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A Study of Generative Partnership

Kirk Zinck and Joanna Neel

This phenomenological study suggests that generativity, long conceptualized as a stage of individual psychosocial development, is a collaborative experience in the developmental trajectory of some marriages and long-term partnerships. This new knowledge was developed through exploring the lived experience of 10 middle-aged and older couples who participated in this research. Termed "generative partnership," this collaborative experience includes 3 facets: embracing generative identity, contributing talents and resources, and passing it on. Findings suggest that generative partnerships enhance satisfaction and vitality in relationships at midlife and beyond as couples encounter the opportunities and challenges of growing old together.

Keywords: relationships, generativity, partnerships, midlife, sustaining relationships

In studying long-term marriage and cohabitation, Zinck, Littrell, and Cutcliffe (2009) found that between midlife and advanced age, some couples transform life together through mutual engagement in activities done in service to their families and community. Such transformation infuses new meaning and purpose into their partnership, relationships, and the mutual pursuit of interests and activities.

This research expands the conceptualization of generativity from characterizing individual development to a collaborative component in couple relationships at midlife and beyond. In a partnership, generativity embraces collaborative activities that benefit a couple's family and community, contributes to the welfare of others, and nurtures and guides the next generation. In a partnership, generativity combines the skills, talents, and abilities of each partner; invites an openness to discovery; and results in collaborative activity that enhances and nurtures the relationship and fosters the well-being of other people. This research expands generativity as a developmental element of marriage and

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long-term partnership: a mutually inspiring, guiding, and health-promoting force that enhances the life and relationships of couples at midlife and beyond. This article documents exploration of generative partnerships, offering new perspectives on generativity that are based upon our research. The first author is a marriage and family therapist and a professor who has been a counselor educator for 14 years, following 23 years of experience in counseling individuals, couples, and families. The second author is a lifelong educator who trains teachers, engages in extensive service work in her community, and joins her husband in mentoring families.

GENERATIVITY

In his theory of individual psychosocial development, Erikson (1950) defined generativity as "concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (p. 267). Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) would later define generativity as "the essence of adulthood" (p. 3) and a life stage spanning 30 years or more. Generativity has evolved into a multifaceted concept. Kotre (1984) described it as "a desire to invest in forms of life and work that will outlive the self" (p. 6). Snow (2016) described generativity as establishing and maintaining effective connections with others and as a path to flourishing (i.e., living well) in later life. Zinck et al. (2009) suggested that generative activity infuses new meaning and commitment to relationships of married/cohabiting couples as they navigate midlife and old age. Generativity has evolved to include acts of nurturing, guidance, and promotion of well-being among individuals, families, and communities, plus caring for the natural environment. Generativity may continue through midlife and into old age, as inner needs, social forces, and a desire to produce and create inspire middle-aged and older people to enhance well-being among all generations. It may incorporate teaching, mentoring, and activities that serve to maintain social institutions, protect natural resources, and other acts that facilitate human advancement and well-being. Generativity is a way of "giving back" to society and promoting community welfare (Erikson et al., 1986; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Slater 2003).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Grounded in early experiences of family/community life, based upon the development of a self-identity and the capacity to develop and maintain meaningful relationships (Erikson 1950), generativity emerges as a motivating force around midlife. A vital aspect of psychosocial development (Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Hofer et al., 2014), generativity promotes successful adaptation to "old age" (Vaillant, 2002, p. 220). Though generativity involves promoting welfare of other people, an effective balance of self-care and caring for others predicts success in navigating old age (Erikson, 1950; James & Zarrett, 2006; Snow,

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2016). Generative activity benefits the "giver" by adding meaning and vitality to life and aging.

At midlife, according to Erikson (1950), people encounter a conflict between generativity and stagnation. The key midlife task is to resolve this conflict, as one's focus evolves from establishing a career, developing a satisfying marriage or partnership, raising children (for many couples), and establishing a comfortable lifestyle, to using one's accumulated skills, talents, and abilities in ways that enhance the well-being of youth, family, community, and other social systems. Failure to develop generativity may promote self-preoccupation and stagnation (Erikson 1950). Stagnation taxes one's resources, inhibits interaction with family and community, and initiates a decline in the quality and meaning of life (Erikson, 1950; McAdams, Reutzel, & Foley, 1986).

