Generativity in Midlife

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In his landmark volume, Childhood and Society, Erik Erikson (1950) identified generativity as the defining psychosocial feature of midlife. It is in the middle-adult years, Erikson maintained, that men and women are most likely to be concerned about the well-being of future generations and involved in various life projects, from parenting to political action, aimed at generating a positive legacy that will ultimately outlive the self. Younger adults are more likely to be involved in the complicated business of establishing an identity and building up long-term bonds of intimacy, Erikson argued. By contrast, old age brings a concern with what Erikson called ego integrity, as the elderly man or woman takes stock of life and, ideally, reaches a point of acceptance. It is in the middle—in that long and vaguely demarcated epoch in the life course, when people are no longer "young" but not yet "old"—that men and women take on the challenges and experience the joys and failures of generativity. It is in that long middle of life that adults should and often do provide care, guidance, inspiration, instruction, and leadership for children, youth, students, protégés, subordinates, followers, and those many others who, individually or collectively, represent those who will come of age, who will reach full maturity in the future. It is in the long middle when men and women make their most significant contributions to future generations and to society.

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Generativity is the concern for and commitment to promoting future generations through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and generating products and outcomes that aim to benefit youth and foster the well-being and development of individuals and social systems that will outlive the self (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998). In their roles as parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, leaders, helpers, and volunteers, generative adults serve as norm bearers and destiny shapers in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and the workplace. From a psychological standpoint, generativity may be experienced both as an inner desire or proclivity on the one hand and an age-appropriate expectation or demand on the other. As Erikson wrote, the midlife man or woman “needs to be needed, and maturity needs guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of” (1963, pp. 266–267). In simple terms, mature adults need and want to care for others, and indeed society expects them to need and want this, and to act accordingly. From the standpoint of society and culture, furthermore, generativity is a critical resource that may undergird social institutions, encourage citizens’ contributions and commitments to the public good, motivate efforts to sustain continuity from one generation to the next, and initiate social change. Consequently, generativity is a psychosocial concept in two related senses. First, adults can be generative only in social arenas that sustain their generative efforts. Second, social contexts and institutions themselves may be more or less generative. There are generative people, generative groups, generative situations, even generative societies. Likewise, there are people, groups, situations, and even societies that are more or less lacking or deficient in generativity (Kotre, 1999; Moran, 1998).

Despite its theoretical richness and intuitive appeal for understanding human lives, generativity remained a dormant concept in the social sciences for at least 30 years following the publication of Childhood and Society. Beginning in the 1980s, however, theorists and researchers began to examine the concept in some detail. Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of creative theorizing and systematic research on the concept of generativity, much of it holding implications for how social and behavioral scientists understand midlife. The goal of this chapter is to synthesize much of the best theoretical and empirical work on generativity within a life-course perspective, with special emphasis on how this work informs the study of midlife. The chapter begins with a history of the concept of generativity, going back 2,000 years. Next, it considers the ways in which generativity is a developmental construct, contrasting life cycle and life-course perspectives on the relation between generativity and midlife. Finally, the chapter considers empirical research on generative lives in the middle-adult years, examining relations between generativity on the one hand and psychological, social, and cultural phenomena on the other. The chapter ends with proposals for new directions in future research and theorizing.

**History of the Concept**

Although Erikson is credited for bringing the word generativity into the modern psychological lexicon, the concept has been around, at least in Western traditions, for over two thousand years. Indeed, the history of the concept of generativity may be neatly divided into three phases: (1) a long period preceding Erikson’s seminal writings; (2) Erikson’s theory itself; and (3) developments that have followed Erikson, in some cases taking issue with Erikson’s emphases and themes.

**Before Erikson**

Wakefield (1998) argues that the first full-blown theory of generativity appears in Plato’s Symposium. In this ancient Greek dialogue concerning the nature of love, Plato spells out a conception of generativity, without even using the Greek equivalent of the word, that underscores its connections to love and the desire for immortality. Plato proposes that love is the desire to possess that which is good and beautiful in the other. The possession of good things makes men (and women) happy, he maintains. But it is not enough to possess the good. The lover wishes to possess the good indefinitely, to continue to have that which is beautiful in the beloved over a prolonged period of time, indeed forever. In that all forms of human love aim at the everlasting possession of the good, love presupposes the human desire for immortality. Heterosexual love, furthermore, reveals an even closer connection to immortality:

Then if this be the nature of love, can you tell me further what is the manner of the pursuit? What are they doing who show all this eagerness and heat which is called love, and what is the object which they have in view? ... Well, I will teach you—the object which they have in view is birth in beauty, whether of body or of soul. ... There is a certain age at which human nature is desirous of procreation—procreation which must be in beauty and not in deformity; and this procreation is a union of man and woman, and is a divine thing; for conception and generation are an immortal principle in the mortal creature. ... Beauty, then, is the destiny or goddess of parturition who presides at birth, and therefore, when approaching beauty, the conceiving power is propitious, and diffusive, and benign, and begets and bears fruit; at the sight of ugliness she frowns and contracts and has a sense of pain, and turns away, and shrivels up, and not without a pang refrains from conception. And this is the reason why, when the hour of conception arrives, and the teeming nature is full, there is such a flutter and
ecstasy about beauty, whose approach is the alleviation of the pain of travail. For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only. ... It is the love of generation and of birth in beauty. ... Because to the mortal creature generation is a sort of eternity and immortality, and if, as has been already admitted, love is of the everlasting possession of the good, all men will necessarily desire immortality together with good—wherefore love is of immortality. (Jowett, 1956, Plato's Symposium, pp. 47-48)

The prototype of generativity is what Plato depicted as "birth in beauty." To be generative is to give birth to a beautiful (e.g., healthy, well-formed, useful, elegant, good) product. The adult gets to generativity through love. The aim of love is to possess the beauty of the beloved, in the hope and expectation that it will inspire one to bring forth something good out of oneself. In the case of erotic love between male and female, generativity may be expressed through procreation, as the product of sexual union is literally (and ideally) born in beauty. More generally, furthermore, love may inspire the birth of many other kinds of beautiful products, including works of art and ideas. In Plato's view, all people are pregnant with physical or mental generative products, awaiting the inspiration for their births that can only come through a loving relationship with another person. As Wakefield puts it, "Generativity is essentially a triadic relationship among the generative individual, a generative love object that serves as a catalyst for the creation and nurturance of the generated product, and a generative product that is brought forth because of the relationship to the love object." (1998, p. 149). It would seem that one cannot be generative on one's own.

The products of generativity help to assure the human desire for immortality, Plato argued. It is expected that one's children will live on after one's death, and it is hoped that they, too, will generate offspring that are good and beautiful and (eventually) generative themselves. Of course, generativity does not end with conception. Parents must work hard and sacrifice a great deal to assure that their children survive and flourish—this was recognized in Plato's time as clearly as it is today. But children are only one road to immortality. Most adults cultivate a good reputation, Plato maintained, and they strongly hope that that reputation will endure after they are gone. Indeed, children are valued not only for the good and beautiful persons they may be, Plato suggested, but also for their role in keeping the parents' good memory alive after they have died. Beyond this, however, the adult may attain an enduring positive reputation through a wide range of heroic exploits (e.g., victory in war, sacrifice for others), industrious activities (making crafts, manufacturing implements), and contributions of the mind (e.g., art, philosophy, teaching). An especially important form of generativity, Plato suggested, is active involvement in social institutions and social reform. When the adult comes to understand that families, social institutions, and laws order society and shape the young of future generations, the lover of wisdom and virtue wants to impart these qualities to others and thus plays an active role in ordering society's institutions and laws consistent with the ideal of justice, and thus encouraging virtue in the citizenry. Laws and institutions provide the structures that nurture all of the procreation, productivity, creativity, and other virtues in a culture. Therefore, social reform is an especially high form of generativity. From Solon to Martin Luther King, Jr. social reformers may earn an exceptionally long-lasting and positive reputation.

Plato's ideas anticipated themes that have gathered around the concept of generativity in the discourse of twentieth-century psychology, especially in writings coming out of the psychoanalytic tradition. As a general desire to possess the beautiful in another, Plato's eros is a direct intellectual ancestor of Freud's (1905/1953) libido, or sexual instinct. The prudent and socially useful investment of libido into objects and people that are worthy of such an investment is the cardinal feature of adaptive ego functioning, Freud argued. Put more simply, psychological adaptation and maturity in the adult years involve the ability to love well and to work usefully—Lieben und Arbeiten, as Freud is thought to have put it. Blending ideas from Freud and Marx, Erich Fromm (1941, 1947) sought to understand how modern adults might love and work well within modern societal arrangements that are not always conducive to generativity. How do modern adults find expression for their basic needs within the rules of culture, those rules ranging from the strictures of totalitarian states to the norms of winner-take-all capitalist economies? The interactions of personal needs and societal contexts give rise to a wide range of nongenerative character types in adulthood, such as the receptive (passive and conforming), the hoarding, the exploitative, and the marketing (opportunistic, market-driven) types. By contrast, the productive type fulfills his or her inner potential to become a creative worker and lover within a well-defined social identity. The productive adult is autonomous, spontaneous, loving, creative, and committed to the social good.

Otto Rank (1936, 1968) and Ernest Becker (1973) picked up on the Platonic desire for immortality as it plays itself out in adult lives. For these psychoanalytic theorists, the fear of death proves the great motivator for human behavior, inspiring both humankind's greatest achievements and most shameful follies. Adults work hard and love earnestly in their efforts to deny death and to build up some kind of legacy on earth that will endure. To denote these death-denying projects in work and love, Becker employed the term heroism, whose meaning approximates aspects of generativity (McAdams, 1985). According to Becker (1973), "the most that any
one of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force” (p. 285). Yet people differ with respect to the “gifts” they may offer. The neurotic man or woman is unable to make an offering and instead erects an impenetrable character shield that keeps him or her from engaging the world in a productive manner. The average man or woman offers “the gift that society specifies in advance” (p. 173). Conforming and dependable, the average person finds a conventional niche in the social world and performs the heroic behaviors—builds a home, raises children, contributes to society—that society deems appropriate. The adult who offers the most heroic, authentic, and influential gift, however, is the artist. Becker employs this label to denote the person who most successfully transforms the fear of death into creative activity that helps to transform society or culture in a positive manner. The gift that the artist offers has a lasting value, transcending the here-and-now to speak to the “highest powers.” “The artist’s gift is always to creation itself, to the ultimate meaning of life, to God” (p. 173).

