

Lasting Words as a Channel for Intergenerational Communication

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ABSTRACT

Lasting words can be defined as verbal messages that are remembered over many years and considered by the recipient to have had a significant influence on his/her life. The study of lasting words is proposed as a supplement to existing approaches to the older person as a communicator and, in particular, to intergenerational communication. A sample of 148 independent-living older adults was asked to share words that had made a lasting impression, and to indicate what lasting words they would like to impart to other people. Parents, teachers, and grandparents were the most common source-persons for the lasting words reported by the elders in this sample. Late childhood and youth were the time periods in which most lasting words were received. Statements of general moral principles and admonitions specific to the recipient were the most common types. Some older people, however, reported derogatory remarks that had remained with them throughout their lives. In passing lasting words on to others, no older people in this sample offered communications of a derogatory nature. The value of education and the importance of giving first priority to one's own family were the most frequent themes of lasting words they would pass on to the next generation. It would appear that attention needs to be given both to the theme and substance of the message, and the total context in which the messages are communicated. Limits of this preliminary study and implications for further research on intergenerational communication are discussed.

KEY WORDS – Lasting words, intergenerational communication, self-narratives, moral principles.

Introduction

Social gerontologists often seek viable alternatives to the image of older people as failing organisms or passive victims of biological fate and social discrimination. Attention to the older person as a communicator holds some promise as an alternative model, as demonstrated by two lines of research which have become increasingly salient in recent

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years: the older person as a participant in conversation, and as the producer of life narratives. Both approaches can be drawn upon to explore an intergenerational communication phenomenon that has not previously received attention: *lasting words* (LWs). At present, little is known about the origin, nature, transmission, and effect of LWs. These communications can be defined provisionally as verbal messages that are remembered over many years and which are considered by the recipients to have had a significant influence on the course of their lives.

This paper has the limited aims of (a) expanding our conception of the older person as a communicator; (b) suggesting alternative frameworks for understanding the nature and function of lasting words, particularly in intergenerational communications; and (c) offering data from an exploratory study.

Intergenerational conversations

A series of enterprising studies has found that younger adults tend to constrain the conversational participation of older adults (*e.g.* Giles *et al.* 1992; Ryan *et al.* 1994; Hummert 1994). Negative stereotypes are activated when people suppose themselves to be in contact with older adults. For example, older-sounding voices and older-looking faces tend to evoke distancing and condescending responses. Younger adults are less comfortable in communicational interactions with older adults, and they make unwarranted assumptions about both older people's communicational skills and the substance of their statements. They also tend to engage in 'secondary baby talk' in which their sentence structure is simplified, volume is raised, and exaggerated intonations and facial expressions used.

As Ryan (1994: 1) observes: 'Communication success of elders is determined by their own competence and by their communication environment'. An extra burden is placed on older people when confronted with patronising, overaccommodating, and distancing behaviour on the part of others. Ryan also notes that individual life history differences play a significant role in conversational effectiveness. Older people are not a homogeneous class with respect to style, substance, and level of conversational skill. The commonality is not age-linked impairment, but the constraining behaviour they encounter on the part of younger conversational partners.

The growing body of data on *Interpersonal Communication in Older Adulthood* (Hummert *et al.* 1994) reveals a number of barriers to effective communication on the part of both younger and older adults.

Younger adults must overcome negative social stereotypes and their own discomfort with ageing, and older adults must at times make some adjustments, especially in listening skills and reduction of judgmental attitudes (Strom and Strom 1991; 1993). From these studies it may be inferred that people who have been effective communicators throughout their lives will continue to be so when their conversational partners respect and treat them as equals. Relatively untouched by these studies is the question of what type of message within what type of interactive context is most likely to be communicated effectively by older people to children and younger adults.

