Extending the Framework of Generativity Theory Through Research: A Qualitative Study

Kate de Medeiros, PhD, Laura M. Girling, MS, Michael Brazda, MA, Robert L. Rubinstein, PhD, Susan Hannum, PhD
Extending the Framework of Generativity Theory Through Research: A Qualitative Study

Robert L. Rubinstein, PhD,* 1 Laura M. Girling, MS, 1 Kate de Medeiros, PhD, 2 Michael Brazda, MA, 1 and Susan Hannum, PhD 3

1 Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). 2 Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. 3 Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland.

*Address correspondence to Robert L. Rubinstein, PhD, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250. E-mail: rrubinst@umbc.edu

Purpose of the study: Based on ethnographic interviews, we discuss three ideas we believe will expand knowledge of older informants’ thoughts about and representations of generativity. We adapt the notion of “dividuality” as developed in cultural anthropology to reframe ideas on generativity. The term dividuality refers to a condition of interpersonal or intergenerational connectedness, as distinct from individuality. We also extend previous definitions of generativity by identifying both objects of generative action and temporal and relational frameworks for generative action.

Design: We define 4 foci of generativity (people, groups, things, and activities) and 4 spheres of generativity (historical, familial, individual, and relational) based in American culture and with which older informants could easily identify. The approach outlined here also discusses a form of generativity oriented to the past in which relationships with persons in senior generations form a kind of generative action since they are involved in caring for the origins of the self and hence of future generative acts. These 3 elements of a new framework will allow researchers to pose critical questions about generativity among older adults. Such questions include (a) How is the self, as culturally constituted, involved in generative action? and (b) What are the types of generativity within the context of American culture and how are they spoken about? Each of the above points is directly addressed in the data we present below.

Methods: We defined these domains through extended ethnographic interviews with 200 older women.

Results and implications: The article addresses some new ways of thinking about generativity as a construct, which may be useful in understanding the cultural personhood of older Americans.

Key words: Culture, Generativity theory, Anthropology

This article attempts to extend work on generativity through discussion of a research project that has led us to conceptualize key aspects of generativity. We discuss details of the project subsequently. Generativity is a concept that
was introduced by Erikson (1950) over 60 years ago. He defined it as “an interest in establishing and guiding the next generation” (1964, p. 267), concluding that this was typically achieved through biological parenthood. According to Erikson, generativity represents part of the conflict between the adult desire to constructively invest oneself in what one will leave behind from life and a desire for involvement most intently with oneself, in a narcissistic fashion, a state he labeled “stagnation.” Erikson noted a crisis of generativity that occurs in middle or late adulthood, a time at which conflicting impulses might lead a person to either invest in what one will be leaving behind or to focus more fully on the self at the expense of other possibilities. This is a critical junction in adult life demonstrating a possible shift in the generations to which one is oriented, to the self or to future generations.

Although Erickson’s view of generativity initially centered on the attainment and development of children, he also explained that generativity can include forms of productivity and creativity. Erikson (1964) found that there are persons who “through misfortune or because of special and genuine gifts in other directions, do not apply this drive to their own offspring” (p. 267), but rather invest themselves into their larger communities. Thus, Erikson’s notion of generativity has a biological (“psychosexual”) basis as well as a sociocultural (“psychosocial”) component. In later work (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1989), he stressed the roles of grandparenting, as well as freedom, responsibility, lifelong learning, and the arts as part of the “vital involvement” of older people in society in a generative manner. When readdressing his life-span theory in his older age, Erikson concluded that some people may not feel needed, may feel existentially useless, or may focus entirely on the self. To be sure, the relationship between generativity and narcissism is complex. Although narcissism may be one way of thinking about what generativity is not, both narcissism and generativity might be thought of as forms of self-fulfillment that can be, for some, closely related in that generative action provides distinctive personal gains.

Generativity and Relational Contexts

Besides the early definition given by Erikson, generativity is one orientation in which people closely connect with others through time. Such a connection can happen with persons who are either defined through biological kinship (e.g., one’s children) or as non-kin (e.g., the students one has taught or mentored). In a recent work, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2013), in reviewing the wide range of kinship forms that are culturally known, defined kinship as “mutuality of being” suggesting that kin are “people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence – thus ‘mutual person(s)’, ‘life itself’, ‘intersubjective belonging’, ‘transbody beings’, and the like” (Sahlins, 2013, p. 2). He also draws attention to the distinction that has been made in anthropology between “the individual”—a Western construct relating to unitary social identity and the autonomous self—and the “dividual,” a term applicable to partible and recombinable formations of the person in interpersonal or intergenerational relationship. This is a term, which has largely been defined until now for non-Western societies (Geurts, 2002; Sahlins, 2013, pp. 19–20, 24–28; Strathern, 1990). Sahlins writes that the sense of “the dividual” is of one who is “not distinct,” but known through culturally particular affiliation of the self or its parts with others. Surely, the notion of “dividuality,” the placing of something of the self with others, is at the heart of what is meant by generativity. Generativity may not be so much a matter of “outliving the self” as Kotre defines it (see Generativity Theory) as passing elements of the self through to others who live after one’s own end. In this sense, it parallels aspects of identity as discussed by Casey (2000), who wrote “thanks to the incorporative action of identification, I interiorize the other, set him or her up within me as an abiding presence” [italics in original] (p. 240).