Outside the psychoanalytic tradition, references to psychological phenomena and processes akin to generativity appear in the writings of such early-twentieth-century life-span theorists as Buhler (1933) and Frenkel (1936). Examining life histories written by almost 400 European men and women in the 1930s, Buhler and Frenkel identified “rather sharply demarcated phases through which every person passed in the course of life” (Frenkel, 1936, p. 2). They argued that while young adults tend to be strongly oriented toward their own personal goals and bodily needs, the midlife man or woman tends to be more preoccupied with internalized duties that one “has set himself [or herself], or which have been set for him [or her] by society, or which have come from some code of values such as religion or science” (Frenkel, 1936, p. 15). The cultivation of those values and their transmission to the next generation becomes an especially salient developmental task in midlife and beyond.

**Erikson’s Theory**

Beginning in *Childhood and Society* and running through a series of books published over a 32-year span, Erikson (1950, 1964, 1969, 1982) conceived the human life course as a sequence of eight stages. The individual moves through each stage in a cultural context that holds expectations and provides socializing influences that pertain to the stage. Each stage, then, spells out how biological, cognitive, and emotional changes on the one hand interact with corresponding societal and cultural forces and factors on the other. Each stage is defined by a central, constellating contrast or dialectic. For example, Erikson viewed the first stage of life (infancy) through the contrast of trust versus mistrust. In this first stage, important aspects of the infant’s behavioral and experience concern the eventual establishment of a trusting attachment bond with caregivers and the concomitant first experiences of mistrust or anxiety in the face of separation, novelty, and other sources of potential danger. The infant’s social world, furthermore, is geared to expect and provide for this first developmental task. Caregivers implicitly know that babies require comfort and attention, and caregivers invest considerable energy, according to the cultural norms of the day, to promoting the development of a secure (i.e., trusting) attachment bond. The more-or-less successful movement through this first stage paves the way for healthy development in subsequent stages, as the toddler now moves into a second stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt, within which the toddler and the toddler’s world face a new set of developmental challenges.

Fast-forwarding to adolescence and adulthood, Erikson’s theory introduces the stages of identity, intimacy, and generativity. After moving through the fifth (late-adolescent) stage of identity versus role confusion and the sixth (young-adult) stage of intimacy versus isolation, the adult confronts generativity versus stagnation—the key issue of Erikson’s seventh stage, associated with the long period of the middle-adult years. In the ideal Eriksonian scenario, the individual first consolidates a sense of who he or she is and how he or she fits into society (identity) and then commits him- or herself to others through marriage and long-term friendship (intimacy) before he or she is psychosocially ready to devote considerable time and effort to the well-being of generations to come. Parenting is perhaps the prototypical expression of generativity, but adults can be generative in many other ways as well, especially through creative and productive activities and through leadership and teaching. Failures and frustrations in generativity may be experienced as stagnation, wherein the adult feels that he or she is unable to create or produce a satisfying legacy of the self, or as self-preoccupation, wherein the adult focuses attention mainly on the care and maintenance of the self rather than others. The latter instance is a curious example of infantilization. The adult comes to see him- or herself to be like a child, needing constant attention and care lest it come to feel neglected.

Erikson identified care as the signal virtue associated with the generativity stage. A primary arena for expression of care is the family, and the primary objects of generativity for many adults are their own children and/or the young people in their immediate community. But generativity can also be expressed on a larger public stage, even to the point of caring for society as a whole. In *Gandhi’s Truth*, Erikson (1969) showed how one man’s generativity mission came to encompass the well-being of an entire nation. As a spiritual leader and a fatherly caregiver for his own people, Gandhi played out his generativity in a dramatic public fashion, even as he failed to be a good father to his biological children at home.
The trade-off of public and private expressions of generativity is an especially salient theme in the life histories of prominent women and men, who have sought, like Becker’s artist, to exert a transformative effect on society at large (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992).

Erikson described generativity as stemming from both inner needs or drives and external forces in society. He speculated that generativity may ultimately be traced from some kind of biological urgings, related perhaps to sexuality and procreation, but he also underscored how society’s expectations for generative behavior shape the expression of generativity and care in adulthood. Furthermore, while Erikson’s stage model suggests that the generativity versus stagnation is a normative developmental issue, adults still differ significantly from one another with respect to the strength and scope of their generative feelings, attitudes, and expressions. Individual differences in generativity may stem from many causes, Erikson argued. Among the most intriguing may be what Erikson (1963, p. 267) called a “belief in the species”—a faith in the ultimate goodness and worthwhileness of the human enterprise. Generativity always involves hard work, and people who lack a belief in the species may find it difficult to summon forth the energy and commitment that are needed to support that work and sustain the hope that it will all pay off in the long run. It is difficult to be generative, Erikson maintained, if one is not at least moderately optimistic about the future and about the fate of one’s family, community, or people.

Generativity motivates behavior aimed at promoting the greater good. But Erikson also emphasized how generativity can be good for the generative person. Not only is generativity a sign of psychosocial maturity in Erikson’s developmental scheme, but it should also be associated with mental health and well-being. Psychoanalytically informed theorists and clinicians have argued that generativity represents the full expression of love and work. Vaillant (1977) placed generativity at the center of healthy adaptation in the adult years. Elaborating on Erikson’s ideas, Vaillant suggested that in early-to-middle adulthood generativity is often expressed through parenting and through one’s activities in the workplace but that as adults move through midlife their generative expressions expand to encompass the maintenance of important societal institutions. In midlife, Vaillant wrote, especially generative adults may come to function as society’s “keepers of the meaning.” Following Erikson, other life-span theorists have identified generativity as a key component to psychosocial adaptation in midlife. Gould (1980), Gutmann (1987), Havighurst (1972), Heise and Wink (1992), Levinson (1978, 1996), Neugarten (1968), and Roberts and Newton (1937).

There are intriguing parallels between Plato’s ancient and Erikson’s modern conceptualizations of generativity. Both views, for example, suggest a tight relationship between adult love and generativity. For Plato, love catalyzes or inspires the generation of self-extending offspring, whether those offspring be children or artistic masterpieces. For Erikson, mature adult love, or what he calls intimacy, is developmentally prior to generativity in the stage scheme. Generativity’s fullest expression awaits the successful resolution of the intimacy versus isolation contrast of young adulthood. For both views, furthermore, procreation exists as something of a prototype for generativity, but generativity also comes to encompass a wide variety of creative and productive activities. Both Plato and Erikson viewed generativity through a moral lens, and in both views generativity is deemed to be good or virtuous. It is right and good that adults should focus their attentions on promoting the next generation; artistic, intellectual, and political expressions of generativity, furthermore, are held in very high esteem. By way of difference, Erikson deemphasized the extent to which generativity stems from desires for immortality, though the idea is not absent in his writings (e.g., his analysis of Gandhi; Erikson, 1969). More than Plato, Erikson emphasized the softer and more nurturing aspects of generativity. Generativity is first and foremost about caring for the next generation, Erikson maintained. While Plato’s philosopher-king and Becker’s heroic artist may make contributions that profoundly impact the worlds around them, thereby assuring a noteworthy reputation for generations to come, Erikson left more room for everyday acts of kindness and care, even when those acts are displayed in the most local of scenes by the most anonymous of actors, and even when those actions are soon to be forgotten. There is a democratic, egalitarian spirit in Erikson’s writings (Friedman, 1999). He seemed to believe that all adults could, in principle, be generative.

**After Erikson**

Although Erikson’s overall stage model of psychosocial development proved to be an extraordinarily influential framework for the social and behavioral sciences, and even in some branches of the humanities, the concept of generativity attracted little notice in the years following the publication of his first work. With only a few exceptions (e.g., Browning, 1975), little scholarly or scientific attention was paid to generativity through the 1970s. Virtually no empirical research was conducted on the topic, although generativity was sometimes included in more large-scale studies of Erikson’s overall stage scheme (e.g., Constantinople, 1969; Ochse & Plug, 1986; Vaillant, 1977). Generativity featured prominently in some psychoanalytically inspired case studies and psychobiographies (Anderson, 1981), but little effort was made to flesh out the construct or to test hypotheses that might be derived from it.
The situation began to change in the early 1980s. The first theorist to expand significantly on Erikson's ideas about generativity was John Kotre (1984). Kotre distinguished among four different forms of generativity. In biological generativity, adults beget, bear, and nurse their offspring; the generative object is the infant. In parental generativity, adults nurture and discipline offspring, initiate them into family traditions, and continue to support, guide, protect, teach, and advise them through their adolescent years; the generative object, thus, is the child. In technical generativity, the adult teaches skills and offers instrumental training to those who require these competencies for successful adaptation to the world; the generative objects are both the skill itself and the apprentice for the skill. Finally, in cultural generativity, the adult creates, renovates, or conserves a symbolic system—the "mind" of a culture—and explicitly passes it on to the next generation; here the generative objects are the culture itself—its institutions and ideas—as well as those disciples or students to whom culture is transmitted. Cutting across the four forms of generativity, furthermore, are two different styles or modes. Following Bakan (1966), Kotre identified especially communal modes of generativity as involving nurturance and care for others while especially agentic modes encompass creative and/or powerful extensions of the self, as in some forms of leadership, entrepreneurial activity, scientific achievement, and so forth.

Kotre defines generativity as "the desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self" (1984, p. 10). Like Plato, Becker, and Rank, then, Kotre suggests that generativity involves extending the self beyond the end of one's own life, generating an enduring personal legacy. Unlike these theorists, however, and in contrast to Erikson as well, Kotre contends that generativity is not necessarily a virtue in life. As such, generativity may be used for good or ill. One person's efforts to produce legacies that will outlive the self may be seen by others as misguided, destructive, or even evil. Kotre exposes the dark side of generativity—how generativity can sometimes lead to fanaticism, for example, and how the outcomes of one's best generative efforts can sometimes turn out to be bad. At the same time, a person's generativity can also take the form of transforming a bad legacy into a good one, or of assuring that something bad from the past (e.g., a family history of abuse, a destructive cultural practice) is actively blocked so that it will not be repeated in future generations. In this latter example, the generative person functions as an intergenerational buffer, filtering out the negative legacies and seeking to pass on only those meanings and practices from the past that are deemed to be positive (Kotre, 1999; Kotre & Kotre, 1998).

