

Generativity

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In psychology, the term generativity refers to concern for the future and the need to offer positive contributions to future generations. The term first appeared in stage seven of Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development (generativity vs. stagnation). Erikson's model postulates that generativity occurs explicitly in middle adulthood, but a more recent model of generativity created by Dan McAdams proposes that generativity occurs as a function of increasing cultural demand and concern for future generations, rather than a function of personality change (McAdams, 2001).

In Erikson's model of psychosocial development, he proposed that generativity is a distinct stage of psychosocial development, occurring between the ages of 40-64. In his model, Erikson compared generativity to stagnation, hypothesizing that adults with healthy psychosocial development would demonstrate increased societal contributions, whereas adults with underdeveloped psychosocial skills would remain stagnant and generally unproductive. According to Erikson, generativity included various life domains – ranging from professional activity to charity work.

Erikson's hallmark examples of generativity are biographical investigations of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther, both of whom were most productive in their professional lives rather than their private family lives. However, Erikson maintained that generativity was not limited to professional production, and could be extended to family activities such as raising children. Erikson's construct of generativity has been associated with biological obligations (the willingness to reproduce), philosophical desires (eternal legacy), developmental norms (standard

progression), and societal demands (professional productivity). However, a more recent model of generativity have argued that Erikson's original construct of generativity implies a fundamental change in personality development that present data do not support.

In 1992, Dan McAdams developed an alternative theory of generativity in which he proposed that generativity is a construct accessible at any stage of development, dependent upon personal and societal goals of providing for future generations. McAdams' model suggests that generativity begins with 1) cultural demands (e.g., developmental expectations and social opportunities) and 2) personal desire (agency and communion) as the most important sources of motivation in creating generativity.

This suggests a significant modification from the original theory of generativity proposed by Erikson, as McAdams proposes that generativity is not limited to middle adulthood, rather it is more dependent upon personal desire and cultural demand. McAdams then proposes that when in the adult years, personal desire and cultural demand promote a 3) concern for the next generation. If supplemented with 4) belief in the worth of the human race, concern is likely to catalyze 5) commitment to generativity. Additionally, McAdams states that if commitment to generativity is present, it will also increase the levels of belief and concern. Once commitment to generativity has been established, the next step in McAdams' model is 6) generative action, which refers to "creating, maintaining, and offering to others". It is believed that this sequence of cultural demand, personal desire, concern, belief, and commitment most frequently lead to generative action, but McAdams' model also shows that purely motivational factors (cultural demands and personal desire) can lead directly to generative action. In addition to the previous six steps, the final step of sustained generativity is the manner in which the individual ties

together the first six steps to create a 7) narration of generativity – the personal account the individual creates about contributing to the improvement of future generations.

Although McAdams' model of generativity shows some agreement with Erikson's proposed model of generativity, it also has some key conceptual departures from Erikson's model. Although Erikson may have missed the mark on the underlying processes that promote generativity, he did hit the mark on age range. Erikson's placement of generativity in adulthood is undoubtedly accurate. The concept of adulthood being the premier range for generativity is also supported by McAdams' model, but for different reasons. Whereas Erikson proposed that generativity marked a structural change in personality, McAdams proposes that observed changes in generativity in adulthood is due to increases in concern for future generations as well as cultural demands that require adults to take more responsibility for younger generations (i.e., child-rearing, teaching). However, fundamental differences in McAdams' model allow for more a flexible definition of generativity that is directly related to the factors that promote generativity across all ages.

Further Reading

Erikson, E.H. (1974). *Dimensions of a new identity*. New York: Norton.

McAdams, D. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review Of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//1089-2680.5.2.100>

McAdams, D., & de St. Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 62(6), 1003-1015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.62.6.1003>