Although generativity is commonly conceptualized in terms of individual development, some couples combine acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance their mutual development and relationship quality at midlife and beyond (Zinck et al., 2009). These couples join in teaching, mentoring, guiding, and inspiring others. They experience enhanced satisfaction and interest in sharing life together. Generative people are positive, optimistic, and aware that skills and knowledge acquired over time and in varied contexts have value to others. While commonly expressed within family and community, generativity has global potential; combined efforts of generative people everywhere may contribute to the overarching well-being of humankind (Alisat, Norris, Pratt, Matsuba, & McAdams 2014; Zinck & Marmion, 2011).

Scholars describe extending care and concern to others, as well as engaging in meaningful relationships, as the essence of creative and productive living and satisfaction in later life (Hofer et al., 2014; Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Snow, 2016). Kotre (1984) defined generativity as "a desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self" (p. 10). Erikson (1984) and Erikson et al. (1986) viewed it as the essence of adulthood, one spanning 30 years and more. Snow (2016) described generativity as essential to connecting with others and "flourishing" (p. 263) in life. Gottman (1999) emphasized the importance of mutual engagement as an ongoing element of marriage. The failure to share activities, interests, and relationships with each other precipitates the gradual deterioration of relations, a process Gottman labeled the *distance and isolation cascade*. The process resembles Erikson's (1950) concept of stagnation.

Generative people are psychologically healthy and capable of balancing care for others with self-care (Snow, 2016). Generativity enhances social connections and relational vitality, yet existing literature rarely addresses generativity as a component of marriage or long-term partnerships (both referred to as "marriage" in the balance of this article). Generativity is typically portrayed as an individual attribute (Erikson, 1950; Frensch, Pratt, & Norris, 2007; Kotre, 2005; McAdams, 2000, 2006; McAdams et al., 1997). One exception is a small subset of literature addressing generativity as a relational aspect of family

(Dollahite, Slife, & Hawkins, 1998) and society (de St. Aubin & Bach, 2015; McAdams & Logan, 2004). Occasionally, generativity is described as indicating health in a committed relationship because it correlates with an individual's capacity to maintain intimacy (Cohler, Hostetetler, & Boxer, 1998; Erikson, 1950). Mutual development of generativity may offer stability, commitment, and hope for maintaining the vitality of relationships in midlife and beyond.

In the United States, the divorce rate among people 50 years and older doubled between 1990 and 2010 and tripled in people over 65 (Brown & Lin, 2014, Stepler, 2017). Robinson (2009) predicted that divorce rates will remain 40% to 50% for the foreseeable future, because the current midlife cohort (born 1946 to 1964) experienced unprecedented divorce rates in their early years, instability, and dissatisfaction in remarriage. This leads them to seek independence and pursue their own interests in their remaining years (Brown & Lin, 2012; Stepler, 2017). In response to the problem of divorce at middle age, perhaps an increased understanding of generativity as a mutual endeavor will allow counselors, pastors, and professors to positively influence the fulfillment and quality of couple relationships in midlife and beyond. Successful aging includes minimizing the risk of disease and disability, maintaining physical and mental function, and remaining socially engaged (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Social engagement is the focus of mutual generativity. We believe this study is the first to address generativity as a mutual endeavor in the developmental life cycle of marriage. We refer to this process as *generative partnership*.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study addressed the question, "What is the lived experience of generativity among married/cohabiting couples at midlife and beyond?" The purpose was to develop an initial understanding of how couples develop a generative partnership, to develop this knowledge for helping couples enhance their quality of life together in midlife and old age, and to establish a foundation for further research.

