



Stability and change in generative concern: Evidence from a longitudinal survey



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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal data taken at a ten-year interval from a large, nationally representative sample were used to examine stability and change in generative concern, as measured by a reduced form of the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS). Rank-order stability over a ten year period was high ($r > .6$) among those respondents 30 or older at the time of first measurement. Mean scores on the LGS increased for men aged 24–29 and decreased for men and women aged 60–69, but the size of these changes was small. First marriage and childbearing were not associated with an increase in LGS scores. The evidence suggests both life-long stability and a small mid-life peak in generative concern.

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1. Introduction

While Erikson's (1963) life stage theory predicts that generativity should peak in mid-life, no prior research has directly tested this theory using longitudinal measures of the LGS. This paper uses a reduced version of the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), which measures "generative concern," that was given to respondents in the 1995 and 2005 waves of the nationally representative Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey. It tests rank-order stability in the LGS by correlating individuals' 1995 and 2005 scores. It tests whether scores on the LGS peak in midlife, as measured both by chronological age and by the life course transitions of marriage and children. It also tests whether rank-order stability and life course peaks in generative concern vary by gender.

2. Generativity and the Loyola Generativity Scale

2.1. Generativity

Erikson (1963) originated the concept of generativity when he stated that the crisis of generativity versus stagnation was the seventh of eight life stages, and one that occupies much of the adult life course. During this stage, individuals are challenged to become less focused on their individual success and happiness and more focused on giving back to society and leaving a legacy for others. Erikson (1963) saw the desire for generativity as both an innate drive and a culturally influenced social norm. Later scholars (Kotre, 1984; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998) connected

generative motivation within the increasing awareness of one's own mortality that comes with age.

Cultural norms affect the timing of generativity (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) and "cultural demand" in the United States "urges adults to assume generative roles as they move into their 30s and 40s" (McAdams et al., 1998, p. 17). Erikson (1963) did not state exactly when the generative stage was supposed to end, but cross-sectional surveys have found that people in their sixties and early seventies score lower on measures of generative concern than people in their late thirties, forties, and fifties (Keyes & Ryff, 1998; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993).

Stewart and Vandewater (1998) further elaborated the theory of the life course development of generativity by dividing the concept into generative motivation, generative capacity, and generative achievement. They argue that generative motivation develops completely in early adulthood and then declines; felt capacity for generative action begins to occur in early adulthood, peaks in mid-adulthood, and then decreases; and generative achievement increases through adulthood and peaks late in life. They supported this theory with quantitative coding of narrative data taken from two longitudinal studies of female college graduates.

2.2. The Loyola Generativity Scale

Scholars have used a number of strategies to measure generativity (Kotre, 1984; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Peterson, 1998; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998), but one of the most commonly used is the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), a measure of "generative concern" (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The LGS asks respondents to evaluate how well

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twenty statements describe them, on a scale of one to four. These statements include “I think I would like the work of a teacher,” “I think I will be remembered a long time after I die,” and “Other people say that I am a very productive person,” along with some reverse-coded negative items such as “I do not feel that other people need me,” and “I feel that I have done nothing that will survive after I die.” The LGS has high internal validity and test–retest reliability and correlates with measurements of generativity that use life narrative data and other qualitative methods (McAdams et al., 1998). The LGS appears to be a unidimensional scale; exploratory factor analysis found that the LGS loaded on two factors, but these were distinguished only by question wording, as one factor included positively worded items and another included negative, reverse-coded items (McAdams et al., 1998). The LGS was developed using American subjects but has been used successfully in Australia (McKeering & Pakenham, 2000), Japan (Marushima & Arimitsu, 2007), Korea (Kim & Youn, 2002), and Cameroon, Costa Rica, and Germany (Hofer, Busch, Chasiotis, Kärtner, & Campos, 2007). The latter study found that some items of the LGS had to be dropped to make it cross-culturally applicable, but the reduced scale had measurement equivalence across the three cultures (Hofer et al., 2007). There appear to be no studies of the measurement invariance of the LGS by gender or across age groups.