The narrative process

The strengths and resourcefulness of older adults come through even more clearly in studies of the narrative process. In *Listening to Old Voices* (Mullen 1992), for example, they draw from their own unique life experiences and the folklore traditions of rural America. A 97-year-old woman reported:

See, I'm an unfortunate child myself... I'm my mama's unfortunate child. My mom gave birth to me and she wasn't married to my daddy... Cause I'm a rape child. You understand what I mean?... I was given away and shifted from hand to mouth and pillar to post (Mullen 1992: 26).

Building on this 'unfortunate child' foundation, the narrator tells the story of a life in which she provided care for many other children who had been bereaved, abandoned, or abused. External information validated her account of overcoming numerous obstacles to nurture rejected children, and continuing to do so well into her 70s. The narrative is then crowned by statements that define who she has become and is still becoming. For example:

I'm learning too. See, that's what I'm try to get the peoples to know: nobody knows it all... I learn from you all, and you all learn from me. So that makes us be in the same boat... We is all seeking an understanding, why we are existing here in the world together... As long as we live, we'll be learning... Some of the older people are setting back and criticizing everything that you youngsters do, but how in the world you going to learn if we who were here first are not learning you? And yet the least little wrong thing that you do, we the first ones to criticize. And I don't believe in that (Mullen 1992: 30-31).

As noted above, older people may be subject to condescension and constraint in many intergenerational conversations. Nevertheless, they

may be considered highly credible sources of information and insight when the conversational partner is interested in narratives about the past. Researchers in the field of communication have found that the perceived credibility of the speaker has a powerful influence on the listener's response (DeVito 1994). Older adults may differ from younger in their perceived credibility in either direction: (a) less credible because of negative social stereotypes toward ageing and older people, or (b) more credible because of their first-hand experiences of past events, long span of observation, and unique life achievements. In considering the 'lasting words' type of message it might be useful to attend not only to the message, but to the speaker's perceived credibility.

Lasting words as a form of communication

LWs are established by the respondent's own frame of reference and self-report. One can question the validity of LWs just as one can question any personal narrative. Those who reject first-person reports of experiences, values, and meanings can add LWs to their list. Those who believe that reports of personal experiences are useful, perhaps even indispensable sources of information can apply reasonable criteria to the study of LWs.

There are points of connection between LWs and the areas of research already sampled. Many LWs are likely to be conveyed during the give-and-take of conversation. Other LWs are likely to be included either in narratives, whether formal presentations such as a minister's sermon or informal self-disclosures such as a friend's account of an exciting incident. Whatever the source of the LW, it will tend to become integrated in what we might call the *implicit life narrative*, *i.e.* the story that the person is ready to tell when the occasion arises. (It is not assumed that the implicit life narrative is invariable; the particular way in which the story is shaped will probably be responsive to the situational context).

There are significant differences as well. LWs are brief semantic units that have been rescued from the ever-flowing stream of communication. Of a thousand conversations with teachers and schoolmates, an older person might have lived with one excerpt from one interaction. LWs are bounded both structurally and semantically, *i.e.* when introduced into conversation, LWs retain their identities as messages derived from particular circumstances and are not completely absorbed by the flow. Consider the following example as recalled by a man in his late 80s.

I cut my hand but good. Blood all over. Kate {his aunt} sat me down and held my hand kind of like that {demonstrates} and the bleeding started to quiet down, but I was, I was amazed at the blood and full of terror, just trembling all over. Right then Kate put her face up to mine, nose to nose. She said, 'You figure on being a man?' I must have nodded yes, I guess. Then she said, 'Men get hurt. Men get knocked on the head. Men bleed. Men get challenged every day and men, the real men go on and get stronger every time. Don't ever you forget that, Earl'. And I have not ever forgot that.

These LWs constitute a firm, set memory-unit. As such, these LWs might be introduced into a variety of conversational interchanges or extended self-narratives without themselves undergoing significant alteration.