METHOD

Interpretive phenomenology was employed to seek an emic perspective of human experience, through direct contact with a small number of participants (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; van Manen, 1990). Interviews and correspondence were employed to gather data of the lived experience of generative partnership from the perspective of couples living the process. Data included interview transcripts, correspondence, and researchers' field notes. Interpretive phenomenology includes investigating, interpreting, and explaining a life experience; exploring groups of people in specific contexts; integrating varied perspectives into an understanding of human experience; expanding the ability to identify possibilities in life situations that range from benevolent

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to challenging; and contributing to a collective knowledge of humanity (van Manen, 1990). Studying experiences of small groups of people has transfer value; an understanding of experiences in one context may allow researchers to locate commonalities, embrace creativity, and develop new perspectives about a similar human experience in other contexts.

Sample Selection and Recruitment

Following approval by the institutional review board at our university, we recruited and interviewed 10 couples who were jointly engaged in generative activity. Participants were provided with written and verbal explanations about confidentiality and the risks, benefits, and expectations of participation. Participants' understanding of these issues was affirmed before an interview. Through purposive sampling, participants were recruited who (a) represented diverse perspectives, (b) were likely "typical" of people in the context of interest, and (c) had specific knowledge related to the issue under study (Creswell, 2007). Participants agreed to be interviewed as a couple and confirmed that they were in a committed relationship of 7 or more years and that each partner was over 40 years of age. Table 1 describes the participants.

Prior to each interview, we met briefly with interested couples to review and explain the study, provide a fundamental definition of generativity, respond to questions, and complete consent forms and other paperwork. Participants expressed intrigue and enthusiasm about the uniqueness of the study and about the opportunity to describe their own lived experience of generative partnership.

Data Collection

Initial data were developed in interviews of 60 to 75 minutes with each couple. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in a combined process of individual and collaborative analysis among research team members. Member checks (Creswell, 2007) were conducted through follow-up meetings of 15 to 20 minutes, allowing us to verify our understanding of participants' experiences and amend or supplement this understanding as appropriate. Interviews occurred in mutually agreed-upon settings, allowing private, relaxed, and open conversation. Interviews were conducted by a team, with one researcher taking primary responsibility for the interview. The initial two interviews were conducted by the principal researcher (first author), with other researchers observing to model, teach interview methods, and standardize the interview process as much as possible. The lead role of subsequent interviews was rotated among team members. Interview 9 was conducted by a single researcher due to scheduling conflicts. We made supplemental notes to document the process, highlight significant content, record observations of nonverbal interaction, and note details that might enhance understanding of a couple's experience (Creswell, 2007; Ivey

TABLE 1

Description of Participant Couples

Couple and Pseudonyms	Age (in Years)	Relationship Length (in Years)	Occupation	Education Level
Couple 1		26		
Carl	50		Law enforcement	Bachelor's degree
Janet	46		Education professor	Doctoral degree
Couple 2		45		
Mary	66		Artist	Bachelor's degree
Zack	65		Artist	Bachelor's degree
Couple 3		39		
Joe	73		Psychologist (retired)	Doctoral degree
Pam	66		Education professor	Doctoral degree
Couple 4		51		
Beth	69		Counselor (retired)	Master's degree
Todd	70		Professor (retired)	Doctoral degree
Couple 5		8		
Claire	50		Corrections associate	Associate's degree
Max	53		Associate psychologist	Master's degree
Couple 6		27		
John	48		Plant nursery manager	Trade certification
Tracey	49		Counselor	Master's degree
Couple 7		16		
Ann	41		Computer technician	Bachelor's degree
Shannon	50		Technical support	Master's degree
Couple 8		32		
Luke	52		IT manager	1 year of college
Victoria	50		Public school teacher	Master's degree
Couple 9		42		
Dani	60		Teacher (retired)	Bachelor's degree
Grant	62		Engineer (retired)	Bachelor's degree
Couple 10		31		
Carol	60		Education lecturer	Master's degree
Rex	65		Education professor	Doctoral degree

Note. IT = information technology.

& Ivey, 2006). Notes were discussed by the research team after each interview, and again during data analysis.

