Initiate, Bequeath, and Remember: Older Women's Transmission Role Within the Family

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Initiate, Bequeath, and Remember: Older Women’s Transmission Role Within the Family

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In social sciences, little attention has been paid to the role and functions of grandmothers in the family, and still less, to their role as legators and transmitters of values. Do older women have the impression they are transmitting or have transmitted something to succeeding generations? If so, what do they believe they are transmitting or have transmitted to their children and grandchildren? What legacies do they think it is important to leave for the next generation? How do they want to be remembered? These are the questions the authors answer in this article, based on a qualitative research of 25 in-depth interviews conducted with three generations of older women (65–74, 75–84, and 85 and older) from Quebec.

KEYWORDS aging women, grandmothers, intergenerational transmission, values, legacy, family memories

INTRODUCTION

For several years now, the grandparental figure, and particularly the grandmaternal figure, has taken on great importance due to demographic and social change and modifications in family configurations (Attias-Donfut, Lapierre, & Segalen, 2002). Simply on a statistical level, Canadian data show that roughly 75% of people aged 65 and older are grandparents, each of them with an average of 4.7 grandchildren (Statistics Canada, 2007; Rosenthal
& Gladstone, 2000). Women, with their greater life expectancy, generally become grandmothers in their early fifties and continue to hold this role for some 30 years. However, even though there has been much research on the ties between grandparents and their grandchildren and the exchanges and services between generations in families, particularly the female lines, little attention has been paid to the role and functions of grandmothers in the family, and still less to their role in intergenerational transmission. Yet, from a sociological standpoint, this is an important question because through their experience and knowledge of family history and wide range of other experiences, these women are in their own way the “transmitters” of family memory. Do older women have the impression they are transmitting or have transmitted something to succeeding generations? If so, what do they believe they are transmitting or have transmitted to their children and grandchildren? What legacies do they think it is important to leave for the next generation? How do they want to be remembered? These are the questions we want to answer in this article, following a brief description of the theoretical and methodological aspects of our study.2

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In sociology, and specifically in sociology of the family, the concept of transmission is closely related to the concepts of socialization and social reproduction that were central to the thinking of most of its theoreticians, from Durkheim (1922) to Mead (1934), Parsons (Parsons & Bales, 1955), Bourdieu (1966), and Dubar (2000). Durkheim considered that socialization was a mode of transmission involving the “action exercised by adult generations on those who are not yet ready to participate in the social sphere” [Trans.] The aim was to “inculcate and develop in the child the psychic, intellectual and moral attitudes required of him or her by the overall political environment and the particular circle to which he or she belongs” (Durkheim, p. 36 [Trans.]). Parson’s analysis proposed, at the macrosociological level, the central role of the family in renewing the generations, and at the microsociological level, the family’s key role in the social integration of children in the family through primary socialization (Parsons & Bales, 1955). For his part, Mead (1934), one of the pioneers of constructivism, concluded that creation is an element of all socialization processes. Transmission can only be understood, therefore, as an individuation process in which individuals construct themselves and adapt their received inheritance in accordance with interactions—with family, peers, etc.—developed during their life course. This is even more true in the contemporary context of successive, multiple, and heterogeneous family memberships, characterized by multiple inheritances and transmissions. While the family has not lost its role as the main agent of transmission, the places and methods of socialization are nonetheless diversifying. So, although family socialization
plays an important role in personal development, it is no longer the sole factor determining an individual’s subsequent development. Socialization continues throughout the life trajectory, as individuals move through other spheres of socialization such as school, recreational groups, and the labor market, all of which become increasingly influential and may contradict the family socialization. This increased degree of empowerment and individuation means individuals can either find the foundation of their identity in their families or make their personal choices by referring to other sources—in particular, their peers (Harris, 1999). Moreover, as Attias-Donfut et al. (2002) have shown, youths can exert a significant influence on their elders; they call this “bottom-up” transmission la transmission à rebours (reverse trans-mission). Last, on the question of transmission, Bourdieu (1966) described how the family transmits not only a material legacy, or the material conditions of existence, but also an ethos—in other words, attitudes, aptitudes, and tastes that express the social class of which it is a member (p. 396).

