



Generativity and aging: A promising future research topic?

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ABSTRACT

Erikson already emphasized the importance of staying generative in old age. The concept of generativity as an important element in human development, significantly impacting on one's ability to age successfully, was discussed later by other authors as well. However, so far generativity has not received much attention in gerontology. This review summarizes and discusses the most important theoretical approaches, measurement methods, and empirical findings with regard to their relevance for gerontological research. This includes age-specific generative aspects, a critical discussion of current scales measuring generativity in older adults, and exploring empirical findings with regard to the association between generativity and successful aging. Finally, open questions concerning generativity and aging will be addressed.

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Erikson (1950) introduced the concept of generativity more than fifty years ago and defined it as “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (p. 267). He assumed a developmental model throughout life with eight stages and defined generativity as the seventh developmental task in midlife. Although, Erikson initially thought of generativity as a stage in midlife, he emphasized that older people should maintain a dignified generative function and proposed that grandparenthood offered individuals a second chance at generativity: “Old people can and need to maintain a *grand-generative function*” (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 63).

The idea that generativity was an important contributor to a successful aging process was proposed by other authors as well. Baltes and Baltes (1990) mention generativity and wisdom as integral elements of a normative definition of an ideal state in old age. Achieving generativity, along with good health, would therefore be a strong indicator of successful aging. Fisher (1995) interviewed elderly employees and found that having a sense of purpose or generativity was central to their belief that they were aging successfully. For Kruse and Wahl (2010), old age presents an individual with an opportunity to realize generativity based on acquired idealistic (i.e. experience, knowledge and time) and material resources. They describe it

as a facet that has yet to be acknowledged for its significant contributions to aging. Carlson, Seeman, and Fried (2000) point out the importance of generativity in healthy aging among older women. According to Vaillant (2007) “the mastery of generativity should be strongly correlated with successful adaptation to old age, for to keep it, you have to give it away.” (p. 220).

Although, already discussed as contributor for successful aging (e.g. Baltes & Baltes, 1990), generativity did not get much attention as a gerontological topic. Most of the studies have not examined adults beyond their early 70s. However, results of these studies represent an important background for future studies on generativity and its importance for aging. More specifically, we will explore how the theoretical approaches, measurement methods, and empirical findings so far apply to gerontological research.

Theoretical background

Origins of Erikson's life cycle model

The eight-stage life cycle essay that appeared as a chapter in *Childhood and Society* was based on Erik Erikson's clinical observations and other experiences to the theoretical perspective he had mastered in Vienna. According to Friedman (1999), Erikson felt that his own work on the life cycle would never have emerged without Sigmund Freud's stage theory. Also, he

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was in training with Anna Freud in Vienna. Besides psychoanalytic theories, he was influenced by philosophers like Buber or Kierkegaard. Erik and Joan Erikson began to work together on the life cycle theory in the mid-1940s, based on Erik's efforts since the mid-1930s to move beyond Freud's psychosexual developmental scheme. Erik and Joan Erikson sought to formulate the meaning of the stage of generativity within the context of their mixed performances as parents and "wanted to capture a generative tendency, and beyond this a tendency to take care of what was generated" (Friedman, 1999, pp. 222–225).

Erikson's concept of generativity

According to Erikson (1950) generativity stems from both inner needs or drives and external societal forces. It involves fertility, productivity and creativity, affording new lives, new products and new ideas. "And indeed, the concept of generativity is meant to include such more popular synonyms as productivity and creativity, which, however, cannot replace it" (Erikson, 1950, p. 267). Middle adulthood's generative responsibility is the responsibility of each generation of adults to bear, nurture, and guide those people who will succeed them as adults, as well as to develop and maintain those societal institutions and natural resources without which successive generations would not be able to survive (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986).