There is no research literature on LWs as such, although examples of LWs can be found in journals and interview protocols. Adding the study of LWs to existing approaches could have advantages such as the following:

- Providing a brief sample of self-narrative material when research conditions do not make a more extensive sampling feasible.
- Identifying the variables that are most influential in the selection of a few communicational episodes from the constant flow of such episodes for long-term memory and influence.
- Examining possible cohort and generational differences in the themes conveyed by LWs, to improve our understanding of variant and invariant intergenerational communications.
- Learning how the construction and modification of self from youth to age may be influenced by a few particularly salient communications.
- Discovering the relationships between received LWs and those that the individual would choose to pass on to the next generation.
- Observing possible similarities and differences in LWs as a function of socio-cultural traditions and their change/resist change dynamics.

Overall, the study of LWs might well contribute to our understanding of the still largely unknown processes through which one generation attempts to convey its experiences and interpretations of life to the next.

Theoretical perspectives

It would be premature to elaborate a theoretical perspective at this early point in the exploration of lasting words. One might instead find it useful simply to identify two alternative points of emphasis and their implications.

Emphasis on the message

The substance of the message is the most obvious candidate for attention. The basic question here would be the nature of the message that distinguishes the few relatively enduring interpersonal communications from the much larger number that are not recalled and valued as lasting words. It might be held that these few messages are distinctive because their substance embodies 'wisdom'. This would suggest that reported LWs are distinctive in message quality and substance. We might expect LWs to be more structurally complex, layered in meaning, integrative, and original or distinctive, than the more mundane communications of everyday life.

Emphasis on the context: relationship, situation, and need-state

We might instead emphasise the total context in which the communication occurred. The context includes the *relationship* between speaker and listener. For example, the most influential feature of a particular communicational interaction might be the fact that 'It was my grandmother who told me that', or 'My favourite teacher called me aside...' People who were at the time of great significance to the listener and/or accorded high credibility would be much more likely to convey what were to become LWs. The same substantive message would be predicted to have less impact if it came from a less significant or credible speaker.

The *situation* could be regarded as another important facet of the communicational context. A situation involving transition, separation, or loss, for example, might intensify the power of the messages. 'The last time I saw grandfather, he said...' 'It was my first day on the job. I couldn't do anything right. The supervisor called me over and said...' Situations that are auspicious, unsettled, or involve risks might be more productive of LW's than routine situations.

The *need-state* of the listener might also influence the readiness to elicit significant messages from others and/or to interpret the messages as especially significant. Uncertainty about what course of action to pursue, emotional conflict, and a sense of rejection and hopelessness are among the need-states that might make a person unusually receptive to advice, guidance, and expressions of affection, approval, or disapproval.

The contextual approach would take the substance of the message into account, but as only one facet of the total episode from which the LWs emerged. Attention would be given to the functions served by

LWs as well as the messages themselves. The research objectives would include identification of LW contexts as well as content and structural analysis of the messages.

Both perspectives on LWs would direct attention to the advice or guidance function of the messages. Both perspectives might therefore be considered within the overall framework of *communication rules theory* (Shimanoff 1980). This heuristic model conceives of communicational acts as following both implicit and explicit rules that have been constructed by a family, an organisation, or a society. Effective communication requires that all participants follow the same basic rules of discourse. In turn, communicational acts influence the entire sphere of human action. It is through communicational acts that prescriptive rules for action are propagated, affirmed, contested, or rejected. LW's might therefore be interpreted as rules or guides for subsequent action that have been communicated effectively in the form of 'wise' interpersonal messages to people who were in particular need of guidance at that moment. One would still have to determine the balance of message substance vs. contextual factors in the emergence of reported LWs.

Research questions

The following questions were studied in a preliminary manner in the present investigation:

1. Who was the *source* of the LWs?
2. What were the *circumstances* within which the communication occurred?
3. What was the *age* of the recipient at the time?
4. What was the major *theme* of the LWs message?
5. What has been the *effect* of these LWs on the recipient, as perceived by the recipient?
6. What was the *relationship* between the received LWs and the LWs that the individual would choose to pass on to others?