When we consider the research we can see that while many studies have explored intergenerational relationships and exchanges between generations, particularly transfers of money and distribution of property, less work has been done on intergenerational transmission as such. Since the 1960s, the two most intensively researched topics in this regard have been the transmission of political values and the transmission of religious values and practices within families. In these cases, however, researchers mainly studied the heirs or compared the behaviors of children and parents. Research has shown that heirs do not inherit mechanically, à l’identique [the same] (Octobre, Détrez, Mercklé, & Berthomier, 2011), and that it is not exclusively a process of social reproduction. This increased degree of empowerment and individuation means that the generation of the children can either find the foundation of their identity in their families or make personal choices by referring to other sources—in particular, their peers (Harris, 1999). Studies on the transmission of political values show that children inherit a certain political culture from their parents—for example, the importance of voting, but not necessarily the same political orientations. Similarly, when it comes to religious transmission, children inherit their parents’ spiritual values but not their religious practices (Meintel, 2002). These studies are interesting, but they fail to take into account the multiple generations present in contemporary families, and in so doing, overlook the influence of grandparents. Rarely have grandparents, and still less, grandmothers, been the subject of research in terms of their role as legators and transmitters of values, and this is the source of our study’s originality.

METHODOLOGY

Since we did not wish to impose any particular meaning or content with regard to the term transmission, we opted for anchored theorization analysis
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an inductive and flexible approach that allowed us to identify key dimensions of transmission based on what older women themselves told us in their words, employing their own reference system.

Criteria for Constituting the Sample

Since the overarching objectives of our study were to analyze the place and role of older women in the family and the public sphere, we wanted to construct a sociologically diverse sample to gather the broadest possible range of perceptions. In light of the literature on older women and the findings of our earlier studies (Charpentier & Quéniart, 2008; Quéniart & Charpentier, 2012), the sample of older women was diversified according to three principle variables: (a) age: We used the three generations of older women to which researchers commonly refer (Caradec, 2001)—generations that represent sharply contrasting social contexts, especially regarding the place and role of women—women aged 65–74, 75–84, and 85 and older; (b) socioeconomic background; and (c) family/conjugal experience (grandmother or no, married or unmarried).

Respondents

We interviewed 25 francophone Quebecers. Aged between 65 and 98, they were grouped as follows: Nine respondents belonged to the generation aged 65–74, 10 were aged 75–84, and six women were from the generation aged 85 and older. In socioeconomic terms, eight women possessed family incomes ranging from modest to low or low, 14 women were from the middle class, and three were from more affluent backgrounds. Most women were married (9) or widows (9); the others were single (3) or separated/divorced (4). They were all, except one, women in the 65–74 generation. Except for the three single women, the 22 other women had adult children, 20 had grandchildren of varying ages (13 respondents had between one and three children, and seven others had four or more children each), and three had great-grandchildren. In terms of trajectories and educational background, differences were observable in each generation. So, six of the nine women in the youngest generation (65–74) held a university degree (three women had a bachelor’s, one woman had a master’s, and two women had a PhD). All the women in this generation except one held remunerated positions that were both traditionally female (teacher, nurse) and nontraditional (journalist, medical advisor, financial advisor, psychiatric practitioner). Last, not only did they work and raise their families, they were, and continue to be, socially engaged as volunteers, whether in their communities or at work, and they accomplished all this in addition to their family roles. As for the 16 women in the 75–84 and in the 85 and older age groups, their trajectory is typical to women born in the first decades of the 20th century (between
1910 and 1934, before women gained access to higher learning and the work force): Seven had completed Grade 9 or less, four had a Grade 12 education, and the other five had pursued postsecondary studies. Ten women were homemakers throughout their lives (including five out of six of the women aged 85 and older), and the few who were in the workforce held traditionally female jobs (secretary, nurse) and this, only until they were married.

Methods for Gathering and Analyzing Data

Because we wanted to accord special weight to the point of view of our respondents, we opted for semistructured interviews as the data-gathering method most likely to encourage the older women to express themselves as freely as possible about their experiences. The interviews, lasting from 50 to 90 minutes, were held at the respondents’ homes.9 We began the interview with an open-ended question: “Let’s start with some general remarks. Can you talk a bit about yourself?” Next, for the purpose of systematic comparison, we touched on the two main themes of our interview guide, themes we consider fundamental to the understanding of older women’s place and role in the family: their representations of older women and grandmothers (perceptions and images of themselves and older women generally, the place and roles of older women in society and in the family), and the dynamics of intergenerational relations and transmission (nature, type, values, and knowledge transmitted, transmission methods, etc.). At the end of the interview, the women were asked to complete a short sociodemographic questionnaire.