Generativity Theory

Kotre (1984) redefined generativity as “a desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (p. 10). In our minds, this reflects the operation of generativity as a form of dividuality, as defined earlier. In such terms, generativity “seeks” biological, sociocultural, and other outlets and in so doing creates a point of connection between or among individuals through values, knowledge, beliefs, moral values, or other cultural constructs that are partible, moving from one person to another. Kotre (1984, 1996) suggested that generativity is not a stage of development per se, but rather an impulse that can be released throughout the life course. Kotre also stressed the importance of culture on generative expression, describing cultural generativity as the point at which the teacher is no longer merely passing along skills (which he terms “technical generativity”) but has become an active mentor, helping another to discover more about self and meaning.

Kotre proposed a theory that separates generativity into four types and two modes. The four proposed types include (a) biological (fertility and begetting children), (b) parental (nurturing and disciplining offspring and teaching family traditions), (c) technical (the teaching of enduring skills), and (d) cultural (“creating/renovating, and conserving a symbol system . . . explicitly passing it on to successors”; p. 12). The two “modes of generativity” he distinguished are derived from Bakan (1967) and are called (a) agentic and (b) communal. These distinguish between behaviors oriented to the self and those oriented toward the community, respectively.
An important contribution to theory has been further articulated by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) in a multifaceted psychosocial model of generativity that focuses on goals of providing for the next generation. McAdams and de St. Aubin’s approach described generativity as an arrangement of seven empirically grounded facets including desire, cultural demand, concern, belief, commitment, action, and narration (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 2004). Accordingly, cultural demand in combination with inner desire (for agentic immortality and communal nurturance) fosters a conscious concern for future generations. Concern for future generations is strengthened by a belief in the goodness of humankind. The component of belief is derived from what Erikson (1964) referred to as “belief in the species.” Belief is said to lead to generative commitment. Generative commitment subsequently can initiate generative action. Ultimately, the multifaceted connection of these components is assembled through narration of the life story. McAdams and de St. Aubin noted, “a full understanding of generativity in a given person’s life, therefore, requires a full examination of all seven features” (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992, p. 1004). Aspects of this arrangement have been well researched (Ehlman & Ligon, 2012; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Hofer, Busch, Chasiotis, Kärnter, & Campos, 2008).

Design and Methods

The data presented subsequently are drawn from narrative responses to questions about life history, thoughts, and experiences of generativity in a study entitled “Generativity and Lifestyles of Older Women,” which we refer to as the GLOW study (de Medeiros, Rubinstein, & Ermoshkina, in press; Doyle, Rubinstein, & de Medeiros, 2013). The primary objective of the GLOW study was to examine how older women without living children experienced and expressed generativity and its related facets including caregiving; work; productivity; social relations, especially with children; and possible future health concerns. The study sample included 200 women living in mid-Atlantic states, of whom 151 had no living children, ranging from 58 to 98 years of age, divided into groups of women without children who were never married (N = 52), widowed (N = 37), divorced (N = 33), and currently married (N = 29). For comparison, a group of women with children was also interviewed (N = 41); we felt this would better enable us to understand the distinctive motivations of the women without children compared with informants who had children. An additional eight women had nonbiological children such as adoptees. Forty-two percent (N = 84) of the sample was African American and the remainder was European American (N = 116). The selection of a sample of 200 women was dictated so as to have sufficient numbers for meaningful analysis in subsamples of different marital statuses and by ethnicity. Inclusion criteria included English speaking, minimum age of 58, and no obvious cognitive impairment. Most informants were interviewed in an open-ended, ethnographic format, using a basic interview guide, in a series of three in-person interviews held once weekly for 3 weeks, predominately conducted at participant’s homes; in a few cases, the interviews were concluded in two meetings. Those questions we used which in some way concerned aspects of generativity are given in Table 1. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed professionally, and team coded for analysis using Atlas.ti, a software program for the management and analysis of qualitative data. All transcripts were coded using a general array of 44 topical codes as well as the eight generativity types described subsequently. The analysis here deals specifically with these eight factors. All names and details have been changed to protect the identities of informants. The three interviews in sum ranged from 3 to 8 hr, depending on how much the informant had to say in response to the questions. Following techniques that are common in qualitative research, the questions in the interview guide were used as openings to ongoing conversations in which responses to initial questions were turned back as follow-up questions until each line of inquiry was fully discussed and its meaning made clear. The questions in the interview guide ranged widely and topics included demographic and background information; family and social relations; the elicitation of a life history narrative; work life, achievement and productivity; current health issues and future health perceptions; and an extended inquiry about generativity and mentoring. Possible topics relating to generativity were open, numerous, and extensive. We should also note that the age range of the informant pool was quite broad and did, in effect, incorporate two cohorts, early Baby boomers and those who were from the previous generation. This article does not incorporate a specific cohort analysis, but we do note that the framework we discuss subsequently was appropriate for informants from the entire age span incorporated in the sample.

