

# Generativity's manifestation in young adults: a grounded theory study

Generativity  
development in  
young adults

Addison Sellon and Lindsay Hastings

*Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication,  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Applying traditional grounded theory techniques, the present research reanalyzed secondary data from four previously conducted studies to explore how generativity is manifested in young adults.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A new conceptual model of generativity was developed to depict how generativity manifests among this age group.

**Findings** – This study's findings provide leadership educators with a refined approach to interacting with this construct while simultaneously increasing young adults' potential ability to experience the benefits available to them through generativity at an earlier stage in their lives.

**Originality/value** – This study advances the field of leadership education by establishing foundational insight into the uniqueness of generativity's development in young adulthood.

**Keywords** Conceptual model, Generativity, Teaching and learning of leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Generativity is identified as “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1950, 1963, p. 267) and has been linked to various positive outcomes including life satisfaction (Adams-Price, Nadorff, Morse, Davis, & Melanie, 2018), identity development (Marcia, 2002) and well-being factors such as self-acceptance, autonomy and purpose in life (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). Generativity has traditionally been considered a midlife adulthood construct (Erikson, 1950, 1963) that can be expressed and developed through contexts such as parenthood and establishing a family (McAdams & Logan, 2004). This traditional placement raises the possibility that assessments currently used to measure generativity are similarly framed as relevant to middle adulthood experiences and constructs (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). However, recent studies have revealed higher levels of generativity among young adults, particularly among college student leaders who mentor (Hastings, Griesen, Hoover, Creswell, & Dlugosh, 2015; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Sunderman, 2020) and have established generativity as a key component to young adults' leadership identity development (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005, 2006). This evidence of generativity among young adults leaves room for potential bias and inaccurate measurements of generativity for those in life stages other than midlife.

Although research has explored and found generativity present in early adulthood, there is a lack of research exploring generativity in adolescents and young adults (Leffel, 2008). This study sought to address the need for research in this area by utilizing grounded theory

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methods to develop a theory explaining the process of generativity's manifestation in young adults. The continued exploration of this phenomenon in young adulthood is imperative to effectively evaluate generativity in a way that is representative of this age group. The results of this research provide leadership practitioners with a refined theory of generativity to begin introducing and intentionally developing young adults' generative abilities at earlier stages than natural maturation.

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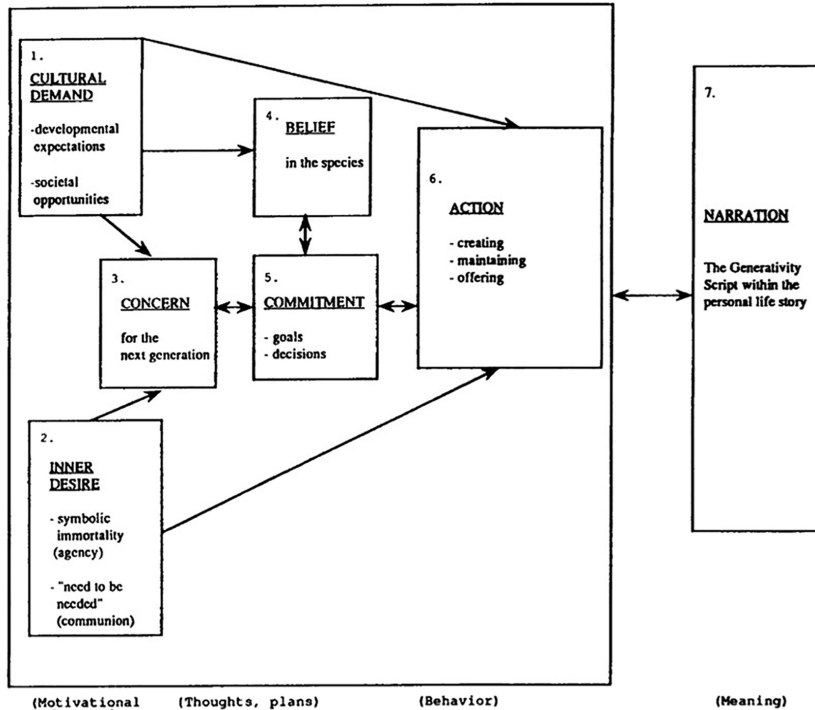
### Review of the literature

Erikson (1950, 1963) paired generativity opposite to stagnation in the seventh of eight psychosocial developmental stages and argued that one can attain and foster generativity when they acquire a deeper level of identity and intimacy from previous developmental stages, furthering their sense of responsibility for the next generation (Bradley & Marcia, 1998). Due to its placement within the psychosocial developmental stages, generativity has traditionally been considered a midlife construct (Erikson, 1950, 1963) rooted in raising children (McAdams & Logan, 2004). However, recent studies have found generativity to be present among different age groups, distinctly within young adulthood (Hastings *et al.*, 2015; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Komives *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Lawford, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005, 2020; Lawford & Ramey, 2015). These studies suggest that in addition to parenting, generativity can also be developed through formats such as mentoring (Hastings *et al.*, 2015; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019), teaching (McAdams & Logan, 2004), active engagement in one's community (Lawford & Ramey, 2015) and leadership within organizations (Slater, 2003). These findings of generative growth beyond the traditional midlife lens raise the need to further explore generativity among other life stages.

McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) developed a conceptual framework of generativity, composed of seven psychological features: (a) cultural demand; (b) inner desire; (c) conscious concern; (d) belief; (e) generative commitment; (f) generative action; and (g) narration of personal life stories (see Figure 1). Initially, generativity stems from two significant motivations, cultural demand and inner desire (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). When the two motivations are combined, conscious concern for, commitment to and action toward the next generation can grow and be reinforced through beliefs and personal narrations of life stories (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams *et al.*, 1993). McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) state that all seven components of generativity are essential to comprehensively understanding one's generativity. McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) also established measurement strategies to gauge individual generativity levels. The Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) is a self-report scale used to measure generative concern, the Generative Behavior Checklist (GBC) is a behavioral checklist used to indicate generative action and autobiographical episodes allow for the assessment of generative narration (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). McAdams *et al.* (1993) also include Emmon's (1986) Personal Strivings measure to assess generative commitment.

Studies have also begun to investigate generativity among college students (Hastings *et al.*, 2015; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Sunderman, 2020). Hastings *et al.* (2015) found generativity to be significantly higher among college student leaders who mentor compared to general college students and college student leaders who were not actively mentoring. This study also indicated a potential relationship between generativity and socially responsible leadership, which was later confirmed by Hastings and Sunderman (2019) when generativity emerged as a significant and positive predictor of socially responsible leadership within the same population.

In addition to socially responsible leadership, generativity also has strong connections to leadership identity development. The leadership identity development theory and model were generated to understand and conceptualize how leadership identity develops among



**Source(s):** From "A Theory of Generativity and Its Assessment Through Self-Report, Behavioral Acts, and Narrative Themes in Autobiography," by D. P. McAdams and E. de St. Aubin, 1992, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(6), p. 1005 (<https://doi/10.1037/0022-3514.62.6.1003>). Copyright 1992 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission

**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual model of  
generativity

young adults (Komives *et al.*, 2005). There are six stages of the leadership identity development model: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leader differentiated, generativity and integration/synthesis (Komives *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Komives, 2011). Generativity, being the fifth stage in leadership identity development, occurs once a leader begins mentoring and recognizes how their choices influence those around them and strengthens their commitment to others (Komives *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Komives, 2011). Generativity allows the leader to look farther than themselves and work towards sustaining the group (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006).

Sunderman (2020) continued Hastings *et al.* (2015)'s research via a longitudinal study to examine generativity development among college student leaders who mentor over three years. When focusing on the change of generativity over time, Sunderman (2020) reported a significant increase in generative behavior (as measured by the GBC) amongst college student leaders who mentor. Generative concern was additionally found to be a predictor of generative behavior throughout students' undergraduate careers as a mentor (Sunderman, 2020). Taken together, these studies provide evidence of the presence and growth of generativity among young adults, encouraging further exploration of generativity within

this age cohort and supporting the need to develop a more precise measure of generativity specific to young adulthood.

While several studies have provided compelling evidence of generativity among young adults, generativity continues to be conceptualized and tested as a midlife construct. The established framework and measures associated with generativity have been constructed in ways that bias toward middle-aged adults, inadvertently affecting and limiting how generativity has been studied among young adults. The tools used to measure generativity are framed in a way that has the potential to inaccurately measure generativity among a more youthful age cohort due to the specifics and relevance of the questions being asked. The LGS, for example, includes the question, "I have a responsibility to improve the neighborhood in which I live" (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). This question can prove challenging for younger adults, particularly college-aged young adults. Traditional living environments, such as campus housing, available to college students can hinder their ability to influence their 'neighborhood' due to their structure. Rather than taking these limitations into account, the current measures would report that these individuals are simply displaying low levels of generativity.

Similarly, the Generative Behavior Checklist asks individuals to share how often in the previous two months the individual has "read a story to a child" (McAdams *et al.*, 1993, p. 224). The ability to interact with a child can be more limited for younger adults. The frame of this question is narrow and specific, leading to potentially inaccurate indications of generativity among young adults. The precise nature of this question could lead a younger adult who invests in an older child or perhaps interacts with a younger individual differently to miss this question due to its level of specification. Because of these skewed questions that have the potential to cater to middle-aged adults, further research to accurately measure generativity among young adults is critical.

## Methods

This study aimed to generate a theory describing the process of generativity's manifestation in young adults. Following traditional grounded theory methodology, data from four previous research efforts studying generativity's presence and development among college student leaders who mentor were re-analyzed. From this analysis, a representative theory emerged, exploring the question, *How is generativity manifested in young adults?* The following sub-questions were used to guide the analysis further: (a) How do young adults describe generativity? (b) In what ways do young adults recognize their generativity? (c) What experiences do young adults associate with generativity? (d) How do young adults experience generativity?

These research questions played a vital role throughout the data analysis process because the use of secondary data meant reframing and exploring participant responses to questions posed in previous studies. The sub-questions for the current study were formatted to provide a guided yet flexible structure to explore what is taking place for generativity to manifest and develop in young adults. The research questions allowed for the reanalysis of participant responses and focused on the core meanings of the responses as they related to the expression of their generativity.