Method

Respondents

The sample reported here comprises 148 adults (103 women, 45 men) whose ages ranged from 62 to 104 with a mean of 83. All lived in private homes. Most were full-time residents of the Phoenix, Arizona area, but some were winter visitors.

Procedure

Students enrolled in an upper division course on Aging and Communication were given the assignment of conducting brief research interviews with two older adults. The focus of this interview was on the LWs that the older people might be willing to share with them. The student-interviewers were given the following written instructions, in addition to participating in a discussion about interactions with older adults.

1. You will conduct Lasting Word interviews with two people age 60 or older. These will be people who are living in the community (as distinguished from nursing care facilities), either year-around or as visitors.
2. Interview each respondent separately.
3. Introduce yourself to the respondent and explain the purposes of the interview. Your explanation should draw on the fact that this is an assignment given to all students in a class you are taking at Arizona State University. This assignment is intended to (a) give you experience in conducting and reporting interviews and (b) to learn more about the kind of communications that stay important to people over many years.
4. Use good communication techniques in establishing and maintaining rapport with the respondent.
5. Choose or create a setting that is conducive to relaxed and effective interaction.
6. Explain the basic question clearly and check to be sure that you have made yourself understood. You want an example of something that was said to the respondent at an earlier time in his/her life that has stayed with them, that has influenced them in some way.
7. Obtain the following information:
 - a. Respondent's date of birth
 - b. The exact words (or as close as possible) that were spoken to them
 - c. Identify the person who said these words (by relationship to the respondent, not necessarily by name)
 - d. Description of the situation within which the LWs were conveyed
 - e. Respondent's explanation of what made these words memorable
 - f. Respondent's explanation of what kind of influence they have on their lives

Encourage respondent to provide a full, detailed, informative report on the situation and meaning of these lasting words.

8. Ask respondent to suppose that he/she has the opportunity to say something to another person that this other person would remember and be influenced by for many years: *what would the respondent say, to whom, and why?*
9. Transfer the information from your notes to the Data Report Form. Use a separate form for each respondent.
10. At the bottom of each form, add useful and illuminating observations about the interview process with these respondents.

The students were also asked to write a discussion encompassing both research interviews and their possible communicational significance. Practice research interviews were conducted and discussed in class prior to the field experience.

The research interview forms and papers turned in by 23 students were excluded from this analysis because of defects in performance or reporting. No respondents were eliminated on the basis of their substantive answers.

Results

The findings have been organised into the following categories:

1. *Originating circumstances* for the LWs: (a) person offering the message; (b) situation in which the communication occurred; (c) age of recipient at the time.
2. *Theme or substance* of the LWs.
3. *Effect* of LWs on recipient, as self-reported
4. Theme/substance of LWs the recipient would *pass on* to others.

Originating circumstances

Parents were the most frequent source-persons for the LWs reported by the respondents in this study. Teachers and grandparents were the next most frequent source-persons, followed by miscellaneous family members. As can be seen in Table 1, relatively few respondents cited LWs from age peers or celebrities. When the LWs were in the form of a quote or paraphrase from a famous person, this passage was almost invariably conveyed to them by a person who was important in their own lives, *e.g.* ‘Grandmother told me more than once: “To thine own self be true, and you will never be false to another person.’ Within the limits of the present sample, then, LWs were acquired as inter-generational communications.

TABLE 1. *Source persons for lasting words*

	%
Parents	55
Teachers	16
Grandparents	13
Other family members	6
Friends, peers, colleagues	4
Other adults	4
Celebrities	2
Total	100
N	148

Percentages rounded.

The situation was not always specified. Many respondents reported that the LWs were characteristic of the source-person and therefore did not seem dependent on particular circumstances. ‘Respect the law!’, for example, was the statement that had made a lasting impression on a man now in his late 60s who had become a policeman just like his father – the source-person for those LWs. There was another class of responses in which the context was characterised in general terms, *e.g.* ‘It was during the “dust bowl” years. The land was as dry as a soda cracker.’ Conveyed to the respondent at some point within this general frame of reference were the LWs: ‘Never spend all you make’.