In order to inquire about generativity, prior to conducting the research, we developed a set of simple generativity types and categories which we felt best represented the cultural aspects of generative behavior. These derived primarily from the first author’s experiences over many years of interviewing many older people directly using a life history framework and included two components: objects of generativity (people groups, things, and activities) and forms of generativity (individual, historical, family, and relational). The intent was to have a simple framework to better understand the nature of generative action. These are discussed
In the research, we used these categories as entry points for discussion and for tailored follow-up questions about generative action including kin relationships, mentoring, and productive relations in the past, present, and future. In the analysis, we also sought information about possible forms of generativity that could act to disconfirm the simple organizing framework we were using. Subsequently, examples are chosen to illustrate informants’ typical responses to the framework we developed.

Although prior theoretical conceptualizations of generativity, such as those discussed earlier, have provided a basic structure for generativity theory, which largely derives from psychology, this article extends previous views of generativity to focus on the particular forms that are situated within American culture and with an emphasis on the dialogic relationships of “dividuality.” Theoretically, one way of inquiring about generativity as a cultural construct would be to ask informants about generative actions without the use of any preexisting theoretical framework, set of definitions, or organizing structure. In other words, one might attempt to locate generative actions and motives without an eye to what larger ideas or meanings might shape or structure them. We did not do this, primarily, because it is very difficult to discuss meaning (such as the meaning of generativity) without a larger context, either one supplied by the researcher or one supplied by the informants. Our goal was to supply a minimal context and permit the informants, through the interview discussion process, to elaborate on or define such a meaningful context. Consequently, as noted, we developed a simple organizing structure for generativity as a way of permitting research informants to respond personally to ideas on generativity that they felt were subjectively important. They could do this by responding to both an open set of questions about generative behaviors and objects (Table 1) in ways that best represented their personal experiences of them and also to discuss themselves and significant generative actions through a life history narrative, an element that is congruent with the approach taken both by McAdams and Kotre.

The proposed loose structure was developed by the authors for the study described here as a way of inquiring about the meaning and experience of generativity among a sample of older women, the majority of whom (N = 151) are childless, thus lacking biological children as “standard” generative outlets. As such, the framework presented here was based on a concern to understand forms of generativity utilized and experienced by informants when they did not have biological children. A primary research question was “What forms does generativity take for women when the main object of it is not specifically one’s biological children?” In what follows, we present the structure of the framework organized in terms of responses to our questions based on extended ethnographic interviews with 200 older women.

Results

Our own data (see below) indicate that some of the constructs developed by McAdams and de St. Aubin have little emic or “natural” significance for the older informants we interviewed. We found that notions such as “belief in the goodness of humankind” or “belief in the species” appear to have little specific relevance for our informants as culturally located or personally meaningful concepts. They are too abstract for the ways in which our informants discussed forms of generativity, which was more personal and involved in the use of generative connection to create both specific and general benefits for others. The idea of a personal or moral responsibility for generative action figured prominently in many of our research discussions with our informants. In our work, we stress the personal gains, especially to culturally situated ideas of identity, created through generative action in support of others (Rittenour & Colaner, 2012). Our approach, as noted earlier, also stresses the partibility of the person as a form of generative connection.

Elements of the Framework

The framework we developed is illustrated in Figure 1. The basis of the framework derives directly from what informants told us of their generative experiences, feelings, and actions in the extended conversations we had with them and in the life stories that they presented to us in the interview setting. Thus, the framework is a new way of culturally thinking about generativity. The foci include types of generative objects that informants easily discussed, for example, people or groups (groups could be cultural, religious, ethnic, ideational, work related, or political in nature). It consists of four loosely defined foci of generativity (people, groups, things, and activities) that represented culturally defined generative objects and four spheres of generativity (historical, familial, individual, and relational) that in part represented culturally significant aspects of generative temporality. All in all, the foci and spheres appear to represent objects of generative action that informants could most easily and naturally identify and describe. In many cases, informants described linking the self to others, reflecting a form of dividuality. To some extent, the foci overlap. And, to be sure, some informants could not identify with all of these; however, in general, the informants could classify their own generative behavior within these contexts. We did come on some informants—no more than five—who could be seen as nongenerative because they did not link to
Table 1. Questions Relevant to Generativity