All the interviews were transcribed and coded line by line to ascertain the overall meaning of the discourse and—based on the principles of anchored theorization analysis, which seeks to develop theory that is rooted in empirical reality—create “conceptual categories” (“matrilineal knowledge,” “initiation to life principles as expressions of generativity,” etc.). Last, we cross-analyzed the interviews to compare the content of the discourses and interpret them by varying certain factors—for example, age and background.10 In this study we reached data saturation for most of the analytical dimensions, both empirically (repetitive data after 15 stories) and theoretically (relevance and solidity of the conceptual categories). However, due to the limited number of women interviewed (particularly, in each age category), our conclusions cannot be generalized to all older women, especially when considering women from a diverse range of ethnic groups whose life trajectories are marked by discontinuity and adherence to several different value systems (birth country, host country). These very specific dimensions would unquestionably affect what they transmitted or wished to transmit.11
FINDINGS

The interview revealed a variety of transmissions that we grouped into three categories: (a) transmission of practical and theoretical knowledge—in other words, skills; (b) transmission of values or general life principles; and (c) transmission of family stories and objects from the past—in other words, family memory. Furthermore, our data disclose the modes of this transmission, ranging from legacy initiation to individual memoirs.

Transmission of Knowledge

KNOW-HOW IS OFTEN TRANSMITTED MATRILINEALLY

When we questioned the respondents about what they had transmitted or were still transmitting to their children and grandchildren, many women first spoke about different types of practical or theoretical knowledge. The accounts of many respondents initially evoke a variety of transmissions that are almost solely related to the domestic sphere, focused on teaching basic cooking skills and practices: teaching grandchildren to cook as a way to entertain them (e.g., baking colorful cookies), initiate them to culinary traditions linked to rituals (e.g., Christmas doughnuts), or share family recipes (e.g., pies). It is also a way of getting children to participate in meal preparation, and in some cases, women taught children how to make everyday meals so that they could cook for themselves once they were grown up.

My oldest daughter . . . it’s been two or three years now. During the holiday season she comes here to make doughnuts with me. I’m the one who showed her how to make doughnuts. She comes to help me and she makes them herself. I tell her how to do it. (Paulette, 79)

For me, it’s about food, my grandson climbs up on a chair and beats the cake batter. It flies everywhere, but I don’t say anything. And then there’s cookies, I call them and say, “How would you like to come and help grandma?” They come and make peanut butter cookies. (Pauline, 65)

As a social space and domain of know-how, the kitchen plays a significant role in family rituals and recreational occasions spent with grandchildren. For example, one of our respondents tries to develop her creativity and imagination through the activity of baking cookies. For her, creativity can take different forms.

Sometimes I bake and I color the cookie forms. My grandchildren love to make cookies. They make them into all kinds of shapes. It’s a treat and they always ask, “When are we going to make cookies?” (Odette, 73)
Another respondent remembers cooking and laughing with her mother, days with the family at the sugar shack and other memories of the past: “Preparing food is a way to give pleasure,” she said. The older women’s transmission of this know-how is not accompanied by any pressure or obligation to perform; it is not part of the contemporary, highly publicized trend of culinary sophistication and performance. As a private domain and space of symbolic significance, the kitchen rather appears to be a locus of family gatherings and is associated with a set of memories and practices that bring people into contact with their loved ones, allowing them to perpetuate traditions and consolidate intergenerational ties.

Sewing is also evoked in the accounts as a form of practical knowledge that women transmitted to their daughters and granddaughters. Like cooking, but mentioned less often, sewing continues to be a form of know-how transmitted through the female line. Learning to sew, knit, or embroider indeed seems to be an explicitly expressed desire of the granddaughters: “V. was the only one who asked me [to teach] her to knit and sew. Yes, I like transmitting what I know how to do” (Bernadette, 76). The transmission of this type of knowledge is therefore a response to the grandchildren’s need to learn or a request expressed by them. It is not imposed, and, like their relationships, it is based on fun and free choice:

My granddaughter asked me, “I’d like to learn how to bake pies.” And my grandson, he calls me: “Could you sew me a red cape?” Things like that. Once my granddaughter said to me, “I’d like to learn how to sew.”
(Marie, 80)

In addition, we observed a clear sexual division in most of the older women’s stories, both in the children or grandchildren’s request, and in the transmission process: For the girls, it was tasks related to the domestic sphere and inside the home, for the boys, manual labor and activities with their father or grandfather:

The boys helped their father and if there were practical jobs [that would be more for] my daughter, because she is female, like washing the dishes, or cleaning, washing the windows. That’s what I taught her when she was young. (Bernadette, 76)