A constructivist grounded theory approach was utilized in the present study. Constructivism is centered around how individuals interpret the world around them and make meaning of their own experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach also emphasizes the notion of a co-constructed theory that is generated from both the participants and researcher, accounting for the role we, the researchers, played in the present study (Charmaz, 2014). We have personal experience as collegiate leadership mentors in young adulthood, which lent to our interpretation of the experiences had by the participants in the

secondary studies. The variations derived from our understanding of the original studies and our experiences enabled the inductive development of a theory that describes the dimensions and process of generativity among young adults.

The term 'young adults' was used in the study to maintain continuity with seminal work within the field of generativity. Original studies utilize terms such as 'midlife adults' and 'middle adulthood' (Erikson, 1950, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Carrying on with this same format, this study incorporated the term 'young adult' to describe the population whose experiences were re-analyzed to develop the theory of generativity's manifestation unique to this life stage. In this study, 'young adult' referred to college students, with the sample of reanalyzed data coming specifically from college student leaders who mentor.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data collection for this study was unique in that it was collected by reanalyzing qualitative data from previously recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The data were gathered from four previous research studies which examined levels of generativity among undergraduate college students who attended the same four-year public Midwestern university and participated in a leadership mentoring program during their interview (Hastings *et al.*, 2015, 2021; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Sunderman, Hastings, & Sellon, 2022). The sampling strategy used in the initial studies was a combination of purposeful and criterion sampling, with participants selected due to their ability to "contribute to the development of the theory," which was discovered by the original researcher to be college student leaders who mentor (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 157). Their reanalysis provided further insight into the manifestation of generativity during young adulthood and allowed us to focus on the experiential and behavioral components of this phenomenon's manifestation.

All 61 of the available transcripts were reanalyzed in their entirety for the present study following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to use the secondary data. Saturation was reached after 58 interviews; however, all available interviews were coded. Once coded, the studies were reanalyzed for their manifestations of generativity, guiding theory development. The analytic procedure of this study followed the established and respected procedures for grounded theory as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2014).

Initial codes were derived from "words that reflect action," (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116), to ensure the focus was on the data, not the participants. Memos were written and the constant comparative method was utilized throughout the data analysis process, allowing for commonalities and patterns between categories and transcripts to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were coded using a combination of coding sentence-by-sentence and groups of sentences expressing the same idea. This technique was inspired by the analytic cues from respected scholars within the field of leadership education and the researchers behind one of the most seminal pieces in the field of leadership identity development (Komives *et al.*, 2005). The participant responses were expressed in more significant portions of dialogue. Utilizing this approach to coding allowed the same ideas to be represented as one unit while remaining close to the data. (Charmaz, 2014). In total, 2,998 phrases were coded throughout the transcripts with 54 initial codes being generated, ranging from 'active investment' to 'learning from others' to 'trust in relationship'.

Focused coding was then conducted by pulling the codes identified most frequently and most significantly to allow the core categories within the data to emerge and be used for developing a theory (Charmaz, 2014; Babchuk & Boswell, 2023). When developing the focused codes, theoretical sampling was incorporated to ensure the emerging themes were representative of all participant comments (Charmaz, 2014; Babchuk & Boswell, 2023). Six final themes emerged from this phase, each with four to five sub-categories. These themes

were then generated into a theory and updated conceptual model representing generativity’s manifestation in young adults. The final categories and conceptual model were verified by an external auditor to ensure appropriate methodologies and data analysis procedures were followed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focused codes generated from the current study are included in Table 1.

Following these steps, theoretical coding was then utilized to highlight the connections of the generated model to the original conceptual model of generativity established by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992). Doing so allowed for the exploration of connections between the categories (Babchuk & Boswell, 2023) while also creating the opportunity to “move [the] analytic story in a theoretical direction” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 151). The categories generated during focused coding were analyzed to explore further the theoretical relationships between the categories generated within the present study’s model for young adults and those of the traditional model.

Findings and development of a theory

Of the six final themes, a sense of inner desire and motivation to be generative was the first theme identified in generativity’s manifestation. This was followed by a second foundational factor of generative awareness. Generativity first emerged as an awareness of the construct, before turning to something young adults saw within themselves and in relation to others. This inner element of generativity’s manifestation also accounted for recognizing growth in oneself and others. Those internal elements were then expressed through tangible opportunities to be generative. These outputs were generative relationships, which

Focused code	Incorporated themes
Generative Desire/Motivation	Desire for the Next Generation/Natural Ability Recognition of Impact Having Others Invest in Them and Wanting to do the Same for Others
Generative Awareness	Others-Focused Mindset Awareness of Generativity as a Concept Awareness of Generative Ability/Self-Awareness Awareness of Others
Opportunities to be Generative	Ownership of Generativity Mentoring Applying Generativity to Various Settings Life Experiences
Recognizing Growth	Practice Generativity Throughout Life Time Challenged to Grow Growth in Self
Generative Relationships	Outcomes of Confidence and Active Investments Establishing the Relationship Connecting Emotions to Relationship Commitment from Investee Witnessing Growth in Investee
Generative Community with Opportunities to Reflect	Affirmation From Others Learning From and With Others Motivation from Peers to Grow in their Generativity Reflection

Table 1.  
Focused coding themes Source(s): Created by authors



harnessed their generative abilities and established their connection in a generative community. Finding a generative community and having the chance to reflect were also identified as influencing generativity's manifestation. The findings suggest that this process is not linear, but rather one that continually influences itself. This model is shown in Figure 2.