Drawing on Erikson, Kotre, and Becker, Dan McAdams and his colleagues (McAdams, 1985; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998) have developed an integrative model of generativity that emphasizes the multiple levels on and modes through which generativity may be expressed. McAdams agrees with Kotre that generativity may take agentic or communal forms, but he goes on to suggest that the fullest expressions of generativity are fundamentally both agentic and communal. The very concept of generativity brings together two seemingly incompatible sets of desires. On the one hand, generativity challenges adults to produce, create, or generate some product or outcome that may potentially, in Kotre's terms, "outlive the self." This sense of generativity suggests a trace of narcissism, of creating something in one's own image, a powerful act of self-expansion. On the other hand, that which is generated must be cared for, nurtured, and eventually granted its own autonomy, to live on as, in Becker's words, a "gift" for/to/of the next generation. Therefore, while the first sense of generativity bespeaks agency, the second sense suggests communion, even to the point of sacrificing the self for the good of that which and those who will follow. Generativity can prove to be a curious blend of narcissism and altruism aimed toward future generations. Bringing together power and love, agency and communion, self-expansion and self-surrender, generativity may embody a motivational paradox, making for a wide range of complex and even contradictory expressions in any given adult life.

McAdams argues that generativity is a configuration of seven psychosocial features—desire, demand, concern, belief, commitment, action, and narration—all of which center on the individual and societal goal of providing for future generations. As shown in Figure 12.1, generativity begins with (1) agentic and communal desires that motivate a person to seek out opportunities for both symbolic immortality and caring nurturance for others and (2) age-graded cultural demands that provide standards and expectations concerning how people may and should begin to take responsibility for the next generation as they move into and through middle adulthood. As Erikson suggested, therefore, generativity comes from within and without. Agentic and communal desires combine with and are structured by cultural norms, expectations, and influences that specify when and how adults are to engage in generative behaviors in a given social milieu. Motivated by inner desires and outer demands, adults develop (3) a conscious concern for the next generation. They begin to expand their purview of concern to encompass the well-being of others who will survive them. They become more interested in those institutions and cultural practices designed to promote positive functioning and social life into the future—schools, churches, charities, community organizations, professional societies, and so on. They become more concerned with intergenerational relations. They begin to see that they may have something to offer others, that the time may be right to "give something back" to society, to move from being the recipient to being the agent of care and concern.
that which has been created or maintained as a “gift” (Becker, 1973) to the next generation (teaching a skill, “launching” a son or daughter into the adult world).

The last of McAdams's seven features is generative (7) narration. As they translate their concerns and beliefs into commitment and action designed to promote the well-being of the next generation, adults construct personal narrations or tellings of their generative efforts, which eventually become incorporated into the larger, autobiographical tellings that comprise their life stories. These tellings are designed both for public and private consumption; people tell each other stories about their own lives, and they tell themselves their own stories—consciously and unconsciously—to make narrative sense of their own lives as they are living them. McAdams integrates the concept of generativity within his overall life-story theory of adult identity. The basic premise of the theory is that modern adults provide their lives with a sense of unity and purpose by constructing and internalizing self-defining life stories, complete with settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes (McAdams, 1985, 1993, 1996b). Within this evolving life story, narrations of generativity become increasingly central and salient as the adult moves into and through midlife (McAdams, 1996a). These narrations specify how the adult has worked and/or will continue to work to fashion a positive legacy for the future. As such, a narration of generativity functions to provide an adult with a potentially satisfying sense of an “ending” for his or her life story (Kermode, 1967), in that the generativity narration anticipates how one’s life may ultimately result in the generation of offspring, products, and outcomes that will outlive the self. Following Becker, adults craft self-defining life stories whose endings defy death, in a narrative sense; for (the author hopes) even though one’s own life will end, it may give birth to new beginnings.

In recent years, a number of other psychologists have begun to articulate further the concept of generativity. For example, Abigail Stewart and Bill Peterson have argued that generative motivation should be distinguished from generative realization (Peterson, 1998; Peterson & Stewart, 1996; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998) Young adults may have strong motivations to be generative, but they may not be able to actualize or realize these desires until they have achieved the necessary resources that may attend midlife. By then, their generative motivations may have flagged somewhat, but their behavioral realizations of generativity are likely to reach their peak. A counterpoint to generative motivation is what John Snarey (1993) has described as generativity chill. Increasingly salient as one moves through midlife, generativity chill is the anxiety and dread caused by a threatened loss of one’s generative products. Other theorists have underscored the variability of generativity across different life domains (MacDermid,
something of a repetitive, cyclical quality. With respect to the last idea, Erikson’s model implies that human beings come full circle by the time they reach the last stage of life; ego integrity (Stage 8) brings forth qualities and experiences that are reminiscent of basic trust (Stage 1). In addition, the cyclical nature of life derives from the relations that individuals have to the lives and developmental trajectories of preceding and subsequent generations. Wakefield describes this idea:

Each individual is nurtured by the previous generation in a way that allows the individual ultimately to nurture the next generation in a way that allows that generation to go and nurture the following generation. The generative strivings of one generation match the needs for nurturance of the next and result from the generative nurturance of which they themselves were the recipients earlier in their lives. The repetition of the generations, the dovetailing of developmental histories of the generations, and in particular, the movement from passive recipient to active provider of generative nurturance constitute the cycle. (1998, p. 137)

In Erikson’s life-cycle model, the stage of midlife is defined by the psychosocial dialectic of generativity versus stagnation. The psychosocial way for generativity is paved by the resolution of developmentally prior issues (most immediately intimacy versus isolation in young adulthood) and by the welling up of inner desire and cultural demand that attend this period in the life cycle. During midlife, then, psychosocial development should be centered on generativity, in the same way, Erikson suggested, that psychosocial development in the first year of life centers around trust versus mistrust. It might be expected, then, that in midlife a person’s generative concerns, commitments, and behaviors should increase, relative to their respective levels in young adulthood. Furthermore, it would be expected that generative concerns, commitments, and behaviors should decrease as the individual moves into the last of Erikson’s stages—“old age” (never clearly defined by Erikson), with its issue of ego integrity versus despair. It might also be predicted that generativity would become a greater source of both fulfillment and frustration as the adult moves into midlife, and that its salience in this regard should diminish somewhat in the later years. To date, data speaking to these hypotheses come from case studies, cross-sectional studies, and longitudinal investigations.

Stewart and her colleagues have carried out a series of quantitative case studies examining Eriksonian stages. Their method is to code open-ended autobiographical data—such as published diaries and autobiographies—for stage-related themes of identity, intimacy, and generativity. Their carefully drawn coding systems provide reliable quantitative indexes for each of these three stages. Stewart, Franz, and Layton (1988) focused on the
well-validated self-report measure of generativity, the 20-item Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), which is designed to assess individual differences in adults' conscious generative concerns. They also employed measures of generative commitments (open-ended reports of daily goals or striving), generative actions (a checklist of generative behaviors displayed in the prior two months), and generativity themes in autobiographical narratives. These four measures were administered to three age cohorts: young adults (ages 22–27, born in late 1960s), midlife adults (ages 37–42, baby boomers), and older adults (ages 67–72, born before World War II). The overall quadratic trend in the data showed that the midlife cohort scored significantly higher in generativity than the young and older adults, in keeping with Eriksonian predictions. This trend was strongest for the measures of generative acts and generative themes in accounts of consequential autobiographical scenes. On the Loyola Generativity Scale, however, young adults scored just as high as midlife adults, and both groups scored significantly higher than older adults. By contrast, the measures of generative commitments (assessed via daily goals) showed extremely low scores for young adults and significantly higher scores for both midlife and older adults. The accounts of daily goals provided by older adults were just as strong in generativity content as those provided by the midlife adults. Therefore, while midlife adults did tend to score higher on generativity than younger and older adults in this study, different measures of the construct showed somewhat different age-related patterns.

More recently, Keyes and Ryff (1998) examined the relation between age and generativity in a large national probability sample for the MacArthur Foundation's Successful Midlife National Study. The sample, drawn with random-digit dialing procedures, consisted of noninstitutionalized, English-speaking adults, age 25 to 74, in the 48 contiguous states of the United States. For ease of description, the researchers divided the age range into young (age 25–39), middle-aged (40–59), and older (60–74) adults. The researchers employed three types of measures of generativity: (1) behavioral measures of the extent to which the respondent regularly provides emotional support and unpaid assistance to others (including children and grandchildren); (2) measures of generative commitment as indicated in obligations to help family and friends and in civic obligations (e.g., serving on a jury); and (3) three measures of self-constructual (how generative a respondent sees him- or herself overall), one of which included items from the aforementioned Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

The results from Keyes and Ryff (1998) showed that age impacts all three dimensions of generativity, though the impact sometimes interacted with effects by education levels and/or gender. Middle-aged and older adults reported that they provided more emotional support and unpaid assistance to others (behavioral measures of generativity) than did younger adults.
With respect to generative commitment, midlife and older adults also showed higher levels of civic responsibility, but younger adults scored higher than the two older cohorts on obligations to help children and other people directly. With respect to self-construals, midlife adults scored higher on the Loyola Generativity Scale than did young and older adults, while age was linearly related to the endorsement of trait-descriptors indicative of generativity. With respect to the last finding, adults viewed themselves as increasingly caring, wise, and knowledgeable with age.

Few longitudinal studies have been explicitly designed to assess the course of generativity over the human life cycle. Instead, researchers have tried to adapt measures employed for other purposes to the generativity construct, with varying degrees of success. For example, Jones and Mersdith (1996) found increases in cognitive commitment around age 30 and in self-confidence around age 40 in the Oakland Growth and Berkeley Guidance Studies. To the extent that cognitive commitment and self-confidence might be related to generativity, the results are consistent with Eriksonian prediction. Similarly, Helson and her colleagues have documented increases in overall scores for self-confidence, responsibility, self-control, responsivity, and tolerance for ambiguity among women graduates of Mills College, as they moved from early adulthood into their early 50s (Helson & Moane, 1987; Helson & Stewart, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1992). These results suggest developmental increases in autonomy and maturity from young to middle-adult years, which is certainly consistent with Eriksonian theory but not directly informative for generativity. By contrast, one longitudinal study that directly assessed individual differences in generativity found no support for an increase from young adulthood to early midlife. Whitbourne, Zuschlag, Elliot, and Waterman (1992) employed a sequential design covering ages 20 through 42 years and administered a self-report inventory of Erikson’s stages developed by Constantine (1969) and modified by Waterman and Whitbourne (1981). Longitudinal analysis did not show significant change over time in generativity from ages 31 to 42 for Cohort 1 or ages 20 to 31 years for Cohort 2.