BEQUEATHING AN APTITUDE FOR MAKING CRITICAL CHOICES

Other respondents thought it more important to transmit a passion for the arts, literature, language, politics, in other words, “general cultural knowledge.” For example, one of our respondents believed that it was essential for her children to learn about Catholicism, “at least so they would be able to discuss with others” (Barbara, 67). Developing a critical sense seemed to be a
basic part of education for this educated woman, who is a writer and married to a medical specialist. This is why for her, the love of reading “is perhaps the most important thing to transmit,” as she explained after describing the extensive list of activities and recreational opportunities (music, sports, etc.) that she and her husband had provided their children:

We tried to offer them a panoply of things and they could then choose those that they liked. . . . They learned how to swim, play different sports, music. . . . We wanted to expose them to as many things as possible so they could choose the things that interested them. (Barbara, 67)

Because she wanted to offer all her children—daughters and sons—diverse possibilities, this respondent said that she had tried to distance herself from the traditional educational approach, or the sexual socialization inherent in children’s education methods. Born in 1942, she must have benefitted from the world of possibilities that opened up to the postwar generation, which for the women and men who belonged to it, represents a kind of “generational legacy.” As Gaudet has so convincingly shown in her research on the entry into adulthood of those born between 1930 and 1940, “the normative constraints attached to individual decision-making about life choices were not a legacy they wished to transmit. Most of them preferred that their children receive an education that allowed them to differentiate themselves” (Gaudet 2009, p. 144 [Trans.]). Thus, having choices, developing and encouraging independence and reflexivity are values that most postwar parents wished to leave as a legacy to their children, especially those who were privileged in terms of their cultural capital.

The Transmission of Life Principles

Socialization and Acquisition of Fundamental Values

Other than practical and general cultural knowledge, many older women mentioned fundamental values that had formed part of their own socialization, which they thought should in turn be transmitted to their descendants. These values are rules of conduct or moral compass that guide individuals’ actions. Respect, honesty, frankness, and integrity are among those we heard most often in the interviews. For example, one respondent had no tolerance for dishonesty and emphasized that she had educated her children to “be respectful” and maintain a degree of dialogue with others. She insisted that her daughters teach the same thing to their children. This notion of respect, which appears so crucial for her and other women as well, extends also to respect for oneself and one’s psychological and physical integrity. Next in importance among the values that our respondents wished to transmit or had already transmitted, were values with different names but essentially
the same meaning: “manner” or way of being. If frankness and respect are a constant theme, notions like perseverance, determination, courage, work ethic, and integrity were also frequently evoked:

Honesty, frankness, work, you earn your living by the sweat of your brow, you don't expect others to do things for you, we're all workers. We get up and work. (Monique, 79)

The appreciation for good work. Something that has to be done should be done well, without being perfectionist about it, but with an eye for what looks good. And also, to be able to carry something through to the end (projects). (Adèle, 73)

To be confident . . . to be honest, have integrity and be truthful, even when we make a mistake. And also, to love . . . and to be frank, be yourself and be confident. And it's coming back to me now. To be respectful. (Laure, 65).

Two respondents are socially engaged and were proud to say that some of their children were also socially committed: “Learning to share is an important thing to transmit. And I can see that my children think it is important to pass on too. So it’s making its way down the line.” (Odette, 73)

FROM SOCIAL VALUES TO LIFE PRINCIPLES: PREACHING BY EXAMPLE

While they also believed in the importance of social engagement and the world of ideas or politics, other women were more focused on transmitting a sense of openness to others so that their children and grandchildren would develop a critical sense and become engaged citizens.

Having an open mind means being interested in what is happening in your society, being committed in at least a small way and having at least some critical sense. And then I tried to develop it in him [grandson] and I think I was pretty successful. (Josée, 71)

In the same vein, one of our respondents is openly feminist and described the feminist values she believed she had transmitted to her daughter and is now trying to pass on to her granddaughters. She underlined the need for women to be financially independent. In particular, she repeats to her granddaughters the importance of getting an education before starting a family:

I'm a feminist and I let them know [granddaughters] and E. too [daughter], she got it from me. I tell them that girls have to be independent. They must not wait for a man or depend on a man like we did. I'm totally
against that. . . . I tell them: “Get an education so you can earn a good living. After that you can have children.” [. . .] If you don’t go to school, don’t depend on a man because relationships don’t last today, it’s very rare.” (Pierrette, 73)

She added that she wanted her granddaughters to “go far.” In other words, she hopes they will move up in life and be completely independent in terms of their life choices and control their own destinies.