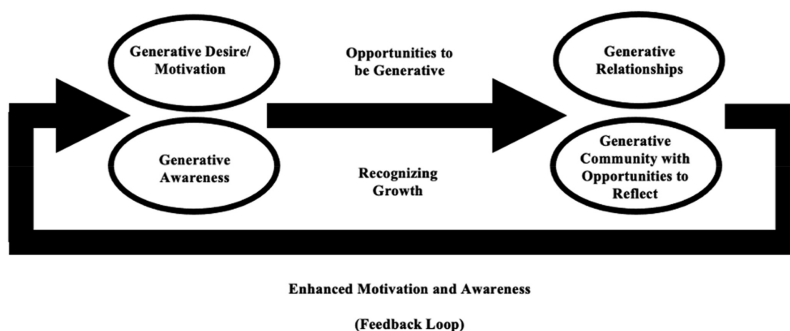
## Generativity development in young adults

### *Generative desire and motivation*

The notion of generative desire and motivation was identified as being the first initial manifestation of their generativity after this pattern was recognized within 53 of the participant comments across all four studies. The idea of a natural ability to be generative emerged from 47 participant comments from all four of the studies, rooting this belief in an internal motivation to be generative. Chelsea from the third study elaborated on the idea of natural ability and a desire to be generative by saying, "I feel like most of us mentors come in, and we want to be mentors for a reason. And I think that's because we seek to invest in others, we just need the means of doing so." However, the sentiment of a natural ability to be generative did not emerge in every transcript. Some participant comments suggest that this motivational component took time to become more apparent. It wasn't until young adults separated their identity from the "next generation" that they appeared to engender the desire to be generative.

The second major sub-theme within this category was the recognition of the impact of being generative, a pattern that was derived from 51 participant comments across the four studies. The desire to be generative appeared to increase when young adults were mindful of the bigger picture, how they could better those within the next generation and help continue to make positive impacts in the community. Around 35 participant comments also indicated that having another individual invest in them while growing up was key to growing their desire and motivation to be generative. Experiencing the impact of being invested in sparked a desire to create that impact for someone else. Even individuals who did not indicate they had a "difference maker" in their life commented on the perceived impact of having someone in that role for them when they were younger. Regardless of if that role was filled or absent, participant comments consistently lent support to the significance of that role and the desire to have that same generative impact on the next generation.

The next sub-theme that emerged was engaging in an others-focused mindset, a theme that was supported by 42 participant comments throughout the four studies. Participant comments indicated that when they were able to put their mentee at the front of their intentional interactions, young adults could express their desire to be generative and focus on them and their needs. Ultimately, 47 participants from the 61 total transcripts that were



**Figure 2.**  
Model of generativity's  
manifestation in young  
adults

Source(s): Created by authors

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reanalyzed suggested that young adults have a general baseline ability to be generative, which initiated their generative development.

### *Generative awareness*

Across all four studies, an awareness of generativity was identified as another foundational theme to generativity's manifestation in young adults. Throughout the studies, 45 participant comments indicate that the first development in their awareness of generativity was the conscious understanding of the notion of "generativity" and being able to place a word with the concept they were living out. Once the name of the intentional care they were acting on was learned, a deeper awareness of their generativity was possible because they could connect those experiences to the concept.

Beyond becoming aware of generativity and their newfound ability to place a name with the experience, 58 participants from the 61 transcripts that were reanalyzed noted the influence of gaining a sense of awareness of their generative abilities. This awareness consistently appeared to stem from their motivation and desire to be generative. Participant comments commonly linked opportunities to be generative, whether through mentoring, involvements, etc., to their generative awareness. These opportunities to grow in their understanding led to confidence in further exploring and developing their generativity.

Developing a sense of self, understanding those around them and recognizing others' emotions also emerged during re-analysis as critical to awareness. Forty-nine participant comments suggested that the awareness of their generative abilities increased when they could see their generativity's impact on others. In the fourth study, Adam verbalized these ideas by sharing, "I think understanding interpersonal relationships is huge for seeing how people are affected by your actions and words and emotions." Recognizing the impact, they could have on those around them, Adam became more aware of their ability to be generative. Gaining an awareness of others was also attributed to connections with their mentees.

A sense of ownership of their abilities and responsibility to engage in generativity also emerged from the reanalysis, of which 49 total participant comments addressed having these experiences. Initial responses indicated that participants held generativity as an innate part of who they are. Through awareness of the concept of generativity, their ability to be generative and their impact on those around them, a sense of responsibility to be intentional with their generativity developed. Combined with a desire to be generative, awareness and acceptance of their abilities further fostered generativity's manifestation within this population.

### *Opportunities to be generative*

A third theme identified as generativity's manifestation in young adults was seeking out and partaking in opportunities to be generative, with 58 of the 61 transcripts having addressed this element. Opportunities to be generative appeared to be a way to put inner desires and generative consciousness into action. Participant comments from each study supported this pattern as "practice" for their generativity and one of the initial components that influenced subsequent categories of generativity in the analytic process. Due to the nature of the sample used in the initial studies, all participants from across the four studies connected their experience with mentoring as a critical component of their generative development. Carl from the third study verbalized this pattern of mentoring's impact on their generativity when they said, "you don't have those moments where you recognize your [generative] impact until you see [your mentee find success]." Being able to mentor in an intentional way that calls on their generativity was a discernible pattern for how young adult participants further developed their ability to be generative.