Note: QUESTIONS ARE ENTRY POINTS TO FOLLOW UP DISCUSSION AND FURTHER TAILORED QUESTIONS
1. About how many close relatives and friends do you have right now? How often do you see or talk to your relatives and friends?
2. Who is the most important person in your life right now? How often do you see him/her?
3. Who lives (here) with you? What is his/her relationship to you?
4. What is your marital status? Are you married, widowed, divorced, or never married?
   IF MARRIED: How long have you been married? What is your spouse’s name?
   Were you ever married before? How many times have you been married?
   IF WIDOWED, also ask: How long have you been widowed? How long had you been married? How old was your spouse when (he or she) died? Was that your only marriage or were you married before?
   IF DIVORCED: How long have you been divorced? How long had you been married? Was that your only marriage? GET DETAILS.
   IF NEVER MARRIED: Did you or do you now ever have a companion or someone with whom you lived? How long had you and your companion been together?
5. Did you ever work? What did you do most of your working life? What did your spouse/companion do most of (his or her) working life?
6. Do you consider yourself retired? IF NO: What do you do? How many hours a week? Do you have any regular volunteer jobs?
7. [For participants with children], ask the first name, location, marital status, and occupation of their children and how often they are in touch with them.
8. What are your main activities nowadays? What are your favorite activities at the present time?
9. How would you describe your personality? For example, are you generally a happy person or are you “blue”?
10. Thinking about your finances at the present time, would you say that you have more than enough, pretty much just get by, or don’t really have enough to make ends meet?

Life history interview

“Now that we have met and talked for a few minutes, I’d like to know more about you and your life. Could you describe your life for me; whatever comes to your mind about what happened along the way? Start where you like and take as much time as you need.”
1. “Now, I would like to go back over what you have told me about your life so that I can get some further details. Let’s start with your childhood.” The interviewer then questions the informant closely about each period in her life and “walks” them, step by step, from early life until the present day. In doing so, the interviewer attempts to integrate some of the key experiences that the subject has already mentioned.

Specific phases of each subject’s life to be inquired about in this way include:
a. childhood
b. education and teenage years
c. early feelings about childlessness
d. events surrounding marriage or nonmarriage
e. young adult feelings about childlessness
f. adulthood and career (housewifery is to be considered a career)
g. recollections about midlife feelings about childlessness
h. retirement and other late life changes
i. the current day meaning of childlessness
j. bereavement and other losses

Generativity Interview

1) Suppose you were asked to make a contribution to a time capsule, one that would not be opened for 100 years. What would you put in it?
2) Suppose, further, they asked you—as an older person—to write down some advice on how to live that you thought would be as good 100 years from now as it is today. What would you write down?
3) Do you ever feel that you are a living representative of a particular cultural, historic, ethnic, or racial tradition?
4) Would you say that you think your family’s history is personally important to you? How so? What things in particular?
5) Is there a person in your family who keeps track of things like family history, births and deaths, and things like that? Who is it?
6) All and all, what things in your life do you think will outlive you?
7) Would you say that you feel your family’s heritage or history? How so?
8) Think about your family for a moment, that is, all the people and generations in your family that have come before you. What do you think are the most important beliefs, ideas, or values you got from them. Repeat for mother, father.
9) Do you feel you are a part of a family tradition? Do you see anything of your mother/father in you?
10) For married/formerly married: Do you see anything of your spouse in you? You in your spouse?
11) What has been your parent’s heritage for you? Do you think that you have reworked or changed the meaning of their heritage for you? In what ways?
12) Did you ever think you’d like to have grandchildren? Elaborate.
13) How did family members take care of elders now or in the past?
14) Thinking about the last five years, what have been your most important accomplishments in life?
15) Thinking about your life as a whole, in your mind, what have been your most important accomplishments in life?
16) Considering your life today, do you want to continue in much the same way/change some parts/change many parts? What parts would you change? Why?
17) What things would you have done over in your life if you could?
18) Thinking about your life, what things are you most glad went the way they did?
19) Thinking about the last five years, what activities have given you the greatest happiness or satisfaction or have had the most meaning for you?
20) Thinking about your life as a whole, what activities have given you the greatest happiness or satisfaction, or have the most meaning for you?
21) Thinking about your life from childhood up until today, what were the happiest times of life? The saddest times?
22) What are the most important ideas or values you think you’ll pass on to other people. To whom?
23) Thinking about the last five years, in what ways/what areas have you been most creative or productive?
24) Thinking about your life as a whole, in which ways/what areas have you been most creative/productive?
25) Was there ever a moment when you felt the desire to describe what you know or what you’ve experienced to other people, so that it won’t be lost when you pass on?
26) Was there ever a time in your life that you felt as if you were “having a second chance,” that is, the opportunity to do over things that had once gone wrong?
27) Are there any objects here in your home that are special to you, that is that have special meaning to you or are especially significant to you. For each: Do you know who’ll you leave that to when you pass on?
28) Obtain details of planned disposition for money, home, and car. Also: Will you do anything special with the photos you have here in your house? Is there anyone to whom you have given or will give your (cooking) recipes?
29) When you think about your life as a whole, what sorts of things do you think about or feel.
30) What comes to your mind about your life?
31) Think about (when you were a child/when you were 50/the last five years) . . . who did/do you admire most? Which persons have had the greatest influence on you? How?
32) Thinking about your life in the last five years, who have you been closest to in that time? Who is the most important person in your life right now?
33) Suppose a younger person, a teenage, say, came to you and asked you for your most valuable advice on how best to live. What would you tell them?
34) Thinking about your life as an adult, whom have you been closest to as an adult?
35) Which people do you think you have had the greatest influence on in their lives? How so? Do you see anything of yourself in other people? Elaborate.
36) Thinking about your life as a whole/the last five years, which people or groups do you feel you’ve influenced the most?
37) Thinking about the people you know, how would you like people to remember you? Who will do so?
38) Did you ever have responsibility for hands on care for other people? Who? What happened?
39) Thinking about the last five years of your life, do you ever think that you’ve been at a disadvantage, in any way, because you have no children/children? Why didn’t (did) you have children?
40) In the last five years, do you think that having no children/children has had any advantages for you?
41) Did you ever encounter any situation in which people looked at you differently because you did not have children? Do you regret having no children/children. If yes, a lot, somewhat, a little, not at all? (Elaborate).
42) Thinking about your adult life as a whole, do you think you’ve been at a disadvantage because you have no children/children? Any advantages?
43) Thinking about your life as a whole, is there anyone (other than your own children) to whom you’ve ever “acted like a parent” to? How so? (Elaborate.) Anyone else?
44) What sorts of special skills or knowledge do you have? (Things like cooking, gardening, crafts, and sewing). Have you ever taught any of these to anyone? Who? Elaborate.
45) Many people think that the childless are unhappy, but many are quite happy. What do you think about this?
46) Is there anyone you’ve ever talked to about what’s gone on in your life, your experiences and what you think they mean?
47) Thinking back to your early days, was there ever a time you knew you wanted to be childless?
48) When did you first realize you would be childless?
49) In some families, children are brought up with the expectation that they should and will be parents. How was that for you?
50) What did your family members think about your not having children? What about your friends?
51) Think back to some of your important friends when you were 50. Did they have children? 14) Did you ever conceive or bear a child who was lost? (Probe gently).
52) Was your childlessness voluntary or involuntary?
any of these categories nor express any sense of individual identity.