Finally, some women said they wanted to transmit their “love of life,” whether in the form of beloved pastimes like dance, music, or the arts, or simple things like laughter, being happy, etc. They described wanting to imbue their descendants with a “philosophy” of life and values. These types of transmission are less tangible, although very real, and are achieved more through impregnation, or through observation and imitation:

I think that I do transmit it to them, for example, they can see that I really love what I do. They come over and they always see that I’m in the middle of a doing a painting. But I never tell them: “I really love it [painting].” I think you transmit by example. For years they’ve been telling me: “You’re so full of life!” And I avoid talking about my little aches and pains. (Marie, 80)

If you dance, you can’t be angry. The music carries you away and you just love life. I still dance. And I teach my children and my grandchildren because, as I tell them, “Listen, you know, life is really very short.” (Rita, 81).

I think they learn about fun and being silly from me [my grandchildren]. I like to make them laugh. People used to call me “little ray of sunshine.” I was, well I still am, I love to laugh and all that. (Laure, 65).

In a way, these older women have acted as models. “What do we transmit to our children?” asked one woman. “Well, how you are, how to act” (Marie, 80). This was echoed by another respondent when she told about transmitting to her grandson her custom of giving flowers to a loved one to mark important occasions. For these women and grandmothers, one transmits oneself, and this is the reason for the differences that we observe in relation to the time periods, values, knowledge, and know-how that circulates within families: “Children look at their elders and say, ‘What kind of lives did they lead?’” (Arlette, 98). So it is through observation and the internalization of the behaviors and attitudes of their older relatives that the younger generations acquire basic values or life principles. Transmission is thus not always a voluntary act of education; it is rather part of a broad socialization process during which children integrate, by “osmosis,” and impregnation, a set of behaviors, values, and aptitudes—an ethos (Bourdieu,
1966)—that is partly responsible for how they define themselves and their future actions.

VALUES THAT ARE NOT PASSED ON

Furthermore, and some authors have underlined this fact, transmission is a bilateral process: The legators transmit, it is true, but the heirs, for their part, inherit or accept only that part of their elders’ legacy they wish to accept. As Singly reminds us (1996), in a rephrasing of Simone de Beauvoir’s famous line, one is not born an heir, one becomes or does not wish to become one. Many of our respondents have seen this in relation to religious values they have failed to transmit to their grandchildren. Some women who place great importance on faith and spiritual and religious values, especially Catholic ones, remarked on their grandchildren’s lack of interest in religion. However, one of these women refused to resign herself and persisted in inculcating her grandchildren with certain religious principles, believing that by adopting a “one step at a time” strategy, she would make an impact and inexorably influence their moral framework once they reached adulthood:

I explained everything to them and saw they weren’t very open to hearing it. But I didn’t bring it up again right away; I’ll do it in stages and on different occasions. Inevitably, the message ends up getting through. Afterwards, they’ll say: “Hey, I remember my grandmother told us that.” It will be like a back order, you know? (Rita, 81)

Comparing her own values with those that she perceives in the younger generations, she feels out of step, even marginalized and old fashioned, compared with the young. Another respondent felt similarly, confiding to us that she would have liked to transmit her faith but came up against the refusal of her son and daughter-in-law. There is therefore a generational break between her and her grandchildren in terms of religious values: “It’s difficult to interfere when it comes to religion; I was told never to discuss religion with the children” (Mona, 80). In addition to not being able to talk about religion with her grandchildren, this older woman also had to deal with her son’s refusal to take 2,000 books that she wanted to bequeath to him as a family legacy. Transmission from generation to generation bears the trace of various mutations (economic, social, technological, etc.) “that also act as ‘filters’ between what is being transmitted and what is inherited” and as a result, transform “objects, their cultural significations and uses, along the generations” (Octobre et al., 2011, p. 72 [Trans.]). By refusing part or all of the transmission of knowledge, objects, or values from earlier generations, heirs set up an “intergenerational distance” (Muxel, 2007), either in the intellectual sphere (the son who rejected his mother’s literature), or in the area of values (rejection of religion). The gap between generations
seems particularly striking in the area of religious beliefs, of course, but it also more generally concerns all older people’s knowledge and experiential baggage. They often perceive themselves as discredited or unrecognized in contemporary society, as this respondent commented:

Last night I told my grandchildren . . . In Africa there is an old proverb that says: “When an old person dies, a library burns.” Then I told them: “Pay attention to your grandmother’s experience. . . . I remember when my grandparents spoke we took it very seriously. There was all the experience of the past behind their words. But today, the mentality is, “You’re old; you have to get with the times.” (Mona, 80)

The attitude evoked by this respondent calls to mind the ageism underlying all the negative and reductive social representations of old age, factors that could obstruct or limit the transmission of seniors’ heritage, indeed, a whole segment of our history. In this respect, the difficulty and even absence of intergenerational transmission is palpable among the single respondents. One of these women deplored the fact that her time on earth would leave no trace, no legacy. Even if they still have family (nephews and nieces, for example), these older women remark that today “that generation is too busy” to visit an old woman (Josette, 91) and as a result, they have no one to whom to bequeath their things and especially, their life story.