In addition to mentoring, 56 participant comments supported the theme of additional roles and experiences as being impactful to their generativity. These opportunities stemmed from



being involved in other organizations during their college career, specifically through on-campus opportunities such as Greek Life. Beyond college programs, 44 participants out of the 61 reanalyzed transcripts recognized general life experiences as additional opportunities to be generative. Beyond a formal program or college experience, being generative towards younger family members also emerged as a sub-theme. Isabelle from the fourth study represented this pattern by recalling how spending time with their cousins was an early opportunity for them to practice their generativity: "I'm the oldest, and I've always been told, 'set the better example,' When I had cousins around, I had to show them how to act." These opportunities to be generative extended beyond formal mentoring moments, spreading to time spent with younger members of their families.

Not only did participant comments reflect recognition of their recent life experiences as impactful to generativity's manifestation, but 49 of the 61 transcripts also indicated a patterned belief that these opportunities to be generative are something that would take place throughout their life. A desire to continue connecting with others, particularly those within the next generation, throughout their lifetime was a common theme that emerged during reanalysis. Participant comments support the notion that if young adults find ways to be generative, their generativity will continually develop.

### *Recognizing growth*

While opportunities to be generative emerged as a critical element to generativity's manifestation in young adults, recognizing growth equally appeared to be a catalyst in this process. Throughout all four studies, 59 participant comments made mention of the notion of time - that as time went on throughout opportunities to be generative, growth in their abilities simultaneously occurred. Participant comments reflected this recognition of time as instrumental to generativity's manifestation by developing generative relationships. Through intentional relationship building and time, young adults developed their generativity.

The concept of being challenged to grow also emerged as instrumental to generativity development. Twenty-eight of the 61 participant comments throughout the four studies supported this factor. Though these challenges often came from being pushed out of their comfort zone, the idea that the push was necessary for them to achieve growth in their generativity emerged during reanalysis. Patterned participant comments noted a similar sentiment that although being challenged may have been difficult at first and required a deeper investment within their community, the rewards that came from meeting those challenges allowed them to grow in their generativity.

The theme of an awareness of self-growth over their time spent within the mentoring program also emerged. Forty-six participants out of the 61 reanalyzed transcripts addressed self-growth during their respective interviews. When originally asked to reflect on the development of their generativity, participants recognized the growth that they had as an individual during that time. Growth at the individual level incorporates many different recognitions (e.g., reflection, affirmation and time). A process that emerged from the reanalysis of the original study as critical to generativity's manifestation was being allowed to recognize their personal growth in generativity. Doing so increased the awareness and desire to act on their generativity while simultaneously recognizing more substantial impacts and success when implementing generativity.

The final component to emerge from the thematic element of growth was the outcomes associated with generative growth. Specifically, 23 participant comments from the four studies indicated an increase in confidence as an outcome of recognizing growth. Further, 37 participant comments spoke to the ability to actively invest in others as the second direct outcome of development over time. In the second study, Jane expressed the second outcome of

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growth, active investment, through an application over time. Because of the opportunity to intentionally practice generativity and subsequently grow by doing so, Jane was able to recognize their ability to consciously recognize generativity: “[mentoring over time has] given me more of a push or a motivation to care for the people who are younger than me. I wouldn’t say that before I necessarily consciously thought about [generativity]. . . but now it’s an instinct.” Participant comments gave support to growth as a catalyst and opportunities to be generative as a facilitator of generativity’s manifestation.

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### *Generative relationships*

Generative relationships emerged as another important theme of generativity’s manifestation in young adults. Patterned participant comments suggested that once participants were aware of, grew in and sought opportunities to be generative, they were drawn to intentional relationships in which they could engage their generativity. All 61 participant comments appear to support the notion of having the desire to establish relationships to foster an intentional and committed connection between themselves and the investee where they could apply their generativity. These purposeful investments were mainly through their mentoring relationships, which was the focus of the initial four studies. At the beginning of these relationships, value appeared to be placed on establishing and building a strong relationship with their mentees, a theme that emerged in 49 participant comments.

These relationships started from the ground up and took time to build and grow. Trust, communication and intentionality were recognized as invaluable foundational elements to creating a generative relationship through this same factor of time. Ken, in the first study, offered a quintessential articulation of the need to establish openness and commitment when in a generative relationship: “I would say that the relationship developed in trust and being able to open up to one another. . . those are little things that pointed me along to feeling like our relationship was growing.” Patterned participant comments seemed to indicate that it was the establishment of a strong relationship that allowed the development of one’s generativity. Further, generativity’s manifestation was evident when participant comments indicated recognition of how to practice strong relationships rooted in generativity.

As relationships strengthened over time, participant comments also indicated that specific emotions connect to their relationship with their mentee. As these relationships grew, the reanalysis of the transcripts revealed a heightened sense of care, concern for and intentionality with their mentees. In all, a heightened sense of emotion for and connection to their mentee due to their generative relationship was identified in 47 participant comments across all four studies.