Finally, Stewart and Vandewater (1998) traced longitudinal changes in generativity motivation (the desire to be generative) in two cohorts of college-educated women: the Radcliffe Longitudinal Study of the class of 1964 (Stewart & Vandewater, 1993) and a stratified random sample of women graduating from the University of Michigan in 1967 (Tangri & Jenkins, 1993). For the Radcliffe study, data were collected when the women were ages 31, 36, and 43 years. For the Michigan study, data were collected when the women were ages 21, 24, 31, and 47. The researchers measured generativity motivation through content analysis of the respondents’ imaginative stories told in response to ambiguous picture cues (the Thematic Apperception Test) and open-ended accounts of future goals. The results showed that generativity motivation decreased over time. By the time the women had reached their 40s, their scores on the desire for generativity were significantly lower than they had been when the women were in their early 20s. Stewart and Vandewater argue that generativity motivation is conceptually distinct from most other measures of generativity, which tend to assess what Stewart and Vandewater call generativity realization, or accomplishment. They propose that while generativity motivation may decrease from young adulthood to midlife, generativity accomplishment tends to increase. Young adults may have strong nascent desires to be generative, but it is not until midlife that many of them have the material and social resources to accomplish generative goals. Interestingly, Stewart and Vandewater suggest that it may be at the same time—in midlife—that desires for generativity may, in fact, be declining.

The empirical literature provides something of a mixed picture concerning the relation between generativity and age. Longitudinal studies are arguably the most persuasive for documenting developmental changes over time. Yet, extant longitudinal investigations tend not to be well designed for the direct charting of generativity over time. One longitudinal study with direct evidence to report (Whitbourne et al., 1992) shows no age effect, though the study follows respondents only into their early 40s. And Stewart and Vandewater’s (1998) longitudinal study shows an unexpected decrease in generativity motivation in women graduates of two elite universities from early adulthood to the mid-40s. By contrast, cross-sectional data tend to show marked age differences in generativity. While these differences may be due more to cohort than developmental effects, the results are consistent with the life-cycle prediction of an increase in various aspects of generativity from young adulthood into middle age. While some young adults may show relatively strong desires to be generative and strong generative concerns for one’s family and friends, measures of generative behaviors and generative commitments (especially those involved with community and civic responsibilities) tend to be higher among midlife adults than younger adults, at least in the American samples employed. Whether older adults show significantly lower generativity scores than midlife adults, however, remains an open question. The cross-sectional studies have not examined adults beyond their early 70s. Within this age range, some measures of generativity do show lower levels among older adults compared with midlife adults (e.g., generative concern as assessed on the Loyola Generativity Scale), but other measures suggest that healthy older adults, at least into their early 70s, tend to express levels of generativity comparable to those expressed by adults in their 40s and 50s. As documented later in this chapter, furthermore, large individual differences in generativity can be seen at all points heretofore studied across the adult life span (McAdams et al.,
Mean differences between age/cohort groups should not disguise that many young adults score quite high on various measures of generativity, and many middle-aged and older adults score quite low.

In light of the findings reviewed, it may be claiming too much to claim that generativity is a "midlife stage" in adult development. While some data do support the life-cycle prediction that generative concerns, behaviors, and commitments tend to increase from young- to middle-adulthood, the empirical picture is too ambiguous to delineate a clearly demarcated stage of generativity in the middle of the adult life course. It is not clear when such a stage would begin, and it is particularly difficult to determine when (and if) it would end. Given the long life expectancy for citizens of most modern Western societies, furthermore, one wonders how useful it is to posit a life stage specifically centered on generativity that could encompass more than 50 to 60 years of an individual's life. Much more is happening, psychosocially speaking, between the ages of, say, 30 and 80, than the expression of generativity. Erikson's placement of generativity within the large middle of the human life span seems sensible enough. But the strong epigenetic message of life-cycle theory may be too strong when it comes to considering the complexities and vicissitudes of generativity in adulthood. A full developmental understanding of the construct, therefore, requires a more contextualized life-course perspective.

Generativity in the Life Course

In their argument against strict stage models and in favor of a life-course approach to the study of generativity, Kohler, Hostetter, and Boxer (1998) write this:

Efforts to portray the course of lives in terms of predefined, sequential, and age-ordered stages, phases, or tasks have provided little lasting understanding of the manner in which people maintain the experience of personal integrity or continuity over time. The course of development is much less clearly ordered than such stage theories would predict and cannot be understood apart from either larger social and historical trends or unique events within particular lives. Certain sequentially negotiated tasks across the adult life course, related to work, intimate partnership, providing for the next generation, and dealing with the finitude of life, appear to be ubiquitous within contemporary society, yet no simple checklist can capture the full range of variation in developmental pathways or the ways in which certain tasks and prescribed social roles are experienced. (p. 266)

In contrast to life-cycle stage models such as Erikson's original epigenetic framework, a life-course perspective offers a more nuanced and situated approach to adult development. Individual lives are viewed in their full social, cultural, and historical contexts, allowing for the tremendous variability in developmental pathways that is observed across many different lives, across cultures, and across historical epochs (Brofenbrenner, 1994; Danner, 1984; Elder, 1995). Generativity is contoured by economic conditions, cultural norms, social change, historical events, and even chance happenings. At the same time, individuals exert their own, agentic influence on the course of development, actively co-constructing their lives in a complex and evolving social context (Bandura, 1989). A life-course perspective on generativity, therefore, brings to the fore (1) social time and timing, (2) social roles and relationships, (3) social structure, and (4) the role of human agency and individual variability in psychosocial development in the adult years.

Social timing "refers to the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles and to related age expectations and beliefs" concerning the course of human life as understood in a given society or social context (Elder, 1995, p. 114). Thus, the extent to which a given social event or role assumption is "on time" or "off time" is of prime importance for social life and individual well-being. Kohler and Boxer (1984) have argued that the experience of positive morale, or life satisfaction, is significantly determined by the sense of being on time for expectable role transitions or life changes. Different societies and different groupings within a society offer markedly different timetables for assuming generative roles. Becoming a parent at age 16 is generally considered off time in middle-class American society even though teenage pregnancy may be biologically routine (and may be viewed as especially on time in a different kind of society). The healthy 45-year-old man who feels he is "not ready yet" to invest time and energy into any kind of nurturing relationship with others may be viewed as especially immature or perhaps narcissistic. If he were 25 years old, society might be more forgiving; but 20 years later, the timing seems off. An important manifestation of what McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) categorize as cultural demand with respect to generativity, then, is general developmental expectations or assumptions about the timing of generative roles in the life course. These culturally constructed developmental guidelines may be fairly elastic in some societies, but there are always limits—biological and cultural—beyond which the guidelines cannot readily be stretched. Therefore, within U.S. society, social timing expectations urge adults to assume generative roles as they move into their 30s and 40s; those who do not do so are typically considered to be off time.

As Elder and Caspi (1990) and others have shown, the timing of historical events can have a significant impact on individual development. Wars, economic downturns, political revolutions, and the like affect human lives in myriad ways that are partly determined by where in the life course a given individual is positioned (Stewart & Healy, 1989).
Across historical time, different cohorts or generations (Mannheim, 1928) may develop their own characteristic patterns of attitudes and expectations about the life course, about what is possible to achieve in life and what is not, about what is good and what is bad, whom to trust and what to fear. While Ryff and Heintze (1983) found that three different cohorts all believed that generativity should peak as a personal characteristic in midlife (reflecting a shared sense of social timing), the young adult cohort in their study showed the highest self-ratings of generativity overall. Historical cohorts may also show different understandings of what generativity is and should be. In an intensive qualitative analysis of the life stories of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Kay (1998) discovered that their generative strivings in late midlife and into old age were strongly, almost obsessively, driven by their desire to provide for the material well-being of their biological offspring, while shunning close emotional connections with the next generation.

In a fundamental sense, generativity is tied up with a society’s overall conception of time (McAdams et al., 1998). In that generativity refers to the creation (generation) of new forms that will outlive the self, generativity points to the future. In that generativity also refers to the maintenance, preservation, and passing on of that which has been valued in a given social context, it points to the past. In its linking of generations, generativity links past and future time. The linkage is not without tension, however, for the demands of the future may be seen as undercutting the verities and virtues of the past. Such a tension may be especially salient in modern societies, in which the struggle between tradition (past) and progress (future) can undermine community and even tear families apart. Amidst the dizzying cultural change experienced in many modern societies, youth may no longer value the wisdom of their elders, for that wisdom may be seen as specific to a bygone time. An older generation may seek to be generative through passing on traditional values and ways of life, but the targets of those efforts—the younger generation—may want and need guidance and resources that better address new challenges in the future. Parents are not always able to give children what they need, and children do not always value what parents have to offer. Although generativity mismatches are surely as old as civilization itself, they take on added salience under conditions of rapid social change, as is often witnessed in modern societies.

Overall, modernity affirms a progressive and developmental understanding of time as it demythologizes the authority of the past (Giddens, 1991; Habermas, 1987). From the modern point of view, economic growth promotes the advance of society; medical research lengthens the expected life span and improves the quality of life; science and technology lead to progress in society; and political systems promise a better world in the future. Notions such as growth, advancement, improvement, and progress strike the modern ear as especially generative ideas. However, such potentially generative notions become highly problematic when modern worldviews (1) threaten to destroy those things most cherished in the past or (2) fail to deliver on their promises for a better world in the future. What some scholars describe as the contemporary turn toward cultural postmodernism represents, in part, a rejection of the modern faith in progressive time (Gergen, 1992; Sloan, 1996). If it is true that modern men and women have typically imported the discourse of progressive time into their attempts to make sense of their generative efforts, one wonders what mental forms generativity will take when people lose faith in the idea that the future can be better than the past. In its deepest sense, probably experienced unconsciously, an adult’s orientation toward time is bound to the religious and spiritual dimensions of life, touching on apprehensions of life-in-time, mortality, death, and ultimate meaning.