The Transmission of Family Memories
In the course of our interviews, several women spoke to us about their desire to transmit their family history, so we decided to explore this dimension with all of our respondents. More specifically, we wanted to find out whether they wished to transmit part of their own life story and experiences, or if, as older people who constitute a social group, they believed it was important to pass on their history with a capital H, in other words, sociohistorical memory, to the succeeding generations. These questions turned out to be difficult to answer for many women, who were very modest. Perhaps this is because women of this generation were overlooked in the political and social history books. Nevertheless, several women mentioned that they transmitted to their grandchildren large or small sections of their family history.

TELLING THE FAMILY HISTORY
This transmission is mainly achieved through the telling of stories or personal accounts of forbears—for example, a dead grandfather or great-grandparents. Many older women remembered time spent telling their grandchildren family memories.
I think he would have liked to know the whole story, from his grandfather up until his life today. (Loraine, 77)

I like to tell stories and they like to listen [my grandchildren]. I remember that my father always liked to tell stories. My father was born at the turn of the century in 1900, so that’s going back a long way, and he would talk to us about his grandfather. (Denise, 85)

She would ask “What was it like when you were a child?” And my husband would start telling stories about his childhood. Then, at one point, he polished them up and they became stories that we recorded and she would play them when her father was in Québec City. (Odette, 73)

One respondent told the stories of both her parents and her grandparents, while another remembered the pleasure of sharing memories with other family members. At family gatherings they would trade family anecdotes from the past. Through these stories they constructed an oral transmission of the family memory: Like her and her parents before her, her children would in turn recount their own childhoods to their children. She wants her descendants to remember her “as a storyteller” (Monique, 79). She told us that most members of the family know these stories by heart; they’ve heard them so many times, they’ve taken on legendary status. These stories are often shared by the family during important events, helping to strengthen family cohesiveness and imbuing the family with a “soul” through a process of rallying around a collective norm. “It is through repetition that transmission occurs and through ‘iconization’ that we have reproduction. This ritual memory is mobilized both to strengthen group cohesion and imbue it with a soul” (Muxel, 2007, p. 19 [Trans.]).

Other women also attempted to transmit part of their family history to their grandchildren orally, but later chose other means. One woman is now typing family memories on a computer; another respondent has a sense of urgency, having been asked by her son to record her life story before it is too late and her memory fails:

We’re never together long enough for me to share my story verbally and leave a trace of how we lived back then. I feel nostalgic, because I used to say, before my mother died, that I wanted to record her talking, but life goes on and we never did it. At some point, the memory is lost and it can never be recalled as clearly. It’s going to happen to me, at the age I am now. I should record myself now while I can still remember things clearly. (Odette, 73)

Her son’s request is part of a process of conservation and perpetuation of his mother’s referential memory. She remembers gathering her children around her own mother so they could hear her tell about her life and times.
She referred to her grandchildren’s curiosity. They asked her, “What were you like in the olden days?” They want to know about their grandmother’s childhood and life. Sharing family memories is crucial to the formation of the descendants’ identity because

They reposition an individual’s story within a set of symbolic genealogical ties that unite other members of a family to which the individual is aware of belonging. . . . This form of temporal memory . . . qualified as archeological, places the individual in a space that predates his or her own existence. (Muxel, 2007, pp. 14 and 17 [Trans.])

Intergenerational transmission can also involve a key event in the grandmothers’ trajectory. For example, they may decide to recount a specific experience rather than a more encompassing life history. This was the case of one older woman we interviewed who, when her granddaughter became a teenager, shared her unusual and disturbing love story, a story she intended to recount to the younger sister when she was older. For her, it was important to keep the memory of her dead love alive down through the generations. The function of this constantly repeated narrative is to relive the past:

As a discourse of resurrected impressions, reviviscence brings the person back to an earlier personal place through a route that is more emotional and affective than cognitive. This form of memory is shared rather than transmitted; as a kind of flashback, reliving brings the past to life in the present. [...] The discourse of reliving is the past in image form. (Muxel, 2007, pp. 25–26 [Trans.])