This proposed framework of generativity is necessary because it represents a culturally grounded perspective on American ideas about generative objects and spheres. For example, it is hard to know to what extent some of the concerns of McAdams and de St. Aubin’s psychosocial model of generativity actually represent the lives and concerns of American older adults in their own terms. As noted, ideas they promote such as a belief in the goodness of humankind or a desire for some form of immortality may be too abstract to clearly represent culturally articulated rationales or schema for generative action and we did not encounter many instances of these spoken about in our research. However, a focus on the care or mentoring of a specific younger individual was the sort of generative action often mentioned by our informants, even when biologically childless. Even among our informants without children, consciousness that a younger person might “outlive the self” was not always specifically articulated nor

---

**Table 1. Continued**

53) Is there anyone you’ve ever told your whole life story (or most of it) before now?
54) Is there anyone who you really think understands what you’ve been through in life?
55) Suppose a younger couple, say a man and woman in their early 30s came to you and said that they were considering whether they should have children but were undecided, and they wanted your advice. What would you tell them?
56) In the last five years, have you ever felt that you really had no one to love? How about as an adult? What was that like for you?
57) In the past five years, have you ever felt like there was no one who would remember you when you are gone?
58) In the past few years, have you ever felt that there is no one who would take care of you, if needs be?
59) All in all, describe the meaning that (having no children/having children) has for you?

**Caregiving and health needs:**

1) Have you made any plans for any care you might need in the future? What are they? Is there anyone who will help you with caregiving needs?
2) What do you think life will be like for you in 5 years; in 10 years?
3) Financially, will you have enough to see you through the next few years?
4) Given your life at the present time, what do you believe are future options for you?

**Figure 1.** Aspects of generativity.
listed as the reason for a generative undertaking. But the notions of care and nurturance and the relationship of self to other almost always seemed important to informants in describing themselves. For many informants, there was clear pleasure taken in the role of caring for and helping someone who was younger, in playing a quasi-parental or mentoring role and seeing something of one’s self in that person. Accordingly, the framework we discuss provides a new set of contexts for analyzing generativity in American life.

**Four Foci of Generativity**

The framework centers first on four foci of generativity: people, groups, things, and activities. The first and most important focal point of generativity narrated as personally significant by our informants was *people*. Many of the women without children whom we interviewed had developed relationships with younger persons such as nieces and nephews, quasi-kin, and others they mentored and cared for. However, both peer and senior generation (one’s own parents) caring relationships were not uncommon.

As a consequence, we identified a form of generative action, which may be oriented to relationships that were established with senior generations in the past. We, therefore, have come to view actions such as parent care as a form of generativity in that it establishes care for future generations by caring for the roots of those future generations. Parent care still represents a form of adult dividuality in which care is placed into another—the origin of oneself and of one’s own future. Thus, as children themselves age and reflect back on the difficult parental caregiving they once provided, they may view their own acts of parent care distinctively, as a form of care for their own origins, thus viewing their acts of parent care as self-generative.

More typical, however, are cases of generativity in relation to children (among those informants with biological children) or nieces and nephews. An example of a generative focus on people is supplied by the case of Ms. Smith, 66, with biological children, who indicated to us that her personal moral values have been passed down to her children and grandchildren. Ms. Smith stated, “Well, whatever I’ve taught my children and grandchildren. I hope that they can get some of what I feel is morally right. It’s what you pass down as far as your essence, what you believe in.”

