

“Generativity” and the Pass-It-On Conference

By Lincoln Caplan¹

The concept of “generativity” as we are contemplating it at this conference – a commitment of individual adults to nurturing, guiding, and caring for the generations that follow and to ensuring that major social institutions do as well – traces back to Erik Erikson, who died 20 years ago shortly before his 92nd birthday.

Erikson was one of the most influential psychologists and social thinkers of the 20th century. He is best known for what he called “the epigenetic principle,” the idea that each stage of life “has its critical time of decisive unfolding.”ⁱ

He described “Eight Ages of Man.”ⁱⁱ Each stage, in his view, involves a basic tension and a fundamental “virtue” – a meaning, which he also called an “ego strength” – that emerges when a person resolves the tension in a positive way. The first stage is infancy when the tension is between “trust” and “mistrust” and the virtue is “hope.” The last is old age when the tension is between “integrity” and “despair” and the virtue is “wisdom.”

At each stage, Erikson argued, a person’s ego must struggle unconsciously to define itself in a psychological crisis against inertia, degradation, and other negative forces. Erikson proposed that, when a person’s sense of self matches how others view him or her, he or she develops a durable sense of identity. In the 1960s and ‘70s, as the baby boom came of age, Erikson’s thinking about identity drew widespread attention and made him a celebrity.

When he was a professor of human development at Harvard,ⁱⁱⁱ Erikson elucidated the tension between “identity” and “confusion” that he observed at the heart of adolescence and what he called “the identity crisis.” Erikson taught that each person must resolve the identity crisis to find the virtue of “fidelity,” which is the foundation for later stages. In early adulthood, he said, the ego must become strong enough to resist the confusion about a person’s potentially competing roles in life to begin shaping life project. When resolved well, “the identity crisis” leads to a person knowing that life has finally begun for real.

Adulthood is the longest stage in Erikson’s framework and involves the tension between what he called “generativity” and “self-absorption” or “stagnation.” When the tension is positively resolved, its central meaning is “care”—the quality of care a parent owes a child. In 1950, when Erikson was 48 years old and presented his understanding of the life cycle in his bestselling book *Childhood and Society*, he said very little about generativity. He spent only two pages on the idea.^{iv}

In later decades, however, he focused increasingly on this idea, defining care as “a *generative* tendency, and beyond this a tendency to take care of what was generated.” The focus of adulthood, he said, is “guiding the next generation” and assuming “a parental kind of responsibility” toward society in general.^v

When Erikson and his wife, Joan, were both close to 80, four graduate students at Harvard who were editors of the *Harvard Educational Review*

¹ Lincoln Caplan is a senior advisor to Encore.org and a visiting lecturer in law at Yale Law School.

interviewed them for an article called “On Generativity and Identity,”^{vi} which the journal published in 1981.

Joan was a skillful writer, editor, and thinker, and was Erik’s partner in developing ideas about human development. As a native English-speaker (she was born in Canada and graduated from Barnard College), she helped him develop a lucid, impressionistic, and engaging style of writing after they immigrated to the United States in 1933 when both were 31. (He was born in Denmark and grew up in Germany and had spoken and written in German.)

During the *Harvard Educational Review* interview, Erik Erikson said, “You can say that human evolution has arranged it so that humans have a long childhood and then a long period of generativity, so that adults are then prepared to be for their children what is needed at that evolutionary or cultural moment, or at that moment in history.”

This expansive comment underscores how Erikson’s view about human development is distinct from Sigmund Freud’s in an important respect: Freud largely focused on a person’s inner life; Erikson was especially interested in the “psychosocial” and how a person’s outer life shaped that inner one—parents and family, of course, but also community, society, culture, nation, history, and human nature as it has evolved since the ascent of man.

In 2003, *The Generative Society: Caring for Future Generations*, edited by Ed de St. Aubin, PhD, Dan P. McAdams, PhD, and Tae-Chang Kim, collected essays about a new wave of scholarship building on Erikson’s work. It builds on his view that generativity is “both a psychosocial stage of individual adult development and the cultural adhesive by which valued traditions and beliefs are created, maintained, and revitalized through intergenerational transmission.”^{vii} The collection’s premise is that generativity’s core is the transmission of “that which is valued.”^{viii}

The collection makes clear that this ongoing scholarship has yet to answer significant questions: How does individual generativity relate to collective generativity? Is a society generative if it includes generative individuals, or encourages individuals to be generative, or “infuses the generative spirit into social policy?”^{ix} What about the dark side—passing along a destructive legacy: is that generativity, too?