By sharing this memory with her descendants, then, this woman goes back in time, reconstructs it, and even appears to relive her undying love; her love is timeless, and the couple’s epic story transcends the generations. More generally, the sharing of stories between grandparents and grandchildren creates a bridge between the generations and strengthens grandparents’ confidence that their memories will survive them (Ryan, Pearce, Anas, & Norris, 2004). Transmitting their history, telling past memories and the multiple connections that comprise a life allow the very old to “gather themselves up” and construct a consistent self-identity that imbues their life with meaning. It is way to ensure one’s integrity in the face of time’s irrevocability. (Membrado, 2010, p. xiv [Trans.])

From the descendants’ point of view, being more familiar with their elders’ lives helps them to identify themselves as belonging to the same group.
**Offering Objects**

Last, for some older women, family memory is also transmitted by bequeathing objects that have symbolic value to their descendants while they are still alive:

> Yes, when my granddaughters come I tell them: “That’s going to go to you.” We have quite a few antiques that belonged to my parents. Those things will be shared among them. (Aline, 77)

> Recently, I gave her [granddaughter] a watch that I loved. She told me “Oh, that watch is so beautiful.” (Denise, 85)

One woman gave jewellery that had been in the family to her granddaughters and was delighted to see one of them wearing the pendant containing the portrait of her great-grandparents that she herself had put there. Another respondent inherited cutlery and other family heirlooms from her parents, who had themselves inherited them from their parents. She in turn is gradually bequeathing them to her descendants in the hope that they will then leave them to their heirs. These objects, frequently offered at a “specific moment or to underline a particular relationship with a child” or grandchild, are “more associated with an individual than family logic” (Mortain, 2011, p. 16); they have a sentimental and personal value. More symbolic (Gotman, 1985), they are not associated with the notion of a shared inheritance in its strictest meaning.

In short, the need to transmit an experience or story associated with a defining moment of their life or with events marking part of their trajectories and those of their family contributes to the perpetuation and continuity of a collective, family memory.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our research reveals the multiple and varied forms of transmission between older women and their children and grandchildren. These women and grandmothers play an important role within the family, often acting as the pole around which the family comes together and the perpetuator of family traditions. The act of transmission is not, however, a way to better integrate children into society, but rather, a way to help them take their place within society. In other words, these women are concerned less about conforming to social standards than about enabling children to define their own futures. Furthermore, their role appears to be more one of offering subsequent generations’ personal guidelines, references, values, and symbolic resources than of passing on objects or economic capital. The intergenerational transmission
of values essentially involves practices that are often implicit, forming a backdrop to daily life. As our respondents indicated, we transmit who we are and what we know. In other words, teaching a grandchild to cook or giving her some jewelry is, for these women, a way of transmitting a part of themselves, who they are:

> It is the existential meaning that people pass on. The women were able to pass along that which they believed in and valued via their actions. This transmission was couched in the individual social environment of each woman. (Hunter, 2008, p. 53)

In addition, as several sociologists have shown, parents, through education, transmit culture and specific values from childhood until adolescence, but frequently in an implicit manner. Children receive their parents’ ethos, or social and cultural capital, and they in turn transmit this to their children. However, since every generation is characterized by its particular socialization framework, succeeding generations make modifications. As one of our respondents commented,

> Now they’re the ones transmitting to their children what I believe we transmitted to them. That’s how it works. With some adjustments, though, because how we raised children is not the same as how children are raised today. (Claire, 72)

Differences in values and ideologies emerge out of social change. The general decline of religion in Western societies since the 1960s is a well-known example of this, accounting for the gap between generations born in the first half of the 20th century and those who followed. Consequently, in our study we see that the desire to inculcate Catholic values is a function of generation: Only the oldest women in our sample (80 and older) referred to the difficulty or indeed, barrier, to this type of transmission. In this regard, their discourse testifies to differences between generations’ methods and socialization frameworks (Mauger, 2009) following major social changes like the decline of organized religion and the rise of individualism.