Data Analysis

During data analysis, we listened to transcripts, conducted line-by-line analysis, and engaged in querying the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as the interview unfolded. Querying the data is a self-interrogation that integrates critical reflection into analysis, highlights sensitivity to emergent meanings, and helps researchers avoid forced interpretation. By periodically asking, "What is going on here?" and "Does what I think I see fit the reality of the data?" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 44), we enhanced sensitivity to what the data revealed. The process enriches understanding of participant experience and increases the awareness of any preconceptions, assumptions, or biases held by a researcher team member that may influence the analysis. Integrating the methodology of Creswell (2007), van Manen (1990), and Cohen et al. (2000), we employed six stages of analysis:

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- *Critical reflection*: Analysis used the recording and transcript of each interview. Prior to transcript analysis, we each engaged in critical reflection (van Manen, 1990), combining contemplation and journaling to facilitate self-examination.
- *Immersion and identifying units of meaning*: Immersion included listening to audio recordings and reading a transcript multiple times. We reread the text, asking, "What statements/phrases reveal the essence of developing, living, and maintaining a generative partnership?" Significant statements and phrases (van Manen, 1990) were highlighted, and emergent themes were noted in margins. We then made a nonrepetitive list of highlighted statements, phrases, and themes (Cohen et al., 2000).
- *Comparison and synthesis*: We met to compare and discuss outcomes of our individual analyses. Comparison and synthesis involve collaborative interrogation, negotiation, and integration through team dialogue about significant statements and themes. The process includes defining terms, clarifying ideas, querying the data, and negotiating agreement on the significance of phrases that convey the essence of generative partnership.
- *Thematic verification*: To validate the analysis, we provided the interview transcript, list of statements, and themes to each participant couple. Couples reviewed documents and offered comments, information, and alternative interpretations, thereby verifying and validating the data analysis.
- *Integration*: Themes and units of meaning were transferred to index cards and categorized representing the combined experience of generative partnership, described by all participants, in a process resembling axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
- *Description*: A composite description of the lived experience of generative partnership was written, incorporating contexts in which the phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2007).

Trustworthiness and Criteria of Rigor

Trustworthiness in qualitative research was defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the integration of four criteria of rigor into the research process. The criteria are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility is developed through sharing the professional background of the researcher with informants (participants) and providing them with pertinent study information through one-to-one contact during recruitment and again just prior to the research interview. In these preinterview contacts, the expectations of informants are clarified, informant questions are answered, and a working alliance is initiated between the researcher and informants. Credibility of this research was enhanced through member checks (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) in which each couple was provided with a written interpretation of their interview and asked to clarify, correct, or supplement researcher interpretations as appropriate. Researchers also engage in reflexive activities (e.g., making memos, contemplation,

reflection) to overcome the influence of their experience, preconception, and bias on data analysis. Peer debriefings refer to researcher consultations with colleagues or other professionals who understand and use qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Thus, researchers avoid inserting speculation, presupposition, or bias into data collection and analysis and remain open to emergent information.

Dependability refers to maintaining stability of the data over time, context, and conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and, thus, maintaining consistency in data collection and analysis.

Confirmability is the identification of congruence in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability develops when shared experiences or meanings are identified in the data of two or more informants. The integration of member checks into this process contributes to confirmability. Additionally, after a researcher who has analyzed the transcript writes the composite summary, it is important to ask each participant to verify the summary. Maintaining an audit trail throughout the study furthers confirmability (Creswell, 2007). The audit trail in this research included sound files, written transcripts of all interviews, reflective and process notes, and memos made by the researchers during the study.

Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is the degree to which study results are pertinent to similar groups of people in other contexts. Transferability is enhanced through developing a detailed description of process and procedures. Including heterosexual and same-sex couples, couples from varied cultural backgrounds, couples with different levels of education and income, and married and cohabiting couples enhanced the transferability of findings in this study.

FINDINGS: THREE FACETS OF GENERATIVE PARTNERSHIP

Generative partnerships develop in midlife, which incorporates ages 40 to 65 (Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1977). In this research, we learned that at least one partner in a generative couple had observed and participated in generative acts through their life span, often in the context of their family of origin. Generative acts included offering time, skills, talents, and resources in ways that enhanced the well-being, capability, and life experience of other people.