Social timing often concerns the sequencing and patterning of social roles. MacDermid et al. (1998) have underscored the importance of work, marital, parental, civic, and religious roles in the expression of generativity. Generative involvements are spread unevenly across different roles, their research suggests, and the strength or quality of generativity in one role is no predictor of the strength or quality of generativity in another. Within any given life, furthermore, generativity may move around from one role to another, according to dictates of the social clock, on-time and off-time events, and a host of other factors. Over the adult life course, generativity ebbs and flows and spreads itself across different roles and life domains, sometimes in an unpredictable manner. Further contouring the development and expression of generativity are close and long-term personal relationships. Life-course theorists speak of linked lives (Elder, 1995) and social couplings (Kahn & Antonucci, 1981) to underscore the many senses in which individual development is thoroughly interdependent. The complex patterning of roles and relationships making up the social ecology of any given person’s life influence the timing, quality, strength, and meaning of that person’s generativity.

Gender, race, and variables of social structure strongly shape generativity, as well. Keyes and Ryff (1998) examined how education and gender, in addition to age, influence levels of generativity in the aforementioned MacArthur Foundation’s Successful Midlife National Study. The results of their study show that education is positively associated with some, though not all, of their generativity measures. (Modest associations between education and generativity have also been observed by McAdams et al., 1998, though they have not found associations between generativity and family income.) In particular, more educated adults in Keyes and Ryff’s study showed higher levels of civic obligation, compared with less educated adults. In addition, education interacted with age and gender in the
contouring of generativity. For example, education predicted higher levels of providing emotional support among midlife and older adults, but not in the cohort of young adults. Women with more education defined themselves as more characteristically generative than did less-educated women, but higher educational attainment did not coincide with enhanced generative self-construals for men. In addition, women scored significantly higher than men on generativity via providing others with emotional support and through obligations to family and friends. By contrast, other studies of generativity have typically not found significant gender effects in mean levels (McAdams et al., 1998); different measures of generativity provide different results in this regard. However, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) reported that the interaction of gender and parenting role predicted scores on the Loyola Generativity Scale. Men who had never been fathers scored especially low in generativity, whereas women who had at one time or another been fathers scored relatively high. For women, the parenting role was not significantly associated with generativity scores.

Beyond mean differences, the characteristic ways in which people understand and express generativity and the different roles and social timing schedules they employ are likely to be a function of gender, class, ethnicity, and other macro variables. Gender stereotypes would predict, for example, that men may express more agentic aspects of generativity while women may show more communal manifestations (Kotre, 1984). To date, however, little research has directly examined this claim. Nor has research directly examined the hypothesis, derived from Gutmann (1987) and other proponents of midlife gender crossover, that men's generativity expressions might move toward the communal in and after midlife, whereas women might channel generativity into more agentic pursuits at this time. Peterson and Stewart (1996) found that highly generative women with careers found gratification through work, whereas generative women not working in careers experienced gratification through parenting. In recent years, many theorists and researchers have moved gender to the center of life-course inquiries, and these developments surely hold implications for understanding generativity in midlife.

Stewart and Ostrove (1998) examined several key features of adult development, including generativity, in the cohort of American women born during the baby boom. By focusing on women in this group and comparing their experience with that of older cohorts and research on men, the authors demonstrate the need for models of aging that take account of the intersections of history, gender, and individual development. Stewart and Ostrove assert that “middle age is gendered differently for different generations” (p. 1186). Graduating from college just before the women's movement gathered steam in the United States, many baby-boom women began young adulthood with rather traditional views of gender roles. By the time they reached age 40, longitudinal studies suggest, a large number of them were experiencing what Stewart and Ostrove call a “midcourse correction” (p. 1188). This process was most consequential among women with traditional role regrets, and for some of them it set off a process involving pursuit of educational or career opportunities that had been abandoned much earlier. For many, the correction brought with it a concerted, and sometimes painful, life review. By their late 40s, most of the baby-boom women studied by Stewart and Ostrove reported high levels of identity certainty and enhanced power as a generative agent in the world. For these women, nascent desires to be generative may have been squelched or channeled into traditional family roles in young adulthood. Stewart and Ostrove argue, but profound social changes—most importantly, the rise of the women's movement—ultimately instigated midlife course corrections, which in turn functioned to broaden generative scope and to strengthen women's confidence in their generative abilities.

The role of race/ethnicity in generativity has been highlighted recently by Cole and Stewart (1996) and by Hart, McAdams, Hirsch and Bauer (in press). Cole and Stewart found that among both African American and White women, student activism in college predicted generativity at midlife. In addition, midlife generativity was positively associated with midlife political participation. In this study, Black women in midlife showed significantly higher scores on generativity and politicalization compared with their White counterparts. Hart et al. found that individual differences in generativity among both Black and White men and women, ranging in age from 35 to 65 years, predicted a wide range of social involvements, from social support to political and religious participation. Controlling for social class differences, Blacks, scored slightly higher on some measures of generativity compared to Whites. In addition, Hart et al. found that Black adults showed much higher levels of religious participation and social support compared with Whites, and their accounts of especially generative experiences were more likely to contain references to religious activities and intergenerational family events. The study by Hart et al. suggests that self-report measures of generativity and objective correlates of the measures may be similar for African American and Anglo-American adults, but the culturally informed meanings of living a generative life may nonetheless differ somewhat as a function of race/ethnicity. In a study to be described later in this chapter, McAdams, Bowman, Lewis, Hart, and Cole (1999) focused on possible differences in meanings in a qualitative examination of generativity and life stories among 35 middle-aged African American adults.

The research just described highlights the role of human agency and individual differences in generativity in midlife. Rather than passive adherents to social norms and cultural constraints, adults actively construct their
lives within social contexts. As Cohler et al. (1998) show in their personological portraits of generativity among three gay men, adults often defy social clocks and fly in the face of conventional social norms to create personal meaning and exert positive impacts on the next generation. Within a given age cohort, furthermore, people differ markedly with respect to the strength, scope, and meanings of their generativity. Researchers have developed and attempted to validate measures of individual differences in generativity. Peterson and Klohnen (1995) developed a Q-sort profile for generativity realization or accomplishment in which descriptors such as "behaves in a giving way toward others" and "is turned to for advice and assistance" code for high generativity. The measure is independent of the aforementioned TAT-measure of generativity motivation, but Peterson (1998) has shown that applying the two measures in concert can provide extremely useful profiles of generativity.

McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) developed the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), a 20-item self-report measure that includes such items as "I try to pass along knowledge I have gained through my experience" and "I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die." The scale shows high levels of internal consistency and good test-retest reliability over short periods of time. Himsel, Hart, Diamond, and McAdams (1997) have shown that self-reports on the LGS are strongly positively associated with Peterson and Klohnen's (1995) Q-sort measure. McAdams et al. (1998) also regularly employ behavior checklists to assess individual differences in generative actions and a variation on Emmons's (1986) method for collecting personal strivings (daily goals), that are coded for generativity content and viewed as a rough index of current generative commitments. Measures of generative concern (LGS), generative actions (behavior checklist), and generative commitments (daily goals) tend to be significantly positively correlated with each other, but the correlations are not so high as to suggest that the three measures are assessing exactly the same thing (McAdams et al., 1998). Rather, each of the three appears to be getting at a different feature of the general construct of generativity. Other self-report measures of generativity include the survey scales employed by Keyes and Ryff (1998) in the MacArthur nationwide study and omnibus self-report inventories for Eriksonian stages (e.g., Ochse & Plug, 1986; Waterman & Whitbourne, 1981). Various rating scales, informed by Eriksonian theory and/or clinical practice, have also been used in studies by McAdams, Ruetzel, and Foley (1986), Snarey (1993), and Vaillant and Milofsky (1980), among others.

Measures of generativity, then, typically assess the relative strength and or scope of a person's concerns, commitments, or actions associated with generativity. The higher the score, the stronger the generativity. This form of measurement, however, is blind to individual differences in the meanings of people's generative efforts. Instead, meanings are complexly embedded in the stories that people construct to make sense of their lives in time (Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). Cohler et al. (1998) argue that social timing, social roles, and the impact of social structures come together in personal narratives of lived experience. The life-course perspective on generativity "provides a unique opportunity for the study of the manner in which shared cultural meanings become the foundation for the construction of particular lives. These shared meanings are appropriated by individuals and portrayed in a story, or narrative," that serves to reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in such a way as to confer on a human life a sense of unity and coherence (p. 268). A life-course perspective on generativity, therefore, should consider the shared stories about providing for the next generation that prevail within a given culture and the individual life narratives, constructed as idiosyncratic variations on cultural themes, that convey how adults make personal and psychosocial sense of their projects, programs, hopes, fears, accomplishments, and frustrations in generativity.

**Generative Lives in Context: Recent Research**

Individual variation in generativity is a central theme in contemporary generativity research. The development of measures to assess individual differences in generativity has spurred research into the correlates of the construct, especially in the realms of parenting, political activity, and community involvements. Researchers have also tested hypotheses concerning the relation between generativity on the one hand and mental health and adaptation on the other. In addition, researchers have begun to examine especially generative lives in detail through the use of narrative frames of analysis and qualitative methodologies. Supplementing quantitative studies of generativity's antecedents and consequences, therefore, are more qualitative examinations of the meanings of generativity in individual lives.

**Parenting**

The prototype of generativity is probably the bearing and raising of children. One's own biological child is literally an extension of the self, biologically generated in one's own image, flesh of one's flesh, nurtured, cared for, mentored, educated, disciplined, and eventually granted some degree of autonomy to carry forward life for generations to come. It is in the bearing and raising of children that many adults confront their biggest challenges, fulfillments, and frustrations in generativity. Parenting, therefore, can be seen as a primary instantiation of generativity itself.
However, simply being a parent, Erikson argued, does not make an adult a generative person. Generative parenting involves adequate care for one's children and an enduring commitment to the well-being of the next generation (Erikson, 1963; Snarey, 1993). Consequently, individual differences in generativity may be reflective of or associated with individual differences in the quality of parenting.

