### Themes found in the stories

The stories readily resolved into 8 themes, detailed here in order of number of stories associated with each.

The most commonly expressed theme related to *seeking a better life* for one's family – totalling 24 stories. A number of our participants' parents left Europe after the war and moved to Canada to start afresh with a young family – some farmed, some moved for industrial or manufacturing jobs. Two stories referred to moving to warmer climates for the health of a sick child.

My brother was diagnosed with rheumatic fever and the local country doctor told our parents that the best thing to do was to move to a warmer climate. So my father gave up his government job, sold our home, and moved us all to California.

[David]

A sub-theme in many of these stories involves *starting out with very little* and making a home in humble surroundings. One story talks about packing all the family's possessions in a crate made from an up-turned table and bringing it across the ocean to start anew. Another young couple started out in an apartment with a shared bathroom, where the husband had to stand guard while his wife took a bath.

Another sub-theme referred to *hard work being rewarded* – taking on multiple jobs, withstanding hardships, never giving up.

I stayed on at the shipyard, and over time, my skills and work ethic were recognized and I was offered more and more responsibility, and along with that came an increase in salary and in status.

[Alan]

A third sub-theme was the promise of *education* to lead to a better life. Elderly parents referred to their own and their parents' determination that they be educated and acquire specialised skills in order to secure a more prosperous future.

The second theme, made up of 19 stories, related to *youthful fun*, and told of exciting and amusing experiences, particularly as a young person. Given the wartime experience of this cohort, there were several stories about how they spent VE (Victory in Europe) and VJ (Victory in Japan) Days. One gentleman recalls dressing up in his Boy Scout

uniform and going out in the streets with the hope of cashing in on some of the kissing that was going on with servicemen! There were also several stories of pranks or mischief played on others, all told by fathers. A number of stories featured travel adventures undertaken as young persons, including hitch-hiking, motorcycling and trekking.

Also within this theme are classified a number of stories about the importance of being able to see the funny side and being able to make others laugh. One interviewee heard the story of her parent being an evacuee in the war and using her sense of humour to secure her place in this strange home. Finally, there were a number of stories classified in this section about being related to or knowing famous people in their youth. These stories are categorised here as they seemed intended to convey that the parent had a rich and interesting life.

A third theme included 15 stories about the need to *uphold standards*. These included stories about needing to dress properly for certain occasions and situations, to keep one's home clean and in good repair and to demonstrate good manners at all times.

Meals began and ended with prayer. The family rosary was an evening ritual. She ensured we would all dress in our Sunday best for mass at the local parish.

[Emerentia]

During the war, our family took in an evacuee from London – a Cockney child who arrived with lice. The boy had uncultured speech and awkward habits, such as wiping his nose on his sleeve – something we knew better than to do.

[Alan]

These ideas seem somewhat quaint and anachronistic in our contemporary culture, but they were clearly important to the elders. One father is remembered as commenting on the state of the farms in the area and lamenting that the farmers must lack pride to keep their barns and yards in such a state.

There are also several stories about the need to *make a good impression* – to be on time, to be responsible, to fulfil your promises, to do good work.

My father spoke with the owner of the company, where he had worked his whole career. He represented me as a responsible and diligent boy, and I was offered a job on the spot, on the strength of my father's endorsement.

[Thomas]

Finally, there were a number of stories categorised in this theme relating to *knowing one's place*. These stories referred to gender roles, social status and other social markers. One parent told a fascinating allegorical story that appears to express this theme:

We had a cat that lived with the pigs, and shared the pigs' food. The dog was allowed in the house, but never the cat. It stayed with the pigs. Even after the war, when the pig operation was sold, the cat stayed down at the barn and never came up to the house.

[Albert]

Although the link was never made explicit, one can only assume that the point of this story had something to do with understanding social location and knowing where you are and are not welcome.

A fourth theme is called *sticking together* and refers to 14 stories about the importance of family and friends. These stories include siblings looking out for one another, friends being there when you need them, and several stories about putting the family first – even to the point of forfeiting dreams to do what the family requires. There were also a couple of cautionary tales about families bickering or speaking harshly to or about one another.

With five girls, you can imagine there were some spats, some hurt feelings, some resentments. They were never allowed to go to bed mad. They had to get things ironed out before problems got too big to reconcile.

[Gwen]

The fifth theme contained 12 stories about *doing what's right*. Several stories had to do with *adhering to the rules*, and there being no special treatment, regardless of who you were. There were stories about shortages during the war and rationing aimed at ensuring fair distribution of scarce resources. These storytellers were insistent that the rules must be applied equally to everyone, and there must be no bending of the rules, despite entreaties to make an exception.