When originating circumstances were particularised, two types of situation were most commonly described: (a) an episode regarding the behaviours and experiences of the recipient of the LWs (48 per cent) or (b) a significant moment in the relationship between source-person and recipient (16 per cent). One example of the first type has already been given, ‘I cut my hand but good’. Another example was provided by a woman who had exclaimed to her teacher that ‘I’ll never learn how to read!’ Mrs. Casey replied, ‘Never say never!’ She became a good reader and has lived by Mrs. Casey’s words ever since.

An example of the latter type of circumstance was provided by Mr. R. S., a man whose repeated bouts of throat cancer had made it difficult for him to speak and who also had a hearing impairment. After several attempts at communication he understood the question and was able to respond. ‘He [his father] was what they call an alcoholic today. He died a very slow death. Liver disease. The last time I saw him alive he was barely alive. He looked just awful and he was in awful pain. He told me and my brothers that “Health is better than wealth.” He had said that to us before, but this time, it stuck. None of us wanted to end up like he did.’

Age at time of receiving the LWs was classified into general categories because respondents were not always able to specify precise age. The later years of childhood and adolescence comprised the age-zone that provided the richest yield of LWs (71 per cent of examples). When the originating circumstances occurred during adult life they were usually in association with a personal problem. An example is provided by a man who described himself as a recovered alcoholic. 'Believe in God and believe in yourself!' are words that made a powerful impression on him when, in his late forties, he turned to Alcoholics Anonymous after losing his job and his wife because of his drinking. There were no examples of respondents having picked up their LWs at age 60 or beyond.

Theme or substance of LWs

The themes most frequently reported can be classified as: (a) general moral principles (45 per cent); (b) admonitions specific to the recipient (24 per cent); (c) derogatory or discouraging statements (16 per cent); (d) statements that encapsulated a personality, a relationship, or a way of life (10 per cent).

Statements of general moral principles were the most common in this sample, though closely followed by admonitions specific to the recipient. 'To thine own self be true...' is an example of the former. A rather different type of moral guidance made a lasting impression on a woman during her first week of art school, more than half a century ago. 'The teacher quoted Cezanne to us: "It is better to be daringly bad than mediocresly good." It probably sounds better in French! I have applied this thought to all my life, and not just my art work. When I'm afraid to do something, I do it anyway because it's better than being wishy-washy.' These LWs are classified as statements of general moral principles because the teacher had not singled out the recipient and was not commenting specifically on her approach to art and life.

The 'Never say never!' response given to the school girl who despaired of learning how to read is an example of admonitions specific to the recipient. Another example comes from 'Grandma Morris took me aside a day or two before I started high school. Grandma Morris said, "If you don't want to get pregnant, then you just don't do it." Being Catholic, I don't believe in birth control and have never used it. When I was young, I decided I didn't want children so I didn't fool around. I was a virgin until I married Harold.'

One of the most common types of personal admonition is illustrated by the recollection offered by L. S. He and his brother were doing their

chores on the farm, but both wanted to go to the local fair as soon as possible. His brother finished his chores first and was ready to go. L. S. then decided to do a rush-through job on his remaining tasks, cleaning the stalls and feeding the horses. The boys told their father they had finished the chores, ‘and he told us to have a good time, and to stay away from the pretty girls’. When he came home there was a note on his pillow. ‘It was from Father, and it requested my presence for a private meeting. I knew I had been caught... Father looked right at me and said, “Son, if you’re going to do a job, do it right the first time. Don’t waste my time and your own by having to redo a job. You told me you finished your work. You lied to me. Don’t ever do that to me again.”’ This memory, shared in considerable detail, still seemed to carry emotional force. The interviewer noted that ‘He grimaced after he said these words, and his facial expressions tightened up, not at all like the easy-going person he had been up to that time.’