According to Erikson et al. (1986) "it is clear that adult libido is destined to reach some maturity in a number of generative ways: from a sexual procreativity to the day's technological productivity and whatever patterns of creativity have developed in the individual" (p. 50). Children are important for generativity but "the mere fact of having or even wanting children does not "achieve" generativity" (Erikson, 1950, p. 267). According to Erikson (1950), some parents have an underdeveloped generativity; one reason is due to "the lack of some faith, some "belief in the species", which would make a child appear to be a welcome trust of the community" (Erikson, 1950).

Erikson (1950) introduced generativity (vs. stagnation) as the seventh developmental task in midlife following basic trust (vs. basic mistrust), autonomy (vs. shame), initiative (vs. guilt), industry (vs. inferiority), identity (vs. confusion), intimacy (vs. isolation) and preceding integrity (vs. despair) (for an overview see Table 1). Erikson suggested that these psychosocial strengths are all interrelated, and that later stages are dependent on the development of the previous stages in a sequential manner. Furthermore, each item exists in some form before its critical time normally arrives (Erikson, 1950). For Erikson they are stages of growth of a healthy personality.

Care, the new virtue which emerges from the antithesis between generativity and stagnation, is a commitment to take care of persons, products and ideas. As can be seen in Table 1, Erikson et al. (1986) proposed a maladaptive and malignant tendency for each stage. For generativity (vs. stagnation) it is overextension (not selecting enough of whom to take care of) and rejectivity (being too selective).

According to Erikson (1988), even for highly generative people, stagnation is not a foreign feeling. However, individuals with a steady and strong feeling of stagnation and personal impoverishment often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own and only child (Erikson, 1950).

Erik Erikson's widow Joan Erikson elaborated on his model, adding a ninth stage (very old age) considering increased life expectancy in Western cultures (Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Joan Erikson's work on the ninth stage appears in her 1996 revisions to "The Life Cycle Completed: A Review"). Joan Erikson suggested that the old person confronts all previous eight stages again, but this time all stages converge at the same time. On top of that, the negative pole now takes the dominant role over the positive. For instance, instead of confronting generativity vs. stagnation, in the ninth stage the older adult confronts stagnation vs. generativity. Brown and Lewis (2003) found a positive correlation between age and resolution of Stage 9. However, the eight stage model is most commonly referenced and is regarded as the standard.

Generativity: a unidimensional or multidimensional construct?

Kotre's four types of generativity

The first theorist to expand significantly upon Erikson's ideas about generativity was Kotre (1984). He proposed that four distinct forms of generativity exist: biological, parental, technical, and cultural. *Biological* generativity is about begetting, bearing, and nursing children. *Parental* generativity is expressed in feeding, clothing, sheltering, loving, and disciplining offspring (biological or not) and initiating them into the family's traditions. *Technical* generativity is accomplished by teachers, who pass on skills to those less advanced than themselves (e.g. how to read, how to program a computer, how to perform a healing ritual). When a teacher moves from teaching skills to passing on their meaning, he becomes *culturally* generative.

Erikson (1950) thought of generativity as a midlife task. According to Kotre (1996), the schedule for the appearance is misleading as Erikson failed to differentiate between the various types of generativity and their relevance. For example, biological generativity – conceiving and bearing children – has a far earlier

Table 1
Psychosocial stages in life (adapted from Erikson et al., 1986, p. 45).

Age	Maladaptive tendency	Trust	Adaptive strength	Mistrust	Malignant tendency
1. Infancy	Sensory maladjustment	Trust	Hope	Mistrust	Withdrawal
2. Early childhood	Shameless willfulness	Autonomy	Will	Shame/doubt	Compulsion
3. Play age	Ruthlessness	Initiative	Purpose	Guilt	Inhibition
4. School age	Narrow virtuosity	Industriousness	Competence	Inferiority	Inertia
5. Adolescence	Fanaticism	Identity cohesion	Fidelity	Role confusion	Repudiation
6. Young adulthood	Promiscuity	Intimacy	Love	Isolation	Exclusivity
7. Middle adulthood	Overextension	Generativity	Care	Stagnation	Rejectivity
8. Old age	Presumption	Integrity	Wisdom	Despair	Disdain

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