Commitment from the mentee/investee was another key factor identified during the reanalysis. The concept of feeling encouraged by mentee commitment was supported by 28 participant transcripts. The findings suggest that when mentors recognized their mentee’s dedication to the relationship, they were motivated to further invest in and develop them. Seeing the equal care and value that their mentee placed on their relationship appeared to create a sense of affirmation for them to continue being generative.

Another mentee-centered element that emerged as an instrumental part of generativity’s manifestation within young adults was witnessing their mentees grow. This sub-theme was identified in 50 participant comments from the four studies. Watching their mentee grow because of their impact created a surge in their generative motivation and desire. This cycle is referred to as the ripple effect, a cycle of impact that is created when one creates a generative impact on another and then that person begins to create generative impacts on others and so on.

### *Community with opportunities to reflect*

The final component that emerged during the reanalysis process was having a generative community and opportunities for reflection. The element of community was identified in 58

participant comments of the 61 transcripts and was commonly identified as an opportunity to grow and evolve their generativity through connecting with, learning from and receiving support from their peers. The first sub-theme was the opportunity to receive affirmation from others. Affirmation provided a sense of confidence and encouragement in generativity's manifestation - a process supported and addressed in 48 of the transcripts. Patterns within the participant comments suggest that having peers point to the generative strides they were making allowed them to recognize the positive work they were doing.

In a similar respect, learning from and with others emerged as a critical factor within a generative community. This concept was identified in 55 of the 61 total reanalyzed transcripts and represented a deepening in their understanding of generativity by engaging with peers. Being part of a larger community and connecting with those around them provided a sense of support and encouraged further growth.

Motivation from peers was also identified as a component of a generative community. Thirty-nine participant comments supported the notion of young adults having the desire to be like those around them, especially when they were able to see others finding success. Michelle provided strong support for this idea in the fourth study:

I think it's because being surrounded by people who are also practicing such high levels of generativity that it, again, makes you want to get there too. You're seeing how they're making you feel, seeing how they're practicing. I think that's why it influences those levels [of generativity].

Witnessing peers' generative success and growth appeared to serve as encouragement for young adults to act on and develop their own generativity. Participant comments suggest that young adults look to others as guides to explore how they can develop their generativity. Seeing others find success in their generativity created a sense of external encouragement to continually improve their own.

The final element established in this theme of generative community was the opportunity to reflect. Of the four studies, 42 participant comments spoke to the power of reflection and expression of their generativity through their generative community. This sense of reflection came through individual and external reflection by sharing experiences with others. Intentional time spent reflecting allowed young adults to create a sense of meaning behind their relationships and look for ways to continue growing.

### *Fluidity of the model*

The model developed from this study is represented as a fluid process, meaning the model is continually influenced by and built off itself (see [Figure 2](#)). The desire to be generative, along with generative awareness, feeds into the individual searching for opportunities to be generative. Doing so also contributes to recognizing growth in the individual's abilities. From these avenues, generative relationships and generative communities with reflection are formed. However, this process does not stop once these connections are achieved. Through generative relationships, communities and opportunities to reflect, young adults appeared to find further motivation to be generative and had a resurgence of generative awareness. The cycle continued into seeking further opportunities to be generative and recognizing growth, which led to additional generative relationships and depth within communities with reflection. The components of the model remain the core six themes of generativity's manifestation within young adults. However, each time the cycle begins, the component is in an enhanced state compared to where it was prior. In other words, the sense of motivation that young adults capture when the cycle filters back to the beginning of the model is at a heightened level of motivation compared to when they initially experienced generativity's manifestation.

*Theoretical coding*

The original conceptual model of generativity (see [Figure 1](#), [McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992](#)) connects to the model generated from the present study (see [Figure 2](#)). This study's goal was not to overturn the original model but to further explore generativity to develop a similar model that reflects generativity's manifestation in young adults more accurately.

The first overlap between the models is the notion of generative motivation and desire. Participant comments suggested that young adults recognize generativity as a natural essence of who they are and what they enjoy doing. Though this desire sometimes took more time to become apparent, participant comments across all four studies supported the idea of attaining a sense of desire to be generative, which fueled their motivation to have those interactions. This aligns with the [McAdams and de St. Aubin \(1992\)](#) model's notion of "inner desire" as a primary motivational source for generativity, as this also stems from the desire to have a long-term impact and create a sense of influence over the next generation to help guide and better them.

Generative awareness is a category unique to the conceptualized model of generativity in young adults and is comprised of becoming aware of generativity as a construct and recognizing themselves as generative and how they can use generativity to relate to others. The notion of 'awareness' does have a slight connection to the 'narration' component of the original conceptual model. In this stage, [McAdams and de St. Aubin \(1992\)](#) indicate that "the generativity script is an inner narration of the adult's awareness of where efforts to be generative fit into his or her personal history, into contemporary society, and the social world he or she inhabits" (p. 1006). In this sense, awareness is more closely connected to reflecting on their abilities and finding ways to incorporate generativity moving forward. Patterns found during reanalysis in the current study suggest that awareness is a more fluid element of generativity's manifestation, recognizing it as a critical piece of motivation to continue being generative and moving forward with seeking opportunities to be generative.

The 'opportunities to be generative' theme within the young adult model most closely relates to [McAdams and de St. Aubin's \(1992\)](#) category of 'cultural demand'. Both categories connect to simply having the opportunity to be generative. The need/ability to be generative is available to the individual through various formats (e.g., societal opportunities, mentoring, organization involvements), allowing them to have those foundational experiences with being generative.