The most frequently reported of all personal admonitions dealt with the value of education. A typical example is provided by the first respondent in the study, a man approaching his goth birthday. ‘The [high school] biology teacher told me that life can take everything away from you – your friends, your looks, your health. But if you get a good education, you will have it forever and use it every day. I could see that he was right.’ Unable to complete his high school education because of economic needs, he later did so as an adult and soon after his retirement successfully completed a training programme that enabled him to work almost another decade as a psychiatric aide.

M. Q.’s LWs typify those of a number of other women who came of age more than half a century ago: ‘I was the one elected to stay home and care for the younger children, and then my mother, and then practically everybody else. My father didn’t believe that females needed an education; that’s how a lot of people thought back then. Uncle Patrick was my favorite, though, and I was his. He would tell me in sort of a whisper, “Cultivate your mind, my girl. Learn, learn, learn! Fill your mind with knowledge!”’ M. Q. dropped out of high school before graduation, but reports herself to be a life-long reader and now, finally free of obligations, an enthusiastic traveller as well.

Derogatory statements were those that expressed attitudes of rejection, hostility, or bitterness toward the recipient or others. An example is provided by the LWs shared by E. G., described by the interviewer as ‘a charmer. He has very white hair, gold rimmed glasses that hide his blue eyes, and a mouth that is always smiling... He is articulate, quick, and, best of all, genuine’. His LWs were stated with reluctance but ‘with such clarity that I knew this was something that had stuck with

him even to this day'. E. G.'s LWs occurred when, as a teenager, he asked his father if he could bring his new girl friend to the house for dinner:

... She was Italian and had the prettiest olive skin. Dinner went fine but my father was quieter than normal and after she left, he looked at me and said, 'Why can't you stick to your own kind!' I remember looking at him and then looking away and wondering how he could say something like that.

This statement by his father was hurtful and confusing to E. G. at the time, and became his life-long touchstone for accepting all people regardless of their ethnic background or race.

Most derogatory statements were directed to the respondent. A retired librarian, for example, remembers that 'The school counselor told me I should get any idea of college out of my head. I wasn't smart enough. It was all I could do to keep from crying. Then I got mad! I said I would show her, and I did. I am still not ready to thank her for concentrating my efforts, but I suppose that the shock of what she said made me very, very determined to prove her wrong.'

Another woman immediately replied to the LWs question with the statement, 'Oh, yes. Like it was yesterday. I was wearing a pretty new dress and proud of it. Father had let me buy it for some church occasion or other. My stepmother took one look at me in that pretty new dress and she said, "Now, there's a waste of good money. Molly, somebody better tell you that no dress makes a plain girl pretty. Don't grow up expecting to make fellows' hearts go pitter-patter!"' The respondent indicated that this episode was very discouraging and led to years of self-doubt. 'I did all right in the husband department despite what that woman told me, but I haven't gotten over all the hurt yet, don't suppose I ever will. Isn't that silly!'

Some communications seemed to have achieved their enduring status because they encapsulated a valued characteristic of the source-person and/or the texture of life at that time. One woman recalled an incident on the farm not long after a heavy snowfall. 'I was not much above five at the time. Grandpa and Grandma – on my mother's side – had been visiting, and now they were ready to leave. They took a few steps away from the house. Grandpa turned and said something to my parents. I guess he was trying to encourage them because what he said was, "When things are really down there is nowhere for them to go but up." Then they took another step or two and pretty near disappeared through the snow, both of them! I was scared. But they sort of climbed out of the hole and Grandpa had a big smile on his face. And he said, "Just like I said – nowhere for things to go but up!" I guess that has

stayed with me because I loved Grandpa and he was that way... He was stern and firm and all that, but he also had that sense of humor.'