Data analysis yielded seven themes (see Table 2) grouped into three facets of experience related to developing a generative partnership. The facets were

TABLE 2

Three Facets of Generative Partnerships

Embracing a Generative Identity	Contributing Talents and Resources	Passing It On
Creating a generative vision	Paying it forward	Building generative communities
Identifying as generative partners	Giving beyond financial prosperity	Exerting intergenerational influence
Stepping out of the bubble		

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(a) embracing a generative identity, (b) contributing talents and resources, and (c) passing it on. Each facet incorporated two or three themes that described a unique aspect of generative partnership.

Our research suggests that progressing toward generative partnership is a unique experience for each couple; aspects of generativity are uniquely developed and experienced together throughout the history of the partnership. Therefore, we have chosen to depict generative partnership as a three-faceted experience rather than an ordered progression of events.

Facet 1: Embracing a Generative Identity

According to Erikson (1950), each adult has a fundamental motivation to influence society and future generations through guiding, nurturing, and creative activity. Generative acts use one's skills, knowledge, and accomplishments, affirming one's status as a contributor to social well-being, and infer that one's presence makes a difference and will be remembered. Many couples embrace generativity as a team, contributing to the vitality of long-term partnership and avoiding the gradual psychological separation found in some later life marriages (Gottman, 1999). In extensive research on marriage, Gottman (1999) learned that over time, if the personal and professional interests of each partner become disconnected, they gradually end up pursuing separate lives. Aging together may require reconnecting, if the relationship is to remain a source of support, inspiration, and mutual satisfaction. In facing challenges presented by aging, couples must join in developing new opportunities for growth and fulfillment (Gottman, 1999).

Creating a generative vision. Generativity includes learning to see the world and people in different ways (Erikson, 1950). Erikson's (1950) theory emphasized individual development, whereas this study focused on marriage and partnerships. In partnership, generativity can be a shared and collaborative expression of philosophy and action. In a process of re-visioning, a couple joins to generate possibilities and translate outcomes into mutual action. For some participants, re-visioning was deliberate and structured. For others, it was spontaneous.

Re-visioning starts with partners experiencing an inner dialogue that is eventually expanded into talking with each other. Carl and Janet (Couple 1; pseudonyms are used for all participants) join in annual retreats in which they redefine their shared vision and purpose. Their "redefinition retreats" provide opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate their mutual accomplishments, to strategize, and to plan next steps in their generative expression. Re-visioning is tied to recognition that middle age is a threshold that provides opportunities to translate vision into action, while recognizing time limitations imposed by aging. Pam (Couple 3) stated, "We've always been focused on making a difference. As we moved into middle age, each of us realized we wanted to make a bigger difference." This was typical; couples described a drive to influence how people relate to each other and how communities respond to varied needs within the

population. Couples jointly assessed their accomplishments and opportunities to expand their influence as their commitments to work and family changed with age and time. Making a difference included influencing how people relate to each other, affecting how society approaches people in need of support and services, and acting to modify the social and environmental climate in a community. These couples viewed family- and community-centered activities as having potential for global influence.

Generative couples look beyond conventional expectations of retirement. They "dream big and work together" (Couple 1). Middle age may evolve into resurrecting dreams or acting on desires to exert a positive influence in the community. Such ambitions may have been placed "on hold" in years devoted to pursuing careers and raising children. Middle age offers time to re-vision the future together; recognize that life is finite; and anticipate the changes, challenges, and opportunities that come with aging. Couple 3 stated, "We're past the point in life where you wait. If we want to be involved, to do something and make a difference, we step up now or it's too late to wait—it'll pass you by."

Identifying as generative partners. Eighteen individuals in this study described a long-standing motivation to give of themselves (time, talent, ability, knowledge) to better the lives of others. Such motivation originated in observations made of parents and other significant adults during their childhood. As with Erikson's (1950) description of individual generativity, midlife transition profoundly influences a couple's desire to develop generative qualities. Joe (Couple 3) stated, "As we moved into middle age, each of us in our own way wanted to make a bigger difference, bigger than what we did individually. We supported each other to give more. We don't want to just live, we want to leave a mark—to make a difference."