Generativity is a topic of growing significance today. As the baby boom ages, the collection’s editors write, “a large portion of the citizenship is grappling in their own lives with issues of legacy-leaving and caring for members of younger generations.”^x This is of growing significance because of the “social recession”^{xi} documented by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* and by others: American society is enjoying extreme material wealth, especially among the wealthy, but is “at a low point regarding social health.”

Finally, rapid changes in communications, technology, and other primary shapers of society have “called into question the value of the skills one generation has to pass onto the next.”^{xii} Kai Erikson, a Yale professor emeritus of American studies and sociology and the Eriksons’ oldest son, addresses this issue in the collection.

For people of his parents’ generation, born at the beginning of the 19th century, Kai Erikson writes, “the generative task”^{xiii} was to pass along “tradition and

belief” so that “their children became participating members of the communities into which they were born.” But two World Wars and a host of other calamities led to a century of migration between 1830 and 1930, with 35 million people from Europe immigrating to the United States.

Those passages brought new beginnings and fresh promise, but also bewilderment, loss of social status, and a profound sense of displacement. Erikson writes, “ ... The deepest of their sorrow, often, was the realization that they had so little to pass on to their children.”^{xiv}

In the old country, whether it was Italy or Ireland, Germany or Norway, Poland or Russia, “lessons learned by parents over a lifetime” became their children’s “curriculum.” Not in America: “No one knew less about the intricacies of this new land than parents, and no one was a less adept role model for children seeking new opportunities, moving into new occupations, and learning new ways of behaving.”^{xv}

Kai Erikson writes: “Erik Erikson was an immigrant, and as so often happens in such circumstances, his children learned some of the ways of his new land more rapidly than he did. So I was often his teacher in matters having to do with the complexities of American life, just as my children are often my teachers in matters have to do with the complexities of modern life.”^{xvi}

But the wisest of immigrant parents “knew something that is well worth remembering,”^{xvii} as Erik and Joan Erikson did and passed along to their children:

The best way for parents to help children adjust to the realities of a world about which they know very little is to teach them not *what* to think but *how*, not what particular moral values they should observe but what a sense of values *really is*, not what words they should say or what acts to perform in the presence of others but what respect and compassion and caring consist of, not what articles of faith should be defended but what it means to stand for something.^{xviii}

Erik Erikson did what Pericles, Abraham Lincoln, and other shapers of their times have done in their own ways: he taught later generations of scholars that generativity is a fundamentally important concept in understanding human development and in organizing human society. He encouraged them to expand our understanding of the idea and its applications.

And so, followers of Erikson are helping us understand that for people in the generative stage, passing along knowledge or skill helps fulfill an essential purpose. And that for those these generative individuals support or teach, being the recipient helps inculcate an understanding of intergenerational dependence.

At the level of society, Erikson scholars are helping us understand what the Japanese sociologist Takatoshi Imada writes in the collection: “Generativity based on the virtue of care leads to a new dimension of social responsibility.”

Erikson emphasized this important insight about generativity: “The dependence of children on adults often blinds us to the dependence of the older generation on the younger one. Mature man needs to be needed.”^{xix}

The primary goal of the “Pass it On” conference is to recognize the needs of vulnerable children and youth especially, and to match these needs with the fundamental needs of older adults. In making this match, we will increase the chances of both younger and older Americans to reach their full potential in human development, which was the great and inspiring project of Erik Erikson.

-
- ⁱ p. 251, "On Generativity and Identity: From a Conversation with Erik and Joan Erikson," Harvard Educational Review
- ⁱⁱ Childhood and Society
- ⁱⁱⁱ P. 308, Lawrence J. Friedman, Identity's Architect
- ^{iv} Friedman, Lawrence J., Chapter 16, Erik Erikson on Generativity: A Biographer's Perspective, p. 257
- ^v P. 225, op. cit.
- ^{vi} Op. cit., note 1
- ^{vii} p. 266, The Generative Society
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} P. 267, op. cit.
- ^x P. 269, op. cit.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Ibid.
- ^{xiii} P. 53, op. cit.
- ^{xiv} P. 54, op. cit.
- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} P. 53, op. cit.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} P. 336-337, op. cit.