The relation between parental status itself (that is, whether an adult becomes a parent) and generativity remains unclear. The one study reporting results on this relation showed a mixed picture, with generativity being positively associated with fatherhood but unrelated to motherhood (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). One interpretation of this correlational result is that becoming a father may have a significant impact on a man's overall concern for the next generation. Controlling for age and other demographic effects, men who were not fathers in this study showed especially low scores in generativity. It is possible that women may show slightly stronger concern for the next generation to begin with, compared with men, but that once parenthood is achieved men and women show relatively comparable scores overall. Another possibility, though probably too simplistic, is that it is generative men to begin with who, for the most part, become parents. But given that becoming a parent is a highly overdetermined accomplishment and subject to a wide range of internal and external factors, and given that so little research has examined this problem, it is unwise to draw any firm conclusions about parental status and generativity at this point.

Are parents who score high on measures of generativity more caring and committed parents than those who score low in generativity? This is a difficult question to answer because of disagreements among scholars and laypersons alike concerning what constitutes good parenting and because of cross-cultural differences in parenting approaches and values. Nonetheless, a handful of studies have examined relations between self-report measures of generativity and certain well-defined aspects of parenting. Peterson and Klohnen (1995) found that highly generative women who were also mothers invested considerably more energy and commitment in parenting and showed an "expanded radius of care" (p. 20) compared with less generative mothers. In two other investigations, researchers found that generativity was associated with an authoritative approach to parenting. Peterson, Smirles, and Wentworth (1997) found that middle-aged parents of college students expressed more authoritative attitudes about parenting if they were high in generativity. Pratt, Norris, Arnold, and Filyer (1999) found that generativity among mothers of teenage children predicted authoritative styles, but generativity among fathers was unrelated to parenting style. Authoritative parenting combines an emphasis on high standards and discipline with a child-centered and caring approach to raising

children. Authoritative parents provide their children with a good deal of structure and guidance, but they also give their children a strong voice in making family decisions. In studies done primarily in the United States, authoritative patterns of parenting have been consistently associated with a number of positive outcomes in children, including higher levels of moral development and greater levels of self-esteem (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In Peterson et al. (1997), authoritative parenting predicted attitudinal similarity between parents and college-age children, and it was negatively associated with parent/child conflict.

A large-scale study of parents of children enrolled in Chicago elementary schools showed that for both mothers and fathers high scores on generativity concern (assessed via an abbreviated version of the LGS) were strongly predictive of the extent to which parents were involved in their children's schooling. Mothers and fathers scoring high in generativity tended to help their children with their homework more, showed higher levels of attendance at school functions, and evidenced greater knowledge about what their children were learning and doing in school, compared with parents scoring low in generativity (Nakagawa, 1991). In a sample of both African American and White parents, Hart et al. (in press) found that high levels of generativity were associated with valuing trust and communication with one's parents and viewing parenting as an opportunity to pass on values and wisdom to the next generation. While Black and White parents showed some differences in their descriptions of their own approaches to parenting, generativity predicted the same parenting qualities for both groups.

Given the small body of research supporting a link between generativity on the one hand and caring and committed parenting on the other and given the intuitive appeal of generativity as a construct, family therapists and child advocates have begun to speak of generativity as a key factor in improving family life in the United States. Snarey and Clark (1998) argue that a fuller appreciation of the concept of generativity can enhance the role of fathers in American society. They report research showing that involved fathers have positive impacts on their children, especially sons, and that involvement in fatherhood is associated with other indexes of psychosocial adaptation, such as marital harmony and occupational success. In addition, they illustrate how a father's generative involvements change over time in a moving case study of one particular father-son relationship, charted across four decades. Dolehite et al. (1998) outline principles of generative counseling for work with families. They spell out procedures whereby the family counselor can help families sustain "generative connections," maintain "generative convictions," make "generative choices," keep "generative commitments," develop "generative capabilities," and initiate "generative changes" (p. 455).
Societal Involvements

While parenting is closely associated with generativity, it is intriguing to note that Erikson chose as his exemplary personification of generativity a man whose generative accomplishments were played out in the bright light of public action rather than in the private realm of the family. Although Mahatma Gandhi generated biological children of his own, Erikson viewed him as a paragon for generativity because of his mission to deliver and care for an entire nation. Indeed, Gandhi knew many failings as a father of his own children. But his commitment to the well-being of his people, the nation of India, defined a life whose generativity was as impressive and exemplary as any witnessed in the twentieth century. In Gandhi’s Truth, Erikson (1969) showed how generativity may be expressed in public political actions as well as in the crucible of family and local life.

If parenting within the family, then, is seen as the most private and local realm of generative expression, social involvements among one’s peers, in churches, in the community, and through political action offer opportunities for a more public expression of generativity. It would be expected, therefore, that some highly generative adults would show especially strong involvements in civic and/or religious affairs. In their study of African American and Anglo-American adults between the ages of 35 and 65 years, Hart et al. (in press) found that high levels of generativity were associated with more extensive networks of friends and social support in the community and greater levels of satisfaction with social relationships. In addition, generativity was positively associated with church attendance and involvement in church activities. Adults scoring high in generativity, furthermore, were more likely than those scoring lower to have voted in the last U.S. presidential election, to have worked for a political party or campaigned for a candidate, and to have called or written to public officials about a social concern or problem. Cole and Stewart (1996) found that generative concern among both Black and White women in midlife correlated highly with measures of sense of community and political efficacy, suggesting that adults with strong generative concerns also tend to express strong feelings of attachment and belongingness in their communities and tend to view themselves as effective agents in the political process. Peterson et al. (1997) showed that generativity is positively associated with interest in political issues. And Peterson and Kohnen (1995) found that highly generative women showed more prosocial personality characteristics.

Themes of generativity are very apparent in the social-scientific literature on altruism, volunteerism, and political activism (Andrews, 1991; Colby & Damon, 1992). A prime motivation undergirding the commitments that many adults show toward social causes, political parties, religious traditions, and a wide range of other social and cultural institutions is the concern for the well-being of the next generation. In a critique of American social life entitled, The Good Society, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1991) argue that the most pressing problems facing large-scale American institutions—such as schools, churches, and governing bodies—reflect failures in generative care. Bellah calls on American citizens and their leaders to embrace a “politics of generativity,” through which American adults may be able to “anchor our economic and political institutions firmly in the moral discourse of citizens concerned about the common good and the long run” (Bellah et al., 1991, p. 279). Outside the United States, Japanese social scientists and policy makers have turned their attention to the concept of generativity and its implications for developing a public philosophy to promote the survival and well-being of future generations (Kim & Tough, 1994).

Psychological Well-Being

Erikson believed that generativity was good for society and for the individual, too. The benefits of generativity should be seen in the strengthening of social institutions and the linking of individuals to both benevolent cultural traditions and progressive social change. At the same time, generativity should benefit the generative adult him- or herself. Erikson viewed generativity to be a sign of both psychological maturity and psychological health in the adult years. But what do the data show?

The data show that Erikson was probably right. Longitudinal investigations by Vaillant (1977) and Snarey (1993) have shown that ratings of generativity are positively associated with the use of mature coping strategies during times of stress and with clinically derived ratings of overall psychological adaptation. McAdams and his colleagues have consistently found that measures of generativity are positively correlated with self-reports of life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and sense of coherence in life and negatively associated with depression among midlife men and women, Black and White (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995; McAdams et al., 1998). Similarly, Ackerman, Zuroff, and Moskowitz (in press) showed that generativity was positively associated with positive affectivity, satisfaction with life, and work satisfaction among midlife adults. Among young adults, generativity predicted positive affect at home. Among midlife adults, self-report generative concern, assessed on the LGS, is negatively correlated with trait measures of neuroticism (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995; Peterson et al., 1997). In the Radcliffe and Michigan longitudinal studies, Stewart and Ostrove (1993) reported that, among a host of variables, quality of midlife roles and generativity were the only significant direct predictors of later midlife well-being.
In their nationwide survey, Keyes and Ryff (1998) have provided the most extensive documentation of generativity's relation to psychological well-being. The researchers found that nearly all of their measures of generativity significantly predicted a composite measure of psychological and social well-being. Supporting more people emotionally, feeling more obligated to society, having more generative concern, seeing oneself as a generative resource, and possessing more generative personal qualities were all associated with higher levels of psychological and social well-being. As the authors conclude, "Generative behavior, generative social obligations, and generative self-definitions are key ingredients in the recipe for psychological wellness" (Keyes & Ryff, 1998, p. 249). However, one of the authors' indexes of generativity turned out to be negatively associated with well-being. Feeling strong obligations to family and friends was inversely related to measures of social well-being. Keyes and Ryff suggest that some generative commitments may exact personal costs. Strong obligations to care for family members and ailing friends may sometimes prove burdensome, undercutting the quality of social life.

The main goal of the analysis provided by Keyes and Ryff (1998) was to link social structural variables, generativity, and psychological and social well-being. Their argument was that while structural variables contour generativity, generativity may in turn contour well-being. Survey studies have consistently shown that education levels are significant predictors of well-being. More educated people are generally happier, all other things being equal, than less educated people. Keyes and Ryff suggest that education may impact well-being by way of generativity. Education enhances opportunities and personal accomplishments, which may "motivate generativity by instilling social concern and engendering the desire for reciprocity" (p. 231). In other words, more educated and (assumedly) successful adults may be more motivated to "give something back" to society. Higher levels of education, therefore, should predict higher levels of generativity, which in turn should predict well-being. Keyes and Ryff provide strong empirical evidence for these linkages, and their statistical analyses, furthermore, show that a significant portion of the variance in well-being associated with education can be accounted for by generativity. Generativity components explained between 30% and 40% of the relationship between education and well-being in the nationwide data collected by Keyes and Ryff.