Developing a generative partnership includes ongoing dialogue about generative inclinations, accepting partner influence in pursuing generative opportunities, and inviting each other into generative activities. Often, one spouse assumes the lead in developing generative qualities of the partnership. For example, five couples (3, 4, 6, 8, 10) described one partner as predominant in making mutual generativity a fundamental aspect of the relationship. Initiating partners have a mental road map of what generativity looks like, plus a history of interacting with disadvantaged people. Couples 1, 2, 6, 7, and 9 reported that generative partnership originated early in their relationship; full expression grew out of ongoing development. We learned that generativity evolves over a lifetime—middle age is not the first encounter with generativity; it is a threshold that may precipitate active development and an encompassing expression of this phenomenon. Couple 4 described how one partner's action initiated their generative partnership. Beth invited Todd to join her in helping people who are homeless. She stated, "I suggested assisting disadvantaged and homeless people." Beth described these activities as outside of Todd's "comfort zone." Todd stated, "They have become within my comfort zone. . . . She is correct [they were] outside of my comfort zone. I now enjoy it. It has been a real change."

Couple 1 described blending their goals and individual interests into a generative lifestyle: "You try to be a leader and example to each other and your children." They were determined "not to be pigeonholed into expectations, but to dream big and work together . . . yet have flexibility to do what we each wanted [individually]."

Stepping out of the bubble. Dani (Couple 9) described transitioning to generative partnership as "stepping out of the bubble." The process combines assessing one's lifestyle, investigating possibilities for making a difference in one's community, embracing opportunities for change, redefining individual and joint perspectives, and initiating change. Stepping out of the bubble is influenced by encounters with others, immersion in new contexts, acquisition of knowledge, and experimentation with different ways of thinking and being. The process moves a couple beyond simply giving time or resources to interacting with community members and taking action devoted to making change occur. Giving is reconceptualized as acting in partnership with beneficiaries to create change, rather than simply "giving" or "gifting." Describing the shift from philanthropy to active engagement, Dani (Couple 9) stated, "People with lots of assets are used to being givers, deciding when they give and to whom—making the rules. People who receive are used to figuring out the rules and pushing as far as they can, because that's our system." Generative partnership is action-oriented and requires a shift in perception by those who assist and the recipients of assistance. Joe and Pam (Couple 3) have actively created change within family and community leading to improved quality of life for others. Pam stated, "We actively looked for a group. . . . We found some of those who still want to help the environment, to help people with no voice, without judgment. It's been very rewarding to find a group." Luke and Victoria (Couple 8) described stepping out as "leaving a mark on the community." This ministerial couple, dedicated to service, spoke of expanding their generative expression. Luke said,

> We want to get outside the walls (of congregation and church) and get into the community . . . to do something . . . to impact . . . to leave a mark. We don't want to just live . . . we want to leave a mark. . . . We've met people and influenced them by just stepping out of our own little circle.

His statement conveys an essential truth: Action speaks to and influences others. Generative couples can inspire and model, simply through their presence.

Stepping out of the bubble includes seeing possessions in different ways. Tracey (Couple 6) described inheriting her family's farm, where her husband has a small vineyard: "The vineyard is a place of celebration—grape harvest is an annual gathering of friends, relatives, neighbors, and interested community members. It brings people together and invites them to share time and celebrate

friendships." This indicates that, even in a business venture, there may be an aspect of giving—"a place that people can come to."

Max and Claire (Couple 5) have developed a generative partnership through extending care and kindness to animals (they rescue animals) and people, thus addressing suffering in their community. Max works in a psychiatric hospital, Claire in a prison. Max described a philosophy that guides them: "We follow a principle that I learned from [philosopher] Loren Eiseley [1959]. Eiseley described players as evil, unkind, or destructive, and he says the key [in life] is to make a little less room for meanness, unkindness, ignorance, and racism—making a huge difference."

Facet 2: Contributing Talents and Resources

Analysis of the interviews yielded evidence that couples contribute talents and resources in varied ways, including by assisting their families, friends, and coworkers in family, community, and professional settings. Two primary ways of assisting were described. Zack (Couple 2) labeled one "paying it forward." Todd (Couple 4) named another "giving beyond financial means."