This theme also contained a sub-theme about *speaking up* against injustice or wrong-doing. One story referred to migrant workers being paid less than domestic workers and knowing that was not right. Another disturbing story referred to generally known child abuse that went unreported.

Finally, there were several stories in this theme on *hospitality*, and the expectation that people would extend a welcome and share what they had. Three stories referred to hobos, or itinerant men seeking work during

the Depression, and the memory of families sharing what little they had with these desperate individuals.

My Dad had a job during the Depression, but many men did not. We called them hoboes. They travelled on foot or 'rode the rails', and slept in barns or sheds. Many times, they stopped at the back door and asked through the screen for a bit of something to eat. My mother never refused and never judged, even though we did not have much to spare. She reminded us how lucky we were not to have to beg or go without.

[Gwen]

Three more minor themes emerged, consisting of 10 or fewer stories each. Stories about *encountering other cultures* (10 stories) were told by a number of our interviewees' parents who had grown up in expatriate communities and had fascinating experiences of travel and privilege. Several of the stories in this theme revealed surprising and unexpected kindness from people of different cultures.

There were also stories about *the impact of deaths/losses* (10 stories), particularly related to the war and to infant death.

A part of my mother died that day in August 1944, when the military chaplain came up the long driveway in a black car with the news of Hubert's death while on active duty in France. I can still hear my mother's high-pitched wail to this day, 77 years later.

[Theresa]

Finally, there were a small number of stories that had to do with *changing women's roles* [7], reflecting on differences since the time of the storytellers' youth.

Women were not allowed to go on the altar or participate in the mass. But we worked with the Catholic Women's League for married women in the Church to be addressed using their own name instead of their husband's name.

[Theresa]

## Purposes of storytelling

The second level of coding involved analysing our bank of stories according to a priori codes associated with the 8 purposes of storytelling [13] (see Table 1). Two of the codes were eliminated because we have no context for the

situation within which the stories were told; therefore, we were unable to assess whether stories were told to solve a current or anticipated problem or to alleviate boredom. We also did not use the code 'to prepare for death', since this was not explicitly mentioned by any of the interviewees.

Of the remaining five available codes, the most commonly seen were stories told to *consolidate identity* (59; 47%), and stories intended to *instruct or inform* (35; 28%). These accounted for three-quarters of all the stories told. Thirteen stories (10%) related to *resolving old hurts* or regrets; eleven (9%) seemed designed to *keep alive the memory* of a loved one, and the remaining 8 (6%) seemed simply designed to *entertain or participate* in conversation.

## The reminiscence bump

Finally, we coded the data according to the age of the storyteller in each story. We classified each episode as taking place before or after the age of 30. Consistent with the 'reminiscence bump' described in the literature [18,20], 87% of the stories told to our interviewees were from their parent's youth. Six of the thirteen storytellers told all of their stories from the period of their lives before they were 30 – when they were growing up, going to school, starting their careers and starting a family.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyse the content of stories told by aging parents to their adult children, in an attempt to shed light on the phenomenon of repeated storytelling, and the possible meaning conveyed in these intergenerational conversations. Almost half (47%) of all self-identified care providers are adult children who offer support to their parents or parents-in-law. Our sample almost exactly represents the gender balance found in the population – 7 daughters and 6 sons (54% vs. 46%) [2].

Our assumption was confirmed that ten stories was about the right number to capture the repeated stories told by parents to their adult children. A focus on ten allowed interviewees to feel that they had done justice to their parent's stories, while not feeling overwhelmed by the task. Four of our respondents came up with only 9, but most had no difficulty with the concept of ten stories.

Our findings also confirmed a common observation about personal reminiscence after mid-life that the bulk of stories told in older age arise from the 2nd and 3rd decades of the teller's life [17,18]. Draaisima offers three theoretical explanations for this [21]. It could be because, neurophysiologically speaking, the brain and memory are at their peak at  $20 \pm 5$  years of age, and many more memories

**TABLE 1** Participants' stories by purpose (a la Webster, 1998;  $n = 126$  stories)

	Consolidate identity	Teach / inform	Deal w/ old hurts	Connect absent loved ones	Entertain participate	Y / O <sup>a</sup>	M / F
ALAN	7	2	1			10 / 0	M
ALBERT	6	3				6 / 3	M
DAVID	1	5			3	6 / 3	M
ELAINE	3	2	3	2		9 / 1	F
EMERENTIA	2	2	3	2	1	7 / 3	F
GWEN	4	6				8 / 2	F
JACK	7	2				9 / 0	M
LOIS	1	1	6	2		9 / 1	F
LYNDA	8	2		1		7 / 3	F
ROSE	7	2				9 / 0	F
THERESA	8	1		1		10 / 0	F
THOMAS 1	3	3		2	2	10 / 0	M
THOMAS 2	2	4		2	2	10 / 0	M
TOTAL	59	35	13	11	8	110 / 16	6 / 7
%	47	28	10	9	6	87 / 13	46 / 54