While a positive association between generativity and psychological well-being in midlife seems well established, some caveats are in order. First, the correlations obtained in these studies, while significant, are typically relatively modest, ranging between +.25 and +.40 in the studies reported by McAdams and his colleagues. Second, many of the significant associations reported are between self-report indexes. People who report high levels of generativity tend to report high levels of well-being. Future research, however, needs to employ other forms of measurement, so that researchers can be assured that these associations reflect more than a method bias. Third and related, the assessments of psychological and social well-being that have typically been employed have been designed, for the most part, to assess individual differences in nonclinical samples. Measures of clinical symptomatology and other more direct measures of mental illness per se have generally not been employed. Erikson's theory would certainly predict that adults suffering from serious mental illness would be significantly less generative than well-functioning adults, but this hypothesis has not been directly tested. Fourth, with the exception of Stewart and Ostrove (1998), studies have not been able to tease out cause-and-effect relationships over time. Does being highly generative lead to higher levels of well-being? Or are happier people to begin with more likely to become generative in adulthood? Perhaps both possibilities are true, but research to date cannot reach any conclusion on this issue.

In conclusion, the positive associations between well-being and generativity should not overshadow that (1) generativity is only one factor among many that predict well-being in adulthood, (2) being highly generative is not a surefire guarantee of health and happiness, (3) some highly generative men and women are sure to be unhappy, even miserable, and (4) some especially nongenerative, narcissistic, and self-indulgent adults may indeed feel perfectly fine about their lives. With the exception of one finding from Keyes and Ryff, furthermore, researchers have not seriously considered the possible costs and dangers of high generativity, both psychological and social. Kotre (1984, 1999) has written eloquently of the dark side of generativity. But little research to date has followed this lead.

Narrating the Generative Life

Beginning with Erikson's (1969) psychobiography of Gandhi, social scientists have explored themes of generativity in life narrative. Kotre (1984) portrayed different ways in which adults make sense of generativity challenges in eight life-story accounts. For each case, Kotre created a dramatic narrative encapsulating what he believed to be the heart of the story obtained from his extensive interviews of the adult, and then he analyzed the story in terms of two or three key themes of generativity. A major idea in some of the stories concerned the ways in which efforts to create legacies of the self and then offer them to others may encounter insurmountable and even tragic obstacles. Some adults who desperately want to have children cannot. Some adults who seek to be generative in artistic, political, scientific, literary, or social ways find their efforts stymied and their generated products rejected. Some adults, by design or unwittingly,
damage (and even kill) their own creations. The dynamic between generating and destroying legacies is a major theme in de St. Aubin's (1998) psychobiography of the American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. A similar dynamic is portrayed in Lee's (1998) study of generativity in the life and career of Martha Graham, the American dancer.

A life course perspective on generativity should be sensitive to the myriad ways in which adults appropriate shared cultural meanings and make sense of social roles and social timing through the production of life narratives (Cohler et al., 1998). A growing number of philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, and social critics have argued in recent years that adults living in modern societies tend to provide their lives with a sense of identity by constructing, internalizing, sharing, and revising life stories (Bruner, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Kenyon, 1996; MacIntyre, 1981; McAdams, 1985, 1997, 1999; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Taylor, 1989). According to this view, the dilemma of modern identity is fundamentally a problem in storytelling. Beginning in late adolescence and young adulthood, many people living in modern societies face the daunting challenge of constructing a life and fashioning a niche in society that provides them with a sense that they are unified and purposeful beings and that their lives display some intrinsic meaning or value (Bluck & Habermas, 1999; McAdams, 1985). In that modern societies typically offer no consensus as to how to achieve this psychosocial task, people draw on a wide range of cultural resources to fashion a conception of the self that integrates them into the adult world but also distinguishes them in some meaningful way from others. This is accomplished, more or less, through fashioning and internalizing a story that reconstructs the past and anticipates the future in order to provide a followable and vivifying narrative of the self. As modern men and women continue to fashion self-stories through midlife and beyond, they draw on the established literary traditions in their culture, rending life stories that contain origin myths set in early family experience, turning points in which the protagonist gains new insights, heroes and villains who support the protagonist's strivings, and villains who stand in the way, and endings that resolve conflict and bring events to a satisfying conclusion (Denzin, 1989; Rosenwald, 1992). Within the modern world, therefore, "a person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54).

Generativity is an important story line in the narratives that midlife adults construct to provide their lives with unity and purpose. Many adults include within their self-defining life stories detailed accounts of their efforts to promote the well-being of the next generation. A common theme in many life stories told in midlife is the realization that because others have provided me with care in the past it is now my turn to give something back to my family, my people, or my society. Accounts like these may be called generativity scripts (McAdams, 1985, 1993). For some adults, generativity scripts may dominate the plot lines in their life stories. For others, generativity may be played out in but a small number of life-story scenes.

Employing quantitative measures of generativity and lengthy life-story interviews, McAdams and his colleagues have analyzed life stories constructed by highly generative adults and compared them with the life stories told by adults scoring very low on measures of generativity (Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Levis, Patten, & Bowman, in press). The vast majority of the subjects in these studies are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. In describing how they reconstruct their own past and anticipate their own future, highly generative midlife adults are significantly more likely than their less generative counterparts to highlight scenes in their life stories in which extremely bad events (e.g., death, loss, failure, frustration) are followed by good outcomes (e.g., revitalization, improvement, growth, enlightenment). This way of telling a story about oneself may be called a redemption sequence. A bad scene is redeemed, salvaged, made better by that which follows. The opposite narrative movement is a contamination sequence, whereby an extremely good scene is ruined, spoiled, or sullied by a bad scene that follows it. Highly generative adults rarely construct contamination sequences in accounting for their lives, while less generative adults are more likely to speak of good scenes turning bad.

What is the connection between redemptive imagery in life stories and generativity? First, some adults see their own generative efforts as explicit attempts to redeem their own lives. A striking example of this phenomenon is documented in Maruna's (1997) study of published autobiographies of ex-convicts. Maruna found that men who eventually desist from crime after spending many years in criminal activity tend to tell the same kind of story of their reform. In the standard account, the criminal experiences a dramatic turning point in life, sometimes a life-threatening scene or a spiritual epiphany, that signals a move away from crime and toward a mature life of love and work. However, the move toward a socially acceptable lifestyle may suffer many setbacks and frustrations and the person may fall back into crime, until he or she is able to experience the self as an effective agent who is integrated into a supportive interpersonal community. Once the protagonist of the story finds agency and communion (Bakan, 1966) in life, he is now ready to "give something back" as a kind of payment or penitence for a life of crime. Generativity becomes an effort to achieve redemption in life. It becomes very important that the ex-convict be able to tell his story to other young people who may be headed toward antisocial behavior. The life story becomes dominated by a generativity script that
affirms the author’s redemption and provides a cautionary tale aimed to protect the next generation.

Second, generativity itself may entail an implicit understanding of human redemption. The hard work that the highly generative adult displays in his or her efforts to promote the well-being of future generations may entail a good deal of pain, suffering, and sacrifice. But the hardships of today may pay off in good dividends in the future. Scenes of sacrifice and hard work, therefore, may lead to scenes of blessing and reward—a redemption sequence of sorts. It is rare, furthermore, to find a man or woman in middle age who still believes that his or her life is perfect or unsullied. Adult life is full of mistakes, frustrations, and missed opportunities for most people; yet the promise of a new generation is that those same mistakes will not be made again, that frustrations will pass, and new opportunities will be grasped and fulfilled in the generation to come (Kotre & Kotre, 1998). Again, the hope is that the imperfections of today will be followed by a better tomorrow. Generativity is often couched, then, in terms of progress, improvement, transforming the bad into good. At the same time, however, generativity challenges people and societies to preserve what is good from the past in order to benefit the future. In this case, the effort to preserve the good is often viewed to be difficult or onerous. It is not easy to pass on the good from one generation to the next. There is always a battle to be fought with the forces that oppose such a transmission. The discourse on generativity, therefore, is filled with stories about people suffering and making sacrifices in order that the future will be good (Kotre, 1999; McAdams, 1985). The stories are variations of a more general theme of transforming bad into good—the essence of redemption. Redemption is an idea that appears in one form or another in all of the major world religions and in many cultural myths (James, 1902/1958).

The theme of redemption is often part of a larger and more complex life-story form that McAdams and his colleagues describe as a commitment story. McAdams et al. (1997) identified the commitment story as an especially prevalent life-story format in interviews of highly generative adults. The commitment story comprises five narrative themes: (1) early blessing, (2) suffering of others, (3) moral steadfastness, (4) redemption sequences, and (5) prosocial goals for the future. In their intensive study of 70 life stories, McAdams et al. showed that highly generative adults tend to construct life narratives that more closely approximate the commitment story form than do less generative adults. Although every adult’s life story is unique, the study suggests that highly generative adults appropriate some of the same kinds of themes and images in making sense of their lives in time, and that their stories as a group differ significantly from those constructed by less generative adults.

In the prototypical commitment story, the protagonist comes to believe early on (in childhood) that he or she has a special advantage (e.g., a family blessing, a special talent, a lucky break) that separates him or her out from others. The highly generative adult, therefore, tends to reconstruct the past in such a way as to identify a blessing or advantage that he or she enjoyed at a very early age. The blessing stands in sharp contrast, however, to the realization, again early in childhood, that other people suffer, that while I am blessed, others are not so fortunate. Thus, compared with less generative adults, highly generative adults are significantly more likely to recall and describe scenes from childhood in which they became aware of the suffering of other people. The clash between early blessing and the suffering of others sets up a tension in the story and motivates the protagonist to see him-herself as “called” or “destined” to be of good use to other people. As a result, the protagonist comes to articulate a clear and convincing system of personal beliefs, sometimes rooted in religion but sometimes not, that continues to guide his or her behavior throughout the life span (moral steadfastness). Compared with less generative adults, highly generative adults tell a story of continuity and certainty in moral beliefs—they have known what is “right” since very early in their lives; they have organized their beliefs into a coherent system that centers their life strivings; and they have continued to hold to this belief system ever since, recalling few periods of strong doubt or significant change in their beliefs. Moving ahead with the confidence of early blessing and steadfast belief, the protagonist of the commitment story encounters an expectable share of personal misfortune, disappointment, and even tragedy in life, but these bad events often become transformed or redeemed into good outcomes (redemption sequences), sometimes because of the protagonist’s efforts and sometimes by chance or external design. Thus, bad things happen, but they often turn into good things, whereas when good things happen they rarely turn bad. Looking to the future with an expanded radius of care, the protagonist sets goals that aim to benefit others, especially those of the next generation, and to contribute to the progressive development of society as a whole and to its more worthy institutions.