Paying it forward. Done in a selfless manner, "paying it forward" refers to beneficial acts done for others in response to a good deed done on one's own behalf (Emerson, 1841). Rather than repay someone who did something for you, you help another person without expectation of repayment. Such acts may contribute to initiating changes that empower people to do "good" for the benefit of their fellow human beings. Contributions span a continuum from small and random acts to planned and significant expressions of kindness, assistance, and acceptance.

Using the term "pay it forward," professional artists Zack and Mary (Couple 2) described activities that encourage and support other artists. They developed two annual events over the years to showcase and support regional professional artists. Time and energy are devoted to inspire new artists and assist in their development both as artists and as businesspeople. Another expression of generative partnership is their participation (and leadership) in a community of over 30 friends who have dedicated themselves to a rural and self-sufficient lifestyle.

Other study participants described paying it forward in various ways. Grant and Dani (Couple 9) talked about using their "unique gifts . . . to come beside people who are working to create change or difference in their lives." "Coming beside a person" is a philosophy that characterizes many generative partners. It refers to a helping approach that recognizes the strengths and potential of each person and empowers them, with attitudes and acts that inspire doing good for others and making the world more accepting, giving, and satisfying.

Giving beyond financial prosperity. Giving to people, social institutions, and community is the foundation of generativity. While giving is enabled by financial prosperity, participants emphasized "giving beyond monetary means" (Couple 5). Participants variously defined prosperity as having sufficient

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financial, emotional, and relational security to enable them to offer time, energy, talents, skills, and money in ways that serve people and promote positive changes in society. Carol (Couple 10) stated, "In our early marriage, we gave to our children and their school environment. The professions that we picked are altruistic professions in some respects . . . where you are always trying to help people." All participants donated to people, organizations, and causes. Participant couples defined prosperity as having the confidence and will to reconceptualize their needs and take less for themselves, enabling couples to more fully contribute to the welfare of others. Todd (Couple 4) stated, "We are not wealthy, our needs are few. God has blessed us with enough discretionary funds to help people." Two couples (5 and 9) described reassessing their needs at midlife and downsizing. Intentional changes in lifestyle have allowed the time, money, and peace of mind for helping, mentoring, and leading. Other couples (2, 4, and 7) had always lived simply, allowing themselves the time and financial security to be helpers and givers. One illustration of this perspective was given by a couple who help older adults and people with disabilities access community resources. Todd (Couple 4) stated, "We can give from our prosperity, and we like doing that." Couple 5 had a unique definition of prosperity as having "social skills" and the ability to connect with people across social contexts, viewing time and compassion as prosperity. They mentor adolescents, young couples, and parents who are struggling with relational and economic issues, as well as organize people from all walks of life to read, study, and join discussions of community and national issues, including philosophy, politics, and religion.

Seven couples spoke of empowerment as integral to giving. Thus, we heard that contributions (money, time, skills, energy) are effective when they develop from a "listening stance." Dani (Couple 9) stated, "An attitude that helps is approaching situations as learners rather than fixers." Dani and Grant (Couple 9) described their generative style as informed through participation, observation, and listening to learn from people they assist. Research participants revealed that prosperity within a generative partnership extends to relationship quality, ensuring the couple's basic needs are met. The connection with each other and to community members, as well as their ongoing sense of purpose, contributes to their quality of life, resulting in a generative partnership.

Facet 3: Passing It On

All participant couples spoke of a need to pass on knowledge and wisdom to members of future generations through influencing their community and their children. Two subthemes relate to disseminating knowledge: (a) building generative communities and (b) exerting intergenerational influence.

Building generative communities. Dani (Couple 9) quoted a person in a charitable organization, who said, "Don't just come to serve; come to build community and connection."