The element of 'developmental expectations' from the [McAdams and de St. Aubin \(1992\)](#) model is not present in the current model as this component relates most closely to starting a family at a certain age. Instead, the themes generated from the present study suggested that young adults actively choose to seek opportunities to be generative through other methods. Additionally, [McAdams and de St. Aubin \(1992\)](#) also share that the disconnect with developmental expectations happens "as adults move through their 30s and 40s. [and] are unable or unwilling to contribute to and assume responsibility for the next generation" (p. 1004). A theme of unwillingness to invest in the next generation did not emerge from the current study; rather, participant comments indicated that young adults simply find opportunities beyond traditional developmental expectations to be generative.

Growth is another construct of the emergent model unique to young adults as the idea of recognizing growth was specific to the present study. [McAdams and de St. Aubin's \(1992\)](#) initial model of generativity expresses more of a linear developmental process of generativity. The current study found generativity's manifestation in young adults to be a layered and cyclical process that continues over time. Because of this, 'growth' was a significant theme that emerged from the reanalyzed data. Time, being challenged, recognizing a sense of growth in themselves and identifying outcomes of their growth all emerged as critical dimensions of generativity's manifestation in young adults.

The 'generative relationships' theme from the current study has the closest connections to the original model's components related to 'concern', 'commitment' and 'action'. Through established relationships and community support, participant comments suggested that there is a process of deepening generativity over time. This process somewhat resembles generative concern, commitment and action. The process of developing generative concern into commitment, as showcased in the original model, also emerged from themed comments in the present study. The main difference was that, for young adults, this concern and commitment for the next generation appeared to manifest once they were in their generative relationships. Comments also suggested that young adults do not necessarily share a sense of unconditional commitment to the next generation. We attribute this gap to the difference between having a mentee with whom you are establishing a relationship - like young adults' experience - and having a child. There would naturally be a more ingrained commitment to one's child than a younger mentee with whom the relationship must be intentionally built. The mentoring process incorporates a sense of obligation to and care for the mentee; it just needs time to strengthen into a deeper level of commitment.

'Belief in the species', however, was not entirely expressed in the present study as it is expressed in [McAdams and de St. Aubin's \(1992\)](#) original conceptual model. [McAdams and de St. Aubin \(1992\)](#) identify this as "to place hope in the advancement and betterment of human life in succeeding generations" (p. 1006). Themed comments in the present study appeared to indicate that young adults have a belief in the success of the younger person they are working with but did not share many expressions of belief in the entirety of the next generation. Though sometimes alluded to, this idea is typically connected to the desire to see their mentee create change and impact their community for the better.

The final components of the newly conceptualized model, 'generative community' and 'opportunities to reflect', are also unique elements of young adults' generativity manifestation and development. The most prominent connection between this component and the original model is through reflection. The original model addresses narration and sharing life stories as the meaning-making element of one's generativity. Though we might argue that at this point in their lives, young adults may not yet identify with having a life story to the same degree as someone in middle adulthood, and patterned comments from the current study indicated these narrations on a smaller scale through regular reflecting opportunities. The 'generative community' and 'opportunities to reflect' themes suggested that young adults could make meaning of their experiences and recognize their generativity when able to regularly reflect orally with peers or through reflective processes such as journaling.

### Implications, future research recommendations and conclusion

This study lent itself to a deeper exploration of how generativity is manifested, specifically through the frame of young adulthood. The findings from this study also promote further research within this age group and showcase an overlap between generativity in young adults and the field of leadership education. One of the most considerable contributions this study makes is affirming the presence of and providing a conceptual model for generativity's presence in young adulthood, a notion and need documented in previous studies ([Beaumont & Pratt, 2011](#); [Hastings et al., 2015](#); [Hastings & Sunderman, 2019](#); [Lawford et al., 2005, 2020](#); [Lawford & Ramey, 2015](#)). The study also connects to [Leffel's \(2008\)](#) belief in the fluidity of generativity across various life stages and [Peterson and Stewart's \(1993\)](#) argument of generativity beyond traditional midlife stages.

More specifically towards leadership education, the findings from the current study support the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model ([Komives et al., 2005, 2006](#)), which addresses generativity in young adulthood. The LID model expresses many similar constructs to those developed in the current study's model including awareness, confidence

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and group influences to work towards generativity, which is the fifth stage in the LID model. Similarly, the findings additionally support work done by [McCain and Matkin \(2019\)](#) around the impact of community and the act of storytelling on young adults' leadership identity. Both studies highlight the value that community and interpersonal interactions can have on one's overall development and bring further support to generativity's role within young adults' leadership identity. Lastly, the present study's findings strongly link to initial mentoring research done by positive psychology pioneers, William Hall and Don Clifton. In their initial research (ca. 1965), they identified the impact that having a "difference maker" can have on generativity in young adults. The present findings expressed this same notion through generative desire and motivation and wanting to be generative towards someone after someone was generative towards them.

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### *Implications*

The findings from the current study offer a variety of implications for the field of leadership education. From a theoretical standpoint, the present study provides an updated and clarified model of generativity specific to young adults. Scholars can have a deepened understanding of how generativity is manifested relative to this life stage. The traditional model ([McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992](#)) has been established and trusted for many years. This new conceptual model can serve as an additional piece of insight for scholars to continue exploring generativity in young adulthood.