Similarly, Ms. Robbins, 66 and biologically childless, while narrating her life story to us, indicated that children served as a generative focus. A teacher, Ms. Robbins, noted:

> I had to take one of my students to the office for whatever and when she was talking to the administrator, I remember her saying, I don’t remember what the administrator asked her, but I remember her saying that she wanted to be like me when she grew up. And that was really weird because I had taken her to the office, so, you know, for some reason I remember that now. But, yeah, I would think that I had [made] some kind of, impression and left, well I know I did, and it left an impact, you know, a positive one with most of the children I taught or came in contact with.

The focus on people as objects of generative action was pervasive and widespread in the GLOW data and was a main area of generative concern for informants.

The second focus concerns *groups or organizations*. This may be thought of as a focus on any corporately arranged aggregation of people. For many informants, a great deal was focused on generative expressions through work. We have examples of childless older adults who delayed retirement from a work setting because it was an arena for the desired expression of technical or cultural generativity as well as a source of personal meaning. The organization represents an expression of dividuality because part of the self is placed into the life of the organization. Further, a childless retired teacher, for example, may view her students not only as children whom she has parented but also as persons to whom she has taught technical skills as well as passed down a sense of the skills’ greater meaning. For example, Ms. Morris, 66, without biological children, expressed this notion, saying “I’m never without my children and then I had kids when I worked at [a College], I worked with the students so they were my children, too.”

Throughout our interviews, Ms. Morris consistently expressed the notion that her students were like her children and that she passed both knowledge and organization skills to those whom she taught. Evidence of generativity within a group context was also widely seen among GLOW participants in relation to organizations and other work settings. Ms. Owens, 89, without biological children, noted:

> I think the fact that I was the founding President of [a foundation] which is now in its eleventh year, it will outlive me. And I was the founding person and I served on the board . . . and we raised over three million dollars to send to [country] to help [people there]. So, that organization is now well established with a board of directors and staff members and is housed at [location]. So it will certainly go on without me.

Here, she clearly expresses the idea her organization will outlive her. Likewise, Ms. Thomas, 67, without biological children, also noted her role within an organization as a focus of generative action. She stated:

> Seeing the organization I founded just kind of maturing and really come into strong stability so that it feels like nothing could change, you know . . . So, never, an
organization is never done growing, but it felt like the last five years it got to a really major place.

Although accomplishments among women who had children typically centered on familial accomplishments, some women without children in our sample tended to view accomplishments in relation to their professional endeavors. For example, when asked about her most important accomplishment in life, Ms. Lincoln, 61, without biological children, noted, “Starting a mission-driven, wonderful company and running it.” GLOW data suggest that groups and organizations are an important focus of generativity among older women.

The third focus—things—refers to objects that are personally significant and can include elements such as photos, art, collections, memorabilia, souvenirs, scrapbooks, journals and diaries, antiques, family heirlooms, and houses and places to which individuals may feel attached and may potentially outlive the self. Such entities may serve both as objects and representations of generative care. Objects may be very important for personal meaning among older persons (Paton, 1992; Rubinstein, 1987a, 1987b, 1989, 2002; Schwartz, Brent, & Barry, 1996). For example, Ms. Lewis, 67, without biological children, stressed the significant meaning of her family photographs, stating, “. . . all the pictures and things that I have and I’m hoping, I’ve written down some things that I want given to people when I go, but I hope they treasure them as much as I did . . . family pictures.” Similarly, Ms. Taylor, 88, highlighted the importance of her needlework, stating:

I have done beautiful needlework that I no longer have. I have given it to people who I know that will live a long, long time beyond me. Whether the people who have it now think of it as that good a thing I don’t know. But that will outlive me, I’m sure. I’m sure, yes indeed.

Data suggest that these objects and plans for those objects can be important foci for both ensuring that some aspects of the person last beyond the life span and for creating meaningful and caring relations with others.

Finally, the fourth focus—activities—refers to behaviors that feature a significant investment of self in others by the social actor. Activities may involve a number of sorts of generative relationships, from playing particular, defined social roles within the context of group activities, to dyadic activities as in a mentor–mentee relationship, to solitary activities that give pleasure such as art, writing, or gardening, which are activities that may bring pleasure both to the self and to others. Ms. Stein, 68, told us, “I would say gardening actually. The outside. Being on the outside, working in the yard, that has given me a great deal of pleasure.” Other activities mentioned by informants in the GLOW study included artistic pursuits. An example concerns Ms. Brown, 78, who noted:

I’m doing more of the old folk activities and when we talk about the ceramics, I still get lost in it. But the little things that I make, um, and give away as gifts or something like that and I, I usually give, even will give people choices sometimes. So, so yeah, so the ceramic thing of course I share with family and friends.

The focus of these activities serves as a small investment of the self in a pleasurable way in others and which may outlive the self through connections with other people.