The commitment story appears to be a highly effective life-narrative form for supporting the adult’s generative efforts, an efficacious matchup of narrative identity and generative behavior. The adult who works hard to guide and foster the next generation may make sense of his or her strong commitment in terms of a story that suggests that he or she has been called or summoned to do good things for others and that the calling is deeply rooted in childhood, reinforced by a precocious sensitivity to the suffering of others, and bolstered by a clear and convincing ideology that remains steadfast over time. Perceiving one’s own life in terms of redemption sequences, furthermore, provides the hope that may sustain generative
efforts as private as raising one’s own child and as public as committing

one’s self to the advancement of one’s society or even one’s own people (Erik-

son, 1969). A commitment story provides a language or discourse for the
self that supports a caring, compassionate, and responsible approach to so-
possibility of compassion depends as much on having an appropriate dis-
course to interpret it as it does on having a free afternoon to do it. To ask
whether compassion is possible, therefore, is to ask about the language in
which its very conceivability depends.” A commitment story, therefore,

would appear to provide a powerful language or discourse for generativity.

Variations on the commitment story have been identified in the life sto-
ries constructed by highly generative African American adults, in a qual-
itative study conducted by McAdams, Bowman, et al. (1999). Employing a
grounded-theory, qualitative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to the
analysis of 35 life-story interviews, the authors discovered that highly
generative Black adults crafted life stories in which the protagonist en-
joyed an early advantage, bad scenes were redeemed by good outcomes,
and the future was anticipated with hope and prosocial goals. These dif-
fferences between highly generative and less generative Black adults were
consistent with those found in the McAdams et al. (1997) main White
sample. However, the stories of midlife African American adults who
were high in generativity also depicted plots that were developed in a
progressive, stage-like and goal-directed manner, whereas the life stories
of Black adults scoring low in generativity contained fixated and chaotic
plot structures in which main characters repeated frustrated and trou-
bling goal sequences again and again. For both highly generative and non-
generative African American adults, furthermore, the life-narrative
accounts were noteworthy for the early emergence of danger and threat
in the story, the clear identification of a (bad) antagonist against whom
the (good) protagonist struggled, and the powerful and beneficent role of
religion and extended kin networks in coping with the dangers and the

antagonists that life presents.

The study by McAdams et al. (1999) on the life stories of midlife
African American adults differing in generativity illustrates three points
concerning the narration of generative lives. First, in constructing self-
defining life narratives, highly generative Black adults appropriate some
of the same shared cultural meanings that have been observed in the life
stories of highly generative American Whites. In particular, three of the
five central themes of what McAdams et al. (1997) identified as the com-
mitment story figure prominently in the life stories of generative Blacks
in this small sample. Like their White counterparts, highly generative
Blacks make sense of their own lives in terms of an early advantage they
enjoyed, the transformation of bad events into good outcomes, and the

anticipation of prosocial goals for the future. Second, comparing the life
stories of highly generative and less generative African American adults
revealed themes that have not been highlighted in past research with
Whites. In particular, generativity among Blacks was associated with a
tight, stage-like, and goal-driven plot structure in which the protagonist
steadily progressed over time; whereas the stories of less generative
adults showed fixated plots and the repetition of chaotic or frustrating
scenes. Third, the study showed how the life stories of Black adults at
midlife, regardless of their generativity level, draw on shared cultural
meanings that depart dramatically from those observed in stories of
mainly middle-class White Americans. The emic quality of this analysis
was most evident in the characteristic ways in which the African Ameri-
can adults developed plot lines against a backdrop of perceived danger
and threat and vis-à-vis strong antagonists in the environment. As adap-
tive coping resources for the struggles they perceive, furthermore,
midlife African American adults draw on religious faith and the support
provided by extended family networks, which is consistent with the main
thrusts of empirical literature on psychosocial adaptation among African
Americans across the adult life course (e.g., Bowman, 1990).

**Conclusion**

From Plato’s writings on love and immortality through Erikson’s life-
cycle theory and to the current flowering of research and theorizing on
the concept, generativity has become established as a central psychosocial
issue for the middle adult years. Sharing Plato’s belief that generativity
follows directly from the successful establishment of long-term intimate
relationships in young adulthood, Erikson situated generativity as a dis-
crete midlife stage in his epigenetic life-cycle scheme. Empirical research
generally supports the idea that generativity is important to midlife
adults, but it also argues against a rigid stage scheme and in favor of vari-
ability in the developmental pathways that people follow in the adult
years. A life-course perspective on generativity underscores the determin-
ative influences of social timing, social roles, social structure, and
human agency in the contouring of generativity over time. Research ex-
amining individual differences in generativity shows that highly gener-
avtive adults tend to be highly invested in their children’s growth and
education, to be constructively involved in civic and religious activities,
and to experience high levels of psychological and social well-being,
compared with adults scoring low on measures of generativity. Life-nar-
ратive studies have begun to document the different ways in which
highly generative adults make sense of their lives and the life course,
underscoring the themes of redemption, progress, and personal destiny
in the culturally anchored meanings that generative adults appropriate and articulate in their self-defining life stories.

Empirical research on generativity is still in a very early stage. Future studies are likely to go in a multitude of directions. For example, many important developmental hypotheses coming out of Erikson’s writings on generativity have not been adequately tested. Chief among them may be the proposed developmental linkages between intimacy and generativity. Are adults who have successfully resolved Erikson’s intimacy versus isolation dynamic more likely to be generative in the next phase of life? Does generativity feed back to enhance, or undermine, intimacy? To what extent do important developments in generativity fundamentally alter intimacy and identity? Does successful generativity presage the establishment of ego integrity at the end of life?

Considering generativity from a life-course perspective, researchers will need to explore in much more detail the commonalities and variations in social timing, social roles, and social structural influences across different social contexts and cultures. Researchers need to address the complex ways in which generativity is gendered in different generations (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998) and how generativity is contoured by class, ethnicity, race, and historical events. More creative methods of assessing generativity may also be required, and the many measurement methods already employed will need to be refined further and linked more meaningfully to each other. Especially useful would be the development and validation of more ecologically valid measures that tap directly into the everyday experience of generativity.

Several intriguing questions about generativity have received virtually no research attention at all (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998). First among these is the question of the developmental antecedents of generativity. How is it that some people become more generative than others? Can the roots of strong generativity be traced back to the childhood and adolescent years? While life narrative studies provide some hints in this regard, long-term longitudinal studies are needed to do justice to these developmental questions. Cross-national studies have examined the development of civic responsibility and the role of community service in adolescence (Yates & Youniss, 1999), and a growing literature on social responsibility in adulthood has also begun to take shape (Colby & Damon, 1992; Parks-Daloz, Keen, & Daloz-Parks, 1996). Generativity research may benefit from connections to and indeed may even shed light upon these other lines of research.

A second question that has not been adequately addressed concerns the precise relation between generativity and creativity. Erikson suggested that generativity shares space with the concept of creativity. Many expressions of generativity appear to involve some form of creativity, as in procreation and the making of products and outcomes designed to outlive the self. One might ask whether highly creative people are especially generative. In some ways they may be, and in some ways not. Part of the indeterminacy here comes from the difficulty in defining creativity. Gardner (1993) suggested that creativity exists not so much within a single individual as in the nexus of the individual, the domain, and the field. Creative individuals work within a particular domain of expression that exists as part of a rule-governed field. The field’s rules are determined by various experts such as literary critics and book reviewers (for the field of literature) and granting agencies and peer review panels (for sciences). To a large extent, the experts decide who and what is creative in a given field. In a loose sense, the same might be said for generativity. It is perhaps worthwhile to ponder what and who the experts are and how the rule-governed fields may operate for the different domains of generative expression.

A third question: What are the limits, costs, and excesses of generativity? Kotre (1984) was the first to suggest that generativity may have a dark side. Because generativity involves the creation and passing on of products and outcomes from one generation to the next, the extent to which a community views particular generative expressions as “good” depends on the shifting social constructions of the potential worth embodied in those products and outcomes. Madmen and tyrants may view their own efforts as especially generative, in that they aim to craft enduring legacies for what they may consider to be “the good.” But even the most well-meaning generative expressions can go wrong, for one cannot control what one’s products will lead to in the future, even if one cares for and nurtures those products in a wise and compassionate way. Kotre and Kotre (1998) make another significant contribution to theorizing about generativity by identifying the phenomenon of intergenerational buffering, which is generativity in the service of not transmitting something from one generation to another. The buffer insists that “the damage stops here.” Nonetheless, damage is sometimes the main result of one’s best generative efforts. Beyond the writings of Kotre, this troubling conundrum has not generally been addressed.

Finally, what is the role of suffering in generativity? Snarey (1993) defines generativity chill as the anxiety experienced when one encounters the possibility of losing either the fruits of one’s generative efforts or one’s very power to be generative. From the realm of parental generativity come such obvious examples as infertility and facing the possibility of losing one’s child. Snarey found that the most generative fathers were those who had, at one time or another, encountered an episode of generativity chill. In a similar vein, Kay (1998) intimates that the Holocaust experience seemed to intensify the generative strivings of survivors, who showed much stronger generative inclinations than a matched sample of adults who were refugees...
(rather than concentration camp inmates) during World War II. Peterson (1998) suggests that midlife women who showed high levels of both generativity motivation and generativity realization seemed to be compelled to continue their substantial efforts to achieve generative goals because of tension or frustration in an area of strong generative concern. McAdams et al. (1997) report that highly generative midlife adults tend to construct life stories that emphasize early recollections of the suffering of others and numerous examples in their own lives in which suffering paved the way for growth, insight, and fulfillment.

Is it necessary to experience deep suffering to be especially generative? Is generativity enhanced or undermined by suffering? One can imagine examples of both: ways in which personal anxiety, frustration, or deprivation might help to make a person more generative or might contribute to stagnation, self-preoccupation, and despair. What is the relation between experiencing personal misery or witnessing the misery of others on the one hand and what Erikson identified as the “belief in the species” that sustains the necessary faith for generativity on the other?

When one thinks hard about generativity, one is challenged to ask some of the most important questions about the psychological, social, ethical, and existential dimensions of midlife. These questions beckon the systematic inquiries that social and behavioral scientists can offer. The concept of generativity should continue to generate creative theorizing and informative scientific research on midlife adult development through the twenty-first century and for generations to come.

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