The second theoretical implication is also a recommendation for future research. Future scholars and practitioners can utilize the model and findings from the present study to develop new psychometric measures of generativity for young adults. Current measures for generativity (e.g., the LGS, the GBC, autobiographical episodes and [Emmon's \(1986\)](#) Personal Strivings measure) are framed in a way that innately leans towards midlife adulthood experiences and formatted in an "all or nothing" manner, meaning participants receive no points for their generativity score if the specific and direct question does not apply to them. These factors can lead to potentially misrepresenting generativity levels. Previous research has assumed that young adults express lower levels of generativity compared to their counterparts in midlife adulthood because of these lower scores—however, the results of this study challenge that belief and argue that current measures may be inaccurately gauging young adults' level of generativity. For these reasons, the development of psychometric scales of generativity that better represent young adulthood experiences, as expressed by the formulated model, is encouraged and serves as a theoretical implication. This specification could also support leadership educators' ability to connect with and lean into the unique factors that could enhance generativity within their students.

Practical implications for this study include a better understanding of generativity's manifestation in young adults. Having a heightened knowledge of how generativity is developed in young adults can provide practitioners with further insight into how they can foster generativity in this age group. This study can also potentially offer leadership educators a more applicable framework to harness generativity in young adults, rather than accepting the belief that young adults need to wait until middle adulthood to grow their generativity. Deepening leadership educators' understanding of generativity's uniqueness to this age group, not only allows young adults to experience the benefits of generativity at an earlier rate, but also can lead to enhancing other constructs generativity is associated with, such as leadership identity ([Komives et al., 2005, 2006; Komives, 2011](#)).

Practitioners reviewing this study can examine the population and setting in which the present study took place and ascertain if the new model could be applied to their population of interest. Potential settings in which this new model of generativity could be applied include

mentoring programs, campus organizations and other settings in college environments to establish earlier opportunities for young adults to manifest their generativity. As reported in this study, awareness and opportunities appear to be significant factors in developing generativity in young adulthood. Recognizing generativity in leadership education practices could allow practitioners to incorporate these elements into their teaching and encourage active engagement. Doing so can additionally provide potential opportunities for young adults to channel their generativity, as represented in the model.

### *Future research recommendations*

Additional points of research also stem from the present study and its findings. The first recommendation for future research is to test the developed model on current young adults and ensure its applicability to present generative experiences. Due to the nature of secondary data, there were no connections to the original participants and, thus, no opportunity to confirm the developed model directly with young adults. Using secondary data from college student leaders who mentor is recognized as a limitation of the study. The developed theory aims to represent an entire population of young adults, but because of the population used, there is potential that college-specific experiences influenced the constructs generated in the theory. While initial studies found college student leaders who mentor to have the highest level of generativity among their peers and the flexibility and semi-structured format of the interview protocols allowed for underlying connections between the four studies, it is possible the developed theory is relevant only to this specific population. Comparing the model to current young adults' experiences and confirming its applicability across different populations of young adults would strengthen the developed model. Doing so would provide further insight and affirm the process of generativity's manifestation as represented in the present model and expand on the generalizability of the theory and newly adapted model, which is an additional recommendation for future research.

The final recommendation for future scholars is to explore this field of research and its potential connection to a critical theory paradigm. This worldview was not initially considered a lens for this study, but reflecting on the methodological process, namely exploring and challenging traditional constraints of generativity, did pose potential links between the construct and framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study aimed to push the traditional boundaries of generativity, ultimately generating a model for young adults that allow them to fully embrace and experience the outcomes of being generative. By recognizing this connection, future studies can further assess young adults' manifestation of generativity within the realm of critical theory.

### *Conclusion*

The guiding force behind this research was to explore the manifestation of generativity in young adults. This representative visual model of generativity in young adults (see Figure 2) demonstrates the relationships between the themes that emerged from the secondary data and their connection to the overall generated theory. Inner desire and motivation, experiencing a sense of awareness of generativity, having opportunities to be generative, recognizing growth, developing generative relationships, having a generative community and reflecting within that community were all identified as pertinent dimensions of generativity's manifestation in young adults.

Generativity is an invaluable component of human ability that has the potential to address many societal needs, especially when considering the long-term impacts generativity can have at both the individual and societal levels. Fostering generativity in young adults' lives



has the power to create a powerful ripple effect for countless positive outcomes, such as higher senses of well-being and life satisfaction (Adams-Price *et al.*, 2018; Ackerman *et al.*, 2000; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). However, this study highlighted the prominent role of awareness and opportunities in developing generativity in young adults. If not allowed to be mindful of and actively develop generativity, we cannot expect these results to naturally occur at the same level for young adults.

Utilizing the conceptualized model of generativity in young adults from the current study not only provides the field of leadership education with a description of how generativity manifests in young adults, but also provides a framework as to how generativity might be measured uniquely to this population. This conceptual model offers a theory for young adults to fully experience and engage in the positive outcomes available to them through generativity and offers a pathway, societally, for the intentional development of generativity (and subsequently, social responsibility) in young adults.

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**Corresponding author**

Addison Sellon can be contacted at: [aesellon@gmail.com](mailto:aesellon@gmail.com)

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