A Social sphere keyword

What is 'Generativity'?

Silvia Cataldi

Generativity is a key word that not only has a biological meaning but that can be applied to all spheres of human action, from psychology to sociology, from anthropology to economics. The author, an associate professor of sociology at La Sapienza University (Rome), shows how this concept has become central in the social sphere and illustrates its application.

At the etymological level, the term *generativity* has a double derivation (Cappelletti 2019; Magatti 2018). In Latin it comes from *gen*, the root of parent and people, but it is also the basis of the terms 'brilliant' and 'generous'. In Greek it refers to the verb *gignomai*, which means to be, to make happen. In this sense, generativity indicates openness to the various ways in which life is articulated and oriented towards participation in the realization of others and of the world.

This is certainly not a new concept (Cappelletti 2019). Plato had spoken of generativity in the *Symposium,* linking the action of generating to immortