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Subjectivity and generativity in midlife

Abstract: An important aspect of human development in midlife is, according to E. Erikson's theory, the successful resolution of the crisis between generativity and stagnation. Generativity is understood as focusing one's energy on productivity and creativity – the creation of new works and ideas dedicated to future generations. It is assumed that generativity results from personal needs and constitutes a response to the social expectations directed at individuals. Concern for the next generation does not go hand-in-hand with concern for the personal development of a person in midlife and this imbalance may lead to a psychological discomfort and a sense of martyrdom. Accordingly, it can therefore be concluded that a person focusing on the well-being of the social environment and neglecting her/himself is incapable of feeling that they are a subject that manages their fate and makes decisions enabling them to achieve personal psychological well-being. It could, therefore, be expected that the fulfilment of generative goals may lead to a reduction in the psychological well-being of a representative of middle adulthood. Empirical data has not confirmed this expectation.

Key words: well-being, subjectivity, generativity

Introduction

Middle adulthood does not belong to frequently investigated stages. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, age limits are difficult to specify due to the lack of significant events allowing the start and the end of this stage to be unequivocally identified. Secondly, it sometimes is perceived as a time of peace and stabilisation, thus, of little interest to the investigator. Furthermore, any models used to describe development in midlife are referred to as being poor, which is accepted to be the main root cause of the lack of research. Despite the few concepts dealing with middle adulthood, it should nevertheless be recognised that an undisputable source of theoretical and research inspirations remains the theory of psychosocial development articulated by E.H. Erikson, where the crisis between generativity and stagnation still constitutes an open field for theoretical and empirical analyses. Attempts have been made in this article to discuss the dependencies between the generativity, subjectivity and well-being of persons in middle adulthood, and the author's own research findings have been presented, which, as it would seem, explain the issue in question.

Generativity in middle adulthood

An individual faces new tasks, challenges and crises which are set by social expectations as well as inner desires and needs (Erikson, 1997, 2002; McAdams, 2001). Researchers of this stage in development indicate the occurrence of a significant breakthrough consisting of parting with the status of recipient oriented to self-development and transformation into a donor, offering the next generation the achievements accumulated by them, which include material resources, knowledge, values, experience and manifestations of concern to ensure the well-being of their heirs (McAdams, 2001). Therefore, the middle age stage is attributed the fulfilment of goals comprising generativity (Erikson, 1997, 2002; Kotre, Kotre, 1998; McAdams, 2001), which include focusing on future generations and committing to promote them through teaching, the fulfilment of a mentoring role, producing products that improve the well-being of young people and stimulate their development, as well as providing support to institutions (family, school, workplace, and church), facilitating the cultivation of traditions or the intergenerational transmission of values (McAdams, 2001).

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It is believed that a particularly strong awareness of the need to be needed and the longing for immortality drives this fundamental change from taker to giver in a person's concept of life in middle adulthood (Erikson, 2001; McAdams, 2001). The striving to extend one's presence is connected with the appearance of a new way of measuring chronometric time in middle adulthood, which does not consist of a counting how much time has passed from birth but how much time is left until the end (Neugarten, 1979). A sense of the approaching end of life reinforces the need to make certain aspects of one's Self lasting and present in the next generation, thus, symbolically extending one's being. Whatever the origin of the generative motivation, the essence of an individual's action in midlife is concern for the best possible condition of the next generations (Erikson, 2002). It is for this reason, as indicated by J. and K.B. Kotre (1998), that the content passed on by persons in middle adulthood is filtered by them in order to block harmful components and sustain the positive ones that facilitate the proliferation of good in the next generations.

Thus, generativity obliges a middle-aged adult to enlarge the capital of others above all else, although, according to Erikson (2002), it also constitutes a certain type of personal good. This is because it allows the psychosocial crisis to be resolved, thus contributing to social adaptation, mental health and well-being (McAdams, 2001). If, however, an individual is preoccupied with themselves and with their own Self instead of concentrating on the young generation, they do not manifest maturity and are incapable of successfully coping with the crisis that is specific to middle age (Erikson, 2002). Is this indeed the case? Is the giving of oneself to others that is characteristic of middle adulthood a source of successful social adaptation and gives a sense of well-being?

In considering the effects of a generative attitude and the behaviours of persons in middle adulthood, one cannot but notice that this is the only stage in Erikson's concept where focus on personal development and taking care of oneself is omitted. The continuators of Erikson's thoughts do not consider this to be a comfortable situation. This is also pointed out by Kotre and Kotre (1998) and C.L. Bradley, A. Kovaz and J.E. Marcia (1990 quoted after: Marcia, 1998). When identifying four types of generativity – biological, parental, technical and cultural, Kotre and Kotre (1998) supplement Erikson's generativity vision in the manifestations of technical generativity consisting of teaching the young generation new skills and abilities by extending it with activity geared towards middle-aged persons acquiring new fitness and competences. However, the introduction by the Kotres of a new aspect of activity is not intended to directly serve the midlife, for instance, by obtaining satisfaction from the growth of one's own potential or through the recognition of personal growth opportunities. The aim of these endeavours is to be increasingly better prepared to effectively support the representatives of the young generation in mastering the techniques necessary to act effectively.

Bradley, Kovaz and Marcia (1990, quoted after: Marcia, 1998), on the other hand, agreeing with Erikson's

view that the main task of a middle-aged individual is concern for the life course of the future generation, assert that looking after others should be balanced by looking after oneself so as to prevent exhaustion and martyrdom experiences. This aspect, which was taken into account in the deliberations of Bradley and colleagues (1990, quoted after: Marcia, 1998), seems to relate to Gilligan's concept of moral development (2014; Skoe, 1998) based on dilemmas of concern, in which the highest level of moral reasoning is integrated with caring for oneself and for others. A lower level of reasoning assuming, based on convention and social expectations, that care is extended to others and the meeting one's own needs is foregone, may lead to a sense of sacrifice and the risk of care-based burnout (Skoe, 1998). This may signify that a person concentrating on the well-being of the social environment and ceasing to look after themselves is incapable of feeling that they are a subject that manages her/his fate and makes decisions enabling them to achieve psychological well-being.

Subjectivity

The issue of the subject and subjectivity is present in many philosophical and psychological sources. It led to numerous theoretical approaches within psychology of personality, cognitive psychology and psychopathology (Jarymowicz, 2008; Majczyna, 2000; Uchnast, 1990), a full discussion of which would significantly exceed the scope of this article. We will, therefore, focus only on those issues that are linked to the question concerning the subjectivity of generative individuals. It would first be worthwhile making a differentiation between the subject and subjectivity. According to M. Jarymowicz (2008), when speaking of the subject, we are thinking of a functioning person, whereas subjectivity means a set of her/his characteristics that are responsible for the person being capable of influencing their way of functioning. By taking a closer look at the concept of the subject, it is worth noting their subjective aspect which includes an individual's conviction of being a subject, an actor, the creator of events and states that are compliant with her/his value system (Majczyna, 2000). Therefore, it is apparent that the subject perceives her/himself as a person thanks to the possessed disposition to self-reflect and acknowledge her/himself as being capable of taking up activity and making changes in the world (Kofta, 2006).

An analysis of psychological literature concerning the problem of subjectivity allows two basic approaches to be identified (Sotwin, 2006). One of them combines subjectivity with an individual environmental mastery and an impact on the course of events by restricting external pressure, the other approach refers to self-control, self-determination and is connected with limiting the pressure coming from inside the human body and psyche (ibid.). Discussions about own subjectivity (Jarymowicz, 2008; Sotwin, 2006) highlight the simultaneity of an individual becoming independent from both external and internal limitations. Among the external factors that could impede the formation of subjectivity

are the indiscriminate subordination to pressure and expectations of a group giving rewards for adjusting to the standards that it sets, as well as the unreflective assumption of views or patterns of action. Inner limitations include, for instance: succumbing to temptations and drives, egoism and egocentrism, and distortions in the perception of the Self and of the world (*ibid.*). By distancing oneself to external and inner limitations, an individual assures themselves the possibility to relate to the external environment and to oneself (Sotwin, 2006).

The problem of the causation and self-control capacity can be found in one of the three groups of manifestations of subjectivity that have been identified based on the areas of psychological functioning (Jarymowicz, 2008). The first group of manifestations of subjectivity concerns the area of orientation and preparation which is revealed in self-awareness and self-knowledge, in the way of defining one's identity and understanding one's relationship with the environment, in the self-criticism ability and in construing expected visions of oneself. Another group of manifestations is associated with the emotional and motivational sphere and is also expressed in the ability to assess good and evil, oneself and the world based on personal criteria, making choices and taking decisions in line with one's own rules, setting goals, creating action programmes and foreseeing their outcomes. In the third group – within the executive sphere, such manifestations of objectivity as the aforementioned ability to exercise self-control and causation, to steer oneself through undertaken actions and one's own development (*ibid.*) are mentioned. The signs of subjectivity mentioned in the third group would suggest that concern for one's own development cannot be bypassed by an individual.

However, the next question arises as to what benefits and advantages there are for a person acquiring a sense of subjectivity. These are manifold benefits, amongst which are a better understanding of the world and of oneself, self-acceptance, a sense of happiness and satisfaction, and openness to others (Jarymowicz, 2008). These aspects are present in the concept of well-being developed by C.L.M. Keyes and M.B. Waterman (2003), which allow one to expect that the attainment of subjectivity is connected with the experience of well-being by an individual.

Subjective well-being

Keyes' and Waterman's (2003) concept of subjective well-being is based on the achievements of C.D. Ryff (1989, 1995), C.L.M. Keyes, and A.D. Shapiro (2004) and a plethora of research on affect, happiness and life satisfaction (Argyle, 2004; Carr, 2004). A three-dimensional concept of well-being was developed in this way, which also takes Ryff's Six-factor Model of Psychological Well-being into account, Keyes' Five-factor Model of Social Well-being, and the Five-aspect Model of Emotional Well-being (Keyes, Waterman, 2003). The following are important in order to attain psychological well-being: self-acceptance, a sense of personal development, having an important life goal, the conviction of exercising

environmental mastery, a sense of autonomy and positive relationships with the environment. Social well-being, on the other hand, is affected by an acceptance of the society in which an individual has come to live; by a sense that society is developing in line with best practices; by the conviction that whatever is happening in society is consistent, ordered and foreseeable; by faith in making a significant contribution to the development of society; and by a sense of community and integration with society. The third dimension of well-being – emotional well-being, constitutes a compilation of various approaches and contains an assessment of the positive and negative affect, the general assessment of satisfaction with life and various other areas as well as an assessment of one's sense of happiness (Wojciechowska, 2008).

Thus, subjective well-being in the logic of the three-dimensional concept means a multilateral and integrated state of an individual resulting from experiences relating to the actualisation of one's own potential and is defined by living in accordance with one's Self. It also means the well-being resulting from belonging to a given society and experiencing mainly positive feelings, satisfaction and happiness with life.

Therefore, can a person geared towards fulfilling her/his generative commitments to the young generation experience well-being? Based on earlier deliberations presented herein, one could surmise that generativity, the essence of which, according to Erikson (2002), is directing one's efforts to being concerned for the young generation and ensuring their well-being, may bring on the effect in a middle-aged individual of putting off looking after oneself and one's own development. It is important, nevertheless, to point out that the activity directed towards others undertaken by middle-aged persons does not merely result from adjusting to social and cultural expectations towards an individual at this age. It also stems from their inner desire to "give themselves to others". It might seem that a generative individual feels as the subject in relation to the fulfilment of tasks over which it maintains full control and, thanks to this, is capable of achieving well-being. In the meantime, despite the fact that an individual desires to serve the young generation, their full involvement may lead to excessive exploitation of oneself and exhaustion, forcing them to give up fostering the renewal or increase of their own resources. In effect, an imbalance may arise, postulated by Bradley et al. (1990, quoted after Marcia, 1998), between concern for others and concern for shaping one's own Self and may infringe the sense of an individual's subjectivity and evoke a feeling of discomfort due to sacrificing oneself for the benefit of the next generation. Furthermore, the foreseeing through generative efforts of one's Self lasting through the next generation may hardly be satisfactory because a middle-aged individual may not live to see their effects, what is more, as emphasised by Erikson (2002), faith in the fact that a generative individual's efforts will truly be utilised is essential. Therefore, the question arises as to whether persons in middle adulthood who are fulfilling generative goals actually feel subjective and, in effect, experience psychological, social and emotional well-being.

Examples of own research findings

In order to find the answer to the question posed above, studies were undertaken in order to verify whether or not a relationship exists between generativity and subjective well-being (psychological, social and emotional). If the doubts raised herein are justified, a negative relationship between generativity and well-being in persons in middle adulthood could be expected. However, if Erikson's assumption pertaining to the obtaining of psychological comfort in middle age as a result of the successful resolution of a generativity versus stagnation crisis is correct, a positive correlation between the variables of generativity and subjective well-being could be expected.

100 persons were examined aged 38–62 years ($M = 49.86$; $SD = 5.75$) – 63 women aged 38–62 years ($M = 49.52$; $SD = 5.89$), and 37 men aged 40–62 years ($M = 50.43$; $SD = 5.53$). The selection criteria consisted of having at least one adult child. The Psychological Well-being Questionnaire developed by Łada and Wojciechowska (Łada, 2006), on the basis of the three-dimensional concept of well-being of Keyes and Waterman (2003) was applied. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for reliability for psychological well-being was $\alpha = 0.85$; for social well-being $\alpha = 0.82$; and for emotional well-being $\alpha = 0.90$. Two other questionnaires were used – The Questionnaire of Generative Attitudes based on the *Loyola Generativity Scale* (LGS) developed by Dan P. McAdams and Ed de St. Aubin (McAdams, Hart, Maruna, 2002) and the Generative Behavior Questionnaire based on the *Generative Behavior Checklist* (GBC), a questionnaire by the same authors. Both questionnaires were prepared by Poddany and Wojciechowska (Poddany, 2006). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for reliability equals: for the Generative Attitude Questionnaire $\alpha = 0.85$, and $\alpha = 0.87$ for the Generative Behaviour Questionnaire.

In order to ascertain whether a relationship exists between a generative attitude and generative behaviour and the three dimensions of well-being, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was measured.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present the Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) between generativity indicators and the dimensions of a sense of well-being of the respondents, along with the statistically significant dependencies. It turned out that positive correlations exist between the generative attitude and generative behaviour and the majority of well-being indicators with the exception of negative affect, which failed to correlate with generative attitude and a sense of life goal and social integration, which did not correlate with generative behaviour. This means that the adoption of a generative attitude and undertaking activities concerning the young generation may be linked, just as Erikson assumed, with a sense of a duty well done resulting from an adjustment to social expectations and the appearance of an inner desire to show concern for young people and pass on competencies and results of experience to them. This may also mean that the generativity of persons in middle adulthood, despite overshadowing concern for personal development, does not undermine their subjectivity.

Table 1. Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) between generativity indicators and the dimensions of a sense of psychological well-being of the respondents along with the test of statistical significance

Dimensions of psychological well-being	Generativity		
	Attitude	Behaviour	
Self-acceptance	r	0.489**	0.196*
	p	0.001	0.025
Life goal	r	0.326**	0.158
	p	0.001	0.058
Personal development	r	0.540**	0.410**
	p	0.001	0.001
Environmental mastery	r	0.489**	0.314**
	p	0.001	0.001
Autonomy	r	0.459**	0.332**
	p	0.001	0.001
Positive relationships	r	0.557**	0.273**
	p	0.001	0.003
Psychological well-being	r	0.636**	0.375**
	p	0.001	0.001

r – Pearson's correlation coefficient;
 p – one-sided statistical significance.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) between generativity indicators and the dimensions of a sense of social well-being of the respondents along with the test of statistical significance

Dimensions of social well-being	Generativity		
	Attitude	Behaviour	
Social acceptance	r	0.455**	0.249**
	p	0.001	0.006
Social actualisation	r	0.424**	0.202*
	p	0.001	0.022
Social contribution	r	0.571**	0.372**
	p	0.001	0.001
Social coherence	r	0.404**	0.324**
	p	0.001	0.001
Social integration	r	0.346**	0.113
	p	0.001	0.132
Social well-being	r	0.595**	0.340**
	p	0.001	0.001

r – Pearson's correlation coefficient;
 p – one-sided statistical significance.

At the same time, it should be noted that the correlation indicators are not that high, although higher indicators can be noticed in the case of the relationship between a generative attitude and psychological, social and emotional well-being compared to generative behaviour and the three types of well-being. This may also indicate that the presence of the intention to show concern for the young generation is a greater guarantee of psychological well-being and leads to a sense of satisfaction and self-acceptance, and a sense of potentially being good to others than making an effort for their benefit. Attention should also be given to the fact that the highest correlation coefficient was obtained for the relationship between the generative attitude and generative behaviour and the psychological well-being coefficient, whereas the lowest was obtained for the relationship between the generative attitude and generative behaviour and the emotional well-being coefficient. Such a result indicates that involvement in generative concern may have a greater impact on shaping a sense of personal development and fulfilment and a sense of control over one's life or life meaning-giving than the experience of pleasant (or unpleasant) but sometimes short-lived feelings. This outcome also argues in favour of the positive role of generative attitudes and actions in building crucial, because associated with personality, aspects of subjectivity.

Table 3. Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) between generativity indicators and the dimensions of a sense of emotional well-being of the respondents along with the test of statistical significance

Dimensions of emotional well-being		Generativity	
		Attitude	Behaviour
Positive affect	r	0.405**	0.230*
	p	0.001	0.011
Negative affect	r	-0.143	-0.249**
	p	0.079	0.006
Satisfaction with aspects of life	r	0.280**	0.215*
	p	0.002	0.016
overall life satisfaction	r	0.285**	0.251**
	p	0.002	0.006
Sense of happiness	r	0.424**	0.282**
	p	0.001	0.002
Emotional well-being	r	0.352**	0.271**
	p	0.001	0.003

r – Pearson's correlation coefficient;
p – one-sided statistical significance.

It can be concluded that the generativity of middle-aged individuals is positively correlated with the well-being attained by them, which would suggest that concerns that

their subjectivity is at risk are unfounded. In order to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the established relationship, reference can be made to the role of the desire attributed to persons in middle adulthood, defined as the desire to remain "immortal", the desire to symbolically prolong one's life, or the desire for one's own potential to last through the next generation (McAdams, 2001). This desire can be fulfilled through fostering concern for the young generation, which certainly sometimes comes at a cost to caring for one's own condition and development, which may lead to the current care for being of the individual – their condition and development, as well as their subjectivity – becoming less important, while the far-reaching goals becoming more significant, irrespective of the costs incurred on account of the activities oriented towards the young generation. Thus, it is possible that a sense of one's own potential lasting through the next generation is a key component of the well-being of generative middle-aged individuals. Nevertheless, further research is necessary in order to focus more on the specific manifestations of subjectivity and the substantive indications and differentiated statuses of generativity.

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