Another woman recalled having been responsible for an argument between her parents when she wanted to stay overnight at a friend's house. 'I must have been feeling guilty that I had caused it... But later they were being their usual friendly and affectionate selves, and Mother winked and said, "Don't let the sun set on an argument." I have to admit I'm not that way myself. I can carry a grudge a long time, though I'm not proud of it... I guess that little incident stays in my mind because it was just like them, I mean, just to care about people and not make mountains out of molehills.'

Effects of LWs on recipients

The data did not lend themselves to meaningful statistical analysis regarding the effects of LWs. Many respondents spontaneously stated that their LWs had been influential throughout their lives and some specified the nature of these effects. There was not enough information obtained to go beyond this general impression. It would appear that the LWs were considered by the respondents to have had a prevalingly positive effect, but an improved method of data collection will be needed to check out this impression.

LWs the respondents would pass on to others

The second part of the research procedure asked respondents to indicate the words they would like to pass on to other people to make a lasting impression on them. Respondents were also asked to specify who they would choose to hear these words and why.

Almost all of the pass-on responses conveyed a general moral principle (84 per cent). These principles were usually intended to apply to everybody or to children and youth in particular. A few responses conveyed admonitions specific to a particular recipient. An example of the latter: 'there is a young guy in the neighbourhood named J. He is mentally confused about a lot of things. I tell him, "Don't get in gangs. Don't fool with dope. Stay out of trouble."' There were no examples or derogatory or encapsulating messages in this sample of pass-on responses.

Given the finding that all the pass-on LWs were concerned with principles of conduct it becomes useful to look at the particular themes that were expressed (see Table 2). The most frequent theme was the value of education. The advice to 'Always follow your dream' was

TABLE 2. *Theme of lasting words the respondents would pass on to others*

	%
Value of education	35
Family first	18
Do things right	16
Stay true to one's ideals	10
Treat others as you would like to be treated	8
Resist temptations	8
Other and unclassifiable	5
Total	100
N	148

Percentages have been rounded.

sometimes accompanied by the corollary theme, 'Don't put things off until it is too late', or 'You don't want a lifetime of regret because you didn't seize the opportunity when it came.'

A structural question was also asked of the data: what was the relationship between the LWs that the respondents had selected from their life experiences, and the LWs that they would pass on to others? The clearest finding was that no derogatory or encapsulating statements were offered as pass-on communications. Respondents either mentioned guiding principle LWs in both instances, or switched from derogatory/encapsulating communications to guiding principles. Those who recalled 'value of education' or 'family first' LWs had a high probability of endorsing this same principle in the LWs they would choose to pass on. There was no other strong pattern evident in the relationship between particular moral principle themes between LWs received and LWs passed on.

Discussion

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this preliminary study include both the sample and the research procedure. The sample was drawn in one geographical area of one nation at one point in time. It cannot be assumed that these findings would characterise other current populations. Furthermore, there is also no basis for determining the nature and extent of possible cohort effects. One notes, for example, that many respondents in this sample had an agrarian background, a population characteristic that has become less common throughout the years. The respondents also

lived through The Great Depression and had a number of other experiences that were distinctive to the socio-historical framework within which they developed and aged. It seems more useful to raise questions about possible cohort-related differences in LWs than to assume that the responses from one sample speak for the potential responses of older people in the past and the future. Another possible limitation is the use of student interviewers. Researchers with more advanced skills and experience might have elicited more extensive data and had a lower yield of incomplete or flawed protocols. The particular instructions given to elicit LWs might not be the most effective for that purpose. We do not know how the findings might have varied if the instructions had varied. The decision to avoid elaborate statistical analyses seemed appropriate in view of the preliminary data available here, but this also constitutes a limitation.

Empirical implications

Keeping these (and no doubt other) limitations in mind, one may nevertheless identify several implications that could be worth pursuing.

1. The concept of *lasting words* appears to be meaningful to many older men and women.
2. Researchers, programme planners and others who are interested in the well-being of older people might find it useful to include the LWs questions as part of their interview protocols. The substantive answers could enhance the gerontologist's understanding of the individual's frame of reference while also providing the opportunity for the respondent to contribute actively to the proceedings.
3. The study of LWs could be expanded to include several generations (one such study is now in progress). These studies might examine not only the substance of LWs produced by family members of different generations, but also provide insights into the ability or willingness of one generation to give credence to the words that other generations are living by.
4. The overall study of intergenerational relations might be enhanced by attention to the exchange of LWs. For example, the emerging literature on "intergenerational transfers" (Kronebusch and Schlesinger 1994) has focused on economic and other material items. It would seem unnecessarily self-limiting to continue to restrict the conceptualisation and study of intergenerational transfers to material exchanges when one might also learn of the lessons and meanings that are available for transfer.

It would also seem appropriate to include the voices of older people themselves when examining options for resource allocation and societal response. The values inherent in many LWs have a bearing on decisions and priorities.

5. Those who are interested in improving the flow of communication among generations might well find that LWs offer an accessible and informative starting point. For example, techniques that remove communicational barriers might be tested first on the exchange of these concise nuggets of meaning.
6. The process by which a small number of interpersonal communications become integrated into the individual's life-long construction of self would be useful to those concerned with learning, memory, teaching, and counselling. More refined studies of LWs could help us to discover these rules and/or processes.
7. One substantive finding that appears especially promising for follow-up research is the ability of some people to convert a negative communication into an incentive for positive self-development. This finding was associated with the decision *not* to convey negative LWs to the next generation.
8. Another substantive finding worth follow-up is the fact that the source-person for LWs was almost always somebody who was part of the recipient's life. To what extent has mass media culture with its proliferation of 'celebrities' provided a different context for LWs among subsequent cohorts?

Theoretical implications

Two alternative perspectives on LWs were briefly presented: emphasis on the message; emphasis on the context. The results of this exploratory study suggest that both approaches are of value. The message perspective, supported by thematic analyses, indicated that most of the LWs were classifiable as general moral principles and personal admonitions (both positive and negative).

It cannot be said, however, that 'wisdom' emerged as a salient characteristic of the LWs if by this term one means abstract, complex statements that display the higher reaches of postformal thought. The LWs were usually brief, straightforward, and pragmatic. The expression was often 'homey,' seldom learned or poetic. Out-and-out clichés were infrequent however, and seemed to earn their power through the situational context. 'Health is better than wealth', for example, was uttered by the respondent's dying and agonised alcoholic father.

One might dismiss many of the LW's as derivative and trivial. This attitude, however, would favour a theoretical conception of wisdom as against the actual creation and transmission of influential messages in the midst of everyday life. When attention is turned to the contextual perspective it can be seen that the message achieved its distinctive effect as part of a total situation in which relationship, credibility, and need-state all played a part. A certifiably 'wise' message might have not come across in these situations. Often the messages took the form of 'rules' in Shimanoff's (1980) sense of the term. The listeners were children or young adults at the time, and seemed to be facing doubts, uncertainties and choices for which they did not feel quite prepared. The LW messages provided them with rules or guides. Usually the messages provided positive guides; some were derogatory and provided life-long challenges. There was something about these messages that 'clicked'. The listener was ready to hear them, and the messages themselves were crafted in a memorable way and delivered with an emotional charge. To consider the text of the messages apart from their total contexts would be to miss their role in the overall dynamics. Messages that were too wordy, complex, or 'high flown' might have appeared of higher quality as detached texts, but would have perhaps been less likely to be influential in the situation. 'It's not wise to be wise all the time' is a statement that might apply to the theoretician's demand that LWs should take the form of complex postformal thought.

It is perhaps appropriate that an exploratory study should have yielded more questions than answers. However, it does seem clear enough that many older people are willing and eager to participate in the process of understanding why some communications become integral to us while so many others are discarded. In the long term the study of lasting words as a channel of interpersonal communication might even instruct us regarding the forces that hold people together despite the conflicts and discontinuities inherent in the human experience.

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