Scores on the LGS correlate positively with the “big five” personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience and negatively with the big five personality trait of neuroticism (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995; Marushima & Arimitsu, 2007; Van Hiel, Mervielde, & De Fruyt, 2006). The LGS correlates positively with measures of agency and communion (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995; Peterson & Stewart, 1993, 1996; Rossi, 2001), moral obligation (Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Rossi, 2001), and religiosity (Dillon & Wink, 2004; Wink & Dillon, 2003). Many studies have found a connection between generative concern and generative and prosocial behaviors (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001; Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Peterson, 2002, 2006; Rossi, 2001; Thiele & Whelan, 2008).

3. Review of the literature

3.1. Life course change and stability in the LGS

While there has been much research on the correlates of generative concern, there has been little research on whether scores on the Loyola Generativity Scale actually change over the life course. In testing stability and change in generative concern, one must distinguish between rank-order changes and mean-level changes. Most personality traits show strong rank-order stability over time, meaning that a person high in a personality trait in their 20s will probably continue to be relatively high in that trait throughout their life, compared to other people the same age. This rank-order stability can exist simultaneously with mean-level change, meaning that the average score for a group of people born around the same time can increase or decrease as they get older. A recent study using a large, nationally representative German sample found high levels of stability in the Big Five personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience, found high rank-order stability over a four year period with Pearson's r correlations between .64 and .74 (Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011). The same study found mean-level change in these variables, as all five decreased significantly over time. A similar study using the 1995 and 2005 MIDUS data found correlations across the ten year period of $r = .64$ for agreeableness, $r = .61$ for conscientiousness, $r = .70$ for extraversion, $r = .64$ for neuroticism, and $r = .69$ for openness to experience (Graham & Lachman, 2012).

Change with age and stability over time can interact, and personality psychologists differ on how stability in personality traits changes over the life course (Specht et al., 2011). Some scholars argue that personality forms in young adulthood and is largely stable after age 30 (Costa & McCrae, 1988; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). Others find that stability increases slowly, at least until age 50 (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Srivastava et al., 2003). The largest study to date on the stability of the Big Five personality traits over time found that conscientiousness scores became increasingly stable throughout adult life, but scores on agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience followed a U-shaped curve, peaking in stability between the ages of 40 and 60 and decreasing in old age (Specht et al., 2011).

Two cross-sectional studies have examined whether generative concern scores vary by age. McAdams et al. (1993) tested the timing of generativity among a sample of 152 adults, randomly selected from the population of Evanston, Illinois. They found that people in mid-adulthood (aged 37–42) scored higher on the LGS than young adults (age 22–27) and older adults (age 67–72). Using cross-sectional data from the 1995 wave of the Midlife in the United States study, Keyes and Ryff (1998) also found statistically significant differences in generative concern by age, with 40–59 year olds scoring higher than those aged 24–39 or those aged 60 and older. As both of these studies were cross-sectional, cohort differences instead of life course development may explain the differences found.

There have been only two longitudinal studies using the LGS. One found no significant changes in the LGS among young adults measured first at age 19 and then at age 23 (Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005). Another used longitudinal data from MIDUS to find correlations among family of origin factors, education, generative concern, religiosity, and volunteering, but did not test whether generative concern peaked in midlife (Son & Wilson, 2011).

While generative concern may vary with chronological age, it may be that life course events, not aging, cause changes in generative concern. The generativity stage follows a stage of seeking intimacy, and Erikson (1963) theorized that individuals must successfully resolve one stage before moving effectively to the next. Since most people resolve the intimacy stage by getting married or forming a long-term romantic partnership, we might expect to see people who get married begin to focus less on intimacy needs and more on generative concerns. This hypothesis has not been extensively tested, although one cross-sectional study found no significant difference in generativity between single and married adults (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

Most people express generative concern through having and raising children, and therefore one might expect that scores on generative concern would go up among adults who become parents. Snarey (1993) proposed that parenthood first involved biological generativity, or conceiving and bearing a child, then parental generativity, which involves raising the child, and finally societal generativity, which involves contributing to members of the next generation other than one's own children. A study of parents in the U.S. found a correlation between LGS scores and viewing themselves as a role model and source of wisdom for their children (Hart et al., 2001).

3.2. Gender differences

Girls become aware of biological generativity earlier than boys “with the onset of menses in puberty, and then are regularly reminded of the potential for motherhood throughout the very earliest phases of adulthood” (Miller-McLemore, 1998, p. 180). For this reason, women may develop generative concern at a younger

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