One contribution of our research, especially with respect to the typology of Hunter and Rowles (2005), is that it demonstrates the importance for older women of transmitting practical (cooking, sewing, etc.) and theoretical (culture, the arts) knowledge—a dimension that is virtually absent from studies on family transmissions. Differences in social class are also perceptible in this regard. As Bourdieu (1966) has demonstrated so well, intergenerational transmission is strongly linked to the life trajectories and social environments of the “legators”—in this instance, older women. These environments condition what they have become and what they in turn transmit to their descendants
Older Women’s Transmission Role

through the “spontaneous” learning of the family language and practices, through the educational effect of objectivized cultural capital integrated into the family environment and through all the forms of implicit transmission. (Mauger, 2009, p. 16)

Although our sample and methods do not allow us to generalize in this area, the types of transmission inevitably appear to be connoted by the habitus of class. There are marked differences between women from more privileged backgrounds and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this respect, the respondents possessing a strong cultural capital and affluent economic conditions are the ones who stressed the importance of transmitting an intellectual heritage: intellectual curiosity, critical sense, sense of social responsibility, etc. They are also the ones who spoke most about transmitting their interest in culture and the arts, a typical example of an upper-middle-class habitus that is transmitted through osmosis (Quéniart & Charpentier, 2008). In contrast, the transmissions of women from more modest backgrounds are more focused on practical knowledge (cooking, sewing) and humanistic values (mutual aid, respect for others, compassion). Among the middle-class women, the type of transmission seem to vary in accordance with the phenomenon of social mobility: The respondents who were born in working-class or farming families but who nevertheless had access to education during the period of democratizing educational reform are also those who evoked intellectual transmissions, while the heritages of women who did not benefit from this upward mobility are more similar to those of women from more modest backgrounds.

Last, our research shows that the clearly stated desire to transmit their knowledge or memories leads older women to find specific methods for doing this—for example, putting their story in writing or inviting their grandchildren to bake. Many older women feel the need to bequeath a symbolic inheritance, or a set of values and knowledge that has meaning for them. It is in a sense a need to leave one’s mark and locate one’s present existence within a continuum of learnings about oneself and the world, what Erikson has called the “desire for generativity.” But we prefer to interpret it, as do Lifton and Olson (1974), as a way of attaining “symbolic immortality,” a notion referring to the idea of continuity and acting as a mechanism that enables both legators and heirs to face and reconcile themselves with death.

To conclude, our research also allows us to more clearly discern the conditions surrounding intergenerational transmissions, but due to the limited scope of this article, we cannot include these data here. Different factors appear to influence the scope of transmission in the family—in particular, the fact of having children (not only nephews and nieces, for example) and grandchildren, age, matrimonial status, mobility, and geographic proximity. In this respect, the older women in our study who had strong ties
with their descendants usually lived in the same city as their children and grandchildren. While geographic proximity facilitates contact among relatives, it does not necessarily guarantee, as has long been assumed, greater family proximity. The Internet, social media, and international mobility have changed the order of things, allowing families to form intergenerational ties despite distances. Indeed, transmission cannot be ensured without the will to transmit on the part of the legator and receptivity on the part of the heir, and for this, intergenerational links must be kept up. In other words, transmission depends on grandchildren’s interest in learning about the family history and those that embody that history. It cannot take place unless there is a voluntary interpersonal exchange between the transmitters of historical baggage and the receptors of a story that is to be continued.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Attias-Donfut et al., 2002; Bengston, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Ryan et al., 2004; Quénéart and Hurtubise, 2009.
3. See, for example, Attias-Donfut et al., 2002; Bengston et al., 2002.
4. See, for example, Arrondel and Masson, 2005; Kolm and Mercier-Ythier, 2006.
5. See, for example, Vollerbergh, Iedema, and Raaijmakers, 2001; Koper-Frye and Wiscott, 2000; and Hunter and Rowles, 2005. These authors developed an interesting typology of legacies (biological, material, and values legacies) based on a study conducted with a small sample of men and women (11) aged between 34 and 91 (not only elderly women). But their analysis is not broken down according to sex and age, so we do not know whether a specific type of legacy is associated more with one generation than another, or more with women than men.
6. See, for example, Beck and Jennings, 1991; Jennings and Niemi, 1968; Percheron, 1985; Muxel, 2007; Tedin, 1974.
7. See, for example, Meintel, 2002; Park and Howard Eklund, 2007.
8. Research that has included grandparents has generally focused on the relationships between them, their children, and their grandchildren, rather than on transmission as such.
9. The interviews were conducted by Alexandrine Bourdhouxe and Valérie Amyot, master’s sociology students, and by Isabelle Marchand, research officer, who holds a master’s in communications; we would like to thank them for their essential contributions to this research.
10. To ensure the reliability of our findings, each interview was analyzed by a research officer and by the two lead researchers, and the findings were discussed before being validated by the group.
11. We are currently doing a new joint research project, which will be addressing these issues.
12. Some of our respondents have suffered family tragedies and painful situations that are more difficult to talk about. They maintained a reserve in these areas, preferring to keep the more painful memories to themselves.

REFERENCES