<sup>a</sup>Y = story set  $\leq 30$  yoa; O = story set  $> 30$  yoa.

are stored as a result, thus increasing the probability that a memory from this time will be selected for re-telling. Furthermore, metacognitive capacity is sufficiently developed by late adolescence to permit reflection on events and their meaning [7].

A second possible explanation for the reminiscence bump is that stories associated with this period shaped the individual's identity, and they continue to reinforce the coherence of the life narrative from past to present. The various stories coalesce into a world-view or perspective that is carried forward through life [7].

Finally, stories from the teens and twenties may be told more often because they represent 'firsts' that took place in these two decades – first job, first love, first loss, first home. These emotionally important experiences are more likely to be remembered and repeated than the more neutral experiences, and this finding has held true across cultures [18].

These stories from the second and third decades also coincide with and reinforce the cultural expectations of the time. Steiner and colleagues found that 66% of stories told by their sample involved education and career, 50% involved a physical move, and 20% related to the birth of children [18]. Similarly the most common theme in this research also reflected moving, being educated and establishing a good reputation through skill and diligence.

A number of the stories reflect the historical cohort of the storytellers, most of whom were born between 1915 and 1930, and spent their youth during the Great Depression and the Second World War. Stories emerged

about rationing, going without, adhering to the rules, starting out with little, having to make your own fun, as well as several stories about loss of loved ones or of property. This is consistent with the urge to bear witness to the times in which one came of age, especially if those times were dramatic or memorable [17,21]. One can anticipate that stories told by people who grew up in contemporary time will seek to record the formative effect that the COVID-19 pandemic on the trajectory of their lives. Bruner also refers to the effect of major events in the environment of life narratives, such that individuals become 'variants of the culture's canonical forms' (p.694). [11]

The majority of stories told by our interviewees' parents coincided with two of the eight reasons why people tell stories – to reinforce identity, and to instruct or educate. Reinforcing identity is one of the key tasks of the latter stage of life. It is part to the fulfilment of Erikson's final stage of life, devoted to reconciling the whole of life, with its joys and sorrows, triumphs and regrets, achievements and disappointments [22]. The consolidation of the personal myth in older age serves to summarise who we are, what is important to us, and what we stand for. It is the meta-narrative that the teller wants the world to know about him or her. It is referred to by some authors as constructed autobiography or narrative identity. [7,11]

The second most common reason for telling stories appeared to be to educate or instruct. According to Kotre, parents never stop shaping, guiding or alerting their children to what they think is important and how it might

affect their lives [17]. Our data suggest that the stories told by parents to their adult children are curated specifically for the one to whom they are being told and are a reflection of the relationship between teller and receiver [17]. They may also fulfil a key parental role of older parents in keeping the family together [4]. Memories maintain the social fabric of family and provide a link between generations [23]. These would be classified as transmissive stories according to Kotre, passing on wisdom and values, rather than instrumental/problem-solving or reconciliatory stories. [17]

Consistent with our expectations, the themes appear to represent the inter-generational transmission of values – values like working hard, getting an education, upholding standards, sticking together and doing what's right. The themes resonate with what we know about the generation of parents whose children are currently middle-aged, for whom the emphasis on adherence to rules emphasises communalism over individualism and moral absolutism over relativism. These values that may appear somewhat quaint and anachronistic in today's world. The impetus to tell stories is reinforced when elders perceive that contemporary values diverge significantly from the values that prevailed in their lives [10]. Storytelling is a way in which elders reconcile the values of today with those that prevailed in their own formative years [24]

In conclusion, this study has shown that there are in fact about ten stories that older individuals tell repeatedly to those close to them. Those stories conform to expectations about the time period they represent – usually mostly from the teller's teens and twenties. They appear to mostly fulfil the purposes or reconciling the teller's identity and transmitting wisdom. The content of the stories reflects a number of key themes related to the intergenerational transmission of values. This research is intended to offer caregivers a constructive and positive lens through which to view the repeatedly told stories that can otherwise represent an added burden. Caregivers have the opportunity to give an incomparable gift when they receive their loved one's stories.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

MAM conducted interviews, data analysis and manuscript preparation.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by Queen's University Health Sciences Research Ethics Board.

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