Participants described the communities that they helped to create. Zack (Couple 2) described a community that has endured for 30 years: "There's about 14 to 16 people [mostly couples] . . . intricately involved with each other. We all take care of each other, respond to each other, and respect each other." Such communities embrace people of all social strata to interact, act, and celebrate. John and Tracey (Couple 6) developed a vineyard grape harvest into an event for people from all walks of life to gather to celebrate the season and experience significance and connection. By working with people who are homeless, Ann and Shannon (Couple 7) bring people of varied social strata into a community in which they learn from each other regarding healthy living, empathy, and competence in social interaction. Grant and Dani (Couple 9) include an ex-convict in their family gatherings, recognizing that all people seek community and benefit from opportunities to connect and contribute their character, ideas, and knowledge in social interaction. John and Tracey (Couple 6) spoke of the reciprocal value of community: "Through the years, we have been good friends and we have had good friends. Many people seem to be blessed by us being in their lives and [we are blessed] by them being in ours."

Exerting intergenerational influence. When children observe generativity enacted by parents (and other couples), they often replicate this characteristic within their own marriages. Such observation occurs over the life span, including both young children receiving exposure to generative values and adult children watching their aging parents develop a generative partnership.

Eleven (55%) individuals interviewed in this study spoke of seeing their parents engage in mutual generativity and of being taught generative values. Pam (Couple 3) stated, "It was my parents—they specifically said it was our responsibility to give back. You did it; you went out and found things to give back." John (Couple 6) stated, "My parents were all about other people; they were missionaries for 35 years. They had a worldwide community of friends. Todd (Couple 4) described his wife's family: "Whenever there's trouble, they rally around—they know how close they are." Luke (Couple 8) described how he and Victoria were initiated into generativity by their parents, who worked as ministerial teams in their respective churches: "We had been prepared for this, it seems like all of our lives. I was 12 when I started teaching [children] in my home church. I think you started teaching also children. When we got married, we just kept on doing what we were doing." Five couples observed generativity developing in the marriages of their adult children. Tracey (Couple 6) said, "You know, that's probably a result of some of the things that our oldest daughter learned growing up. She and her husband work together [to do] good." Pam (Couple 3) stated, "We have children that share this 'giving back' mentality. I don't know if we model it and they learned or if it's genetic, but they're all in places where they definitely give back. We feel very encouraged about the younger generation."

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IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

The findings of this research suggest that generative partnership is an element of vitality, meaning, and satisfaction among married and long-term couples during midlife and beyond. Generative partnership appears to be rooted in people's observations of their parents or other couples who engage together in generative activities. Young people may be exposed to generative values and activity within their family, and adult children may observe development of generative partnerships between their parents or other aging couples. This suggests that learning about generativity and generative partnership may occur at any time in the life span.

This research examined a small and regionalized sample of couples. It accomplished what was intended: first, to examine an idea that grew out of the lead author's observations of couples during his work as a marriage and family therapist and his research on couple relationships, and second, to determine whether the concept of generative partnership has the credibility and promise to merit expanded research.

Outcomes suggest that married individuals may team up with their partner in approaching the midlife stage of development, which Erikson (1950) labeled generativity, suggesting generativity as an aspect of the individual life cycle that may also develop within a partnership. Furthermore, developing a generative partnership contributes to the interest, vitality, and satisfaction that couples may create with each other as they age.

Generative partnership is an intriguing and substantial concept that merits further research and development. Conceptualizing generativity as a characteristic of aging partnerships has the potential to guide aging couples as they look ahead, plan, and ultimately encounter the opportunities and challenges of aging. Counselors and other human service professionals may find that understanding generative partnership is useful in assisting aging couples who wish to preserve, revitalize, or resurrect their satisfaction in marriage or partnership. Communities may benefit from service, leadership, and guidance offered by generative couples who volunteer their time and resources and may guide people of younger generations in making their communities and the world a good place to be.

We suggest that generative partnership research be replicated and expanded. Studying couples from a wide variety of social and cultural groups, diverse communities, and geographic locations should increase understanding of how generative partnerships develop. Social scientists may determine whether this concept is unique to certain social groups or common experience within the marital life cycle. Finally, further research may help determine whether educating couples and helping them develop a generative partnership has potential to enhance and preserve marriages at midlife and beyond.

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