**Four Spheres of Generativity**

Although the four foci of generativity represent specific objects of generative action, the four spheres of generativity (historical, family, individual, and relational) represent distinctive conceptualizations of the scope of time. They are temporal meaning contexts through which the four foci flow. One element of generativity is found in its role as an effort to overcome the temporal (and other) limitations of the self, in the same way that boundaries of the self are overcome through dividuality. The spheres we define subsequently are temporally based categories of experience suggested by informant narrative. In conceptualizing the four spheres, it is best to view the individual as situated in cultural time between generative forces that have come before and those that will come after. Thus, as part of our research, we examined the generative influences that prior people, groups, objects, and activities had on each informant and the influences each informant believes herself to have had on others at present, in the future, or even, as in the case of parental caregiving, in the past.

The **historical sphere** of generativity refers to the awareness by individuals of historical events and traditions that have come before them and which have contributed to the making of the individual. For example, some African American informants in our sample expressed the personal and developmental significance of the Civil Rights Movement as a factor motivating historical generativity, as coming from the past and as an entity that would hopefully continue to exist as significant to people in the future. Ms. George, 85, noted:

So but out of that [the Civil Rights Movement] comes a lot of history, you know, so it’s like, you know, an integral part [of my life]. And as, you know, I’ve learned more about my family history both on my mother’s side and my father’s side. They’ve always been involved in the struggle for making life better. I have relatives on my Dad’s side that fought in the Civil War so, you know, the history is there and it kind of shapes who you are.
Similarly, individuals’ awareness of their own ethnic or religious traditions or contexts, a sense of heritage, an awareness of the burdens on prior individuals or generations, and a sense of dedication to preserving the meaning or memory of those events through an individual’s own actions into the future in the larger context of cultural generativity were also prevalent among our informants, both African American and European American. In the historical sphere, individual life course time is extended through both concern with the meaning and effects of the past and the desire for that meaning to be passed on in its true form.

Previously, Ms. George identified both an historical and a family component to the workings of generativity. The familial sphere is also a major arena for the expression of a sense of generativity and continuity. “Family time” is a very important form of time reckoning. Among our informants, continuity of family was of great importance despite the fact that so many did not have biological children themselves; “family time” was a very important form of time reckoning. Ms. Lane, 89, without biological children, stated:

It’s important because, well, without the family, you know, you don’t . . . that’s your growth and development, my mother and father were the . . . I call them the tap roots and we were the branches on the tree and each branch is different on the tree. And your family, no matter what it is or how it plays out, that’s where you come from. And so it is important and I found that it was important and we have, you know, strong family ties.

This quote is also suggestive of the idea mentioned earlier that connection to the parental generation, through parent care, be considered a form of generativity because it represents the roots of the self through time. Similarly, Ms. Keene, 69, with biological children indicated, “I’ve taught my children and grandchildren. I hope that they can get some of what I feel is morally right. ‘s what you pass down as far as your essence.” Ms. Jones, 72, without biological children, expressed a similar sentiment: “I would like to leave a legacy with my great-nieces and nephews.” The GLOW data suggest that providing a legacy to future generations may represent a natural map of affect and generative feelings.

Among our informants with children, raising a family clearly provided a source of personal accomplishment. For example, when asked about her most important accomplishment in life, Ms. Vincent, 72, noted, “Seeing my children grow up, seeing my great-grandchildren, because I’m a five generation great-grandmother. Five generations!”

The individual sphere is a domain that can be analytically separated from familial and historical time in that it is more closely tied to the individual life course in relation to specific individuals. Often the individual sphere of generativity was, for many women in the GLOW sample, focused on persons who were not relatives. Thus, apart from forms of generativity related to historical and familial contexts, an individual may assess or evaluate her own enduring accomplishments and generative outreach to specific individuals, in evaluating the effects of her lifetime as a generative person. Reflecting on the people she touched throughout her life course, Ms. Wendel, 66, identified two particular individuals she believed characterized her direct generative role. Ms. Wendel stated:

Michele, Mary’s granddaughter, got very interested in playing the organ because of me and she still does. She is a very, it’s very sad situation with her parent’s divorce and everything like that. But Michele . . . and then, one of my piano students, one of the few I ever had, named George. And he’s actually with [Health Organization] up in [State] but if you go on YouTube, put in his name and listen to him play the a piece in that famous competition . . . and he says it’s because of me that he went into music. And he picked it up and he started studying with [pianist name] who was my mentor, and my mentor had been one of the [famous pianist] protégés, one of his five protégés.

Here, we see that Ms. Wendel views her generative role through two specific nonfamilial individuals. Likewise, Ms. Curto, 67, described her generative impulses as directed toward her intern, Allison. Although largely unintentional, Ms. Curto noted she served as a role model for Allison: a representation of a strong, independent, single woman. This representation has strongly shaped Allison’s approach to life and the development of her future self. Ms. Curto specifically noted:

I know I’ve influenced Allison. That was the intern . . . that I make it on my own as a woman, you know, and I didn’t necessarily depend on a man, you know. She said, ‘You’re moving back to [City] over the age of 50 with no job?’ I said, ‘Yep.’ So she thought that was very gutsy and I said, ‘Well, you know, I’ll find work. It may not be what I’m trained to do or what I want to do, but I’ll find work.’ And it worked out. So, she thought that was very gutsy. She would always tell me she wanted to be like me when she grew up. I said, ‘No you don’t!’ She said, ‘Yes I do!’ She’s still living at home with her folks, but I just got an e-mail from her that she’s going to look into buying something and moving out. I said, ‘That’s good, that’s good, it’s about time’.

Ms. Curto indicated that perception of her role as a strong, independent woman played a large role in shaping Allison’s views for her future self. Accordingly, Ms. Curto’s connection with Allison served as a generative role through an individual tie.
The fourth sphere—relational generativity—refers to concerns specific to dyads, such as marital or domestic partnerships, or sibling groups, or other ways in which persons may share or have shared a household. Data from the GLOW study support the view that childless informants who are currently married focus generative energies on the care of their spouses despite their being age peers. This generative sphere is particularly evident in the narrative of Mrs. Donleavy, 66, with no biological children. Mrs. Donleavy spent a vast majority of her life and various endeavors toward caring for her spouse of 48 years. In her discussion of caring for her husband as a significant component of her life, she noted:

He’s a problem. Well, he’s been sickly all his life. All his life. So, and his mother spoiled him rotten and then I came along and he’s the only boy. And then I came along and finished the job . . . Uh-huh [have taken care of him ever since]. And he’s cute as a button so you got to, you couldn’t help it, you know, you couldn’t say no. But he’s learned how to work that through the years.

Furthermore, when examining the activities that have given her the greatest satisfaction in her life, she noted, “Just being with my husband. I’m going to be crushed if he leaves the planet before I do, too.” It became evident in Mrs. Donleavy’s narrative that her marital relationship and her investment in her husband’s health and personal satisfaction served as significant sources of meaning and generative behaviors.

Disconfirmation of the Framework

In general, we found confirmation for the types and spheres of generativity that are described here. Most informants had little trouble describing them or finding examples from their own lives. Analytically, we had little trouble categorizing them. Yet responses from a small number of informants did not fit any of these categories. Although generativity runs through some GLOW informant narratives as a dominant and recurrent thematic line, some informants did not exhibit much or even any generative behavior or interest. For example, when asked who would remember her when she is gone, Ms. Rayburn, 58, stated:

No [one], but I don’t know why I need to be remembered. There are lots of people I’m sure that aren’t remembered when they’re gone. You either have to do something brilliant or heinous and I don’t see myself doing either of those things to be truly remembered. I’m not an Einstein; I’m not a Hitler, so . . .

Throughout our interviews with her, Ms. Rayburn expressed a lack of concern relating to continuity of self. Similarly, when asked about her family’s lineage, Ms. Tinker, 71, replied, “It’s going to die. I think it’ll die with this generation.” Throughout Ms. Tinker’s interviews, the theme of discontinuation of her family lineage was prominent as was her noticeable lack of concern for the well-being of future generations in any manifestation. Similar to Ms. Tinker, Ms. Kish, a 68-year-old childless informant, also exhibited nongenerativity. For example, Ms. Kish stated:

Now this is the weird part. That’s the reason why I want to be cremated. I don’t want to be remembered. There’s nothing to remember, in my opinion. I’m sure there is something, but I’m sure I’ve given some good times, some fun times, some whatever to whoever. But I want to be . . . I want to just disappear, I do not wish a memorial service, definitely not a funeral. I was there, I lived and then I’m gone.

The framework for generativity we have discussed in this article acknowledges that not all individuals are generative and some individuals may not display behaviors consistent with the four foci and four spheres. Nonetheless, nongenerativity among the sample was very rare. Only about 5 of 200 participants exhibited this characteristic.

Discussion

In this article, we have reviewed important earlier definitions of generativity and traced some of the history of conceptualizing this important construct. We have suggested that characteristics of generativity include elements of individuality, a term adopted from cultural anthropology relating to the partibility and combinability of persons. Although earlier theories of generativity have been used in research and in conceptualizing the life course, we suggest that there is a need to expand on earlier approaches to develop a more culturally situated framework for understanding generativity. Such a perspective might be seen as more as a folk model of generativity, based as it is on lengthy discussions with many informants on their perceptions of elements of generativity. Thus, the approach taken here involves three elements: the partibility and combinability of the self through generative action; a focus on a form of generativity oriented to the care of the roots of the future; and most significantly, a framework of foci and spheres of generativity. The fact that most of the informants were women without children did not seem to affect their experiences of generativity and most informants found important outlets for their generative energies. The perspectives proposed in this article enable researchers to answer key questions about generativity and self-concept among childless and other older adults. These questions include (a) How is the self, as culturally constructed, involved in generative action? and (b) What are the types of generativity within the context...
The data discussed in this article were gathered in a research project called, “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Women” (R. L. Rubinstein and K. de Medeiros, Pls). We are extremely grateful to National Institute on Aging for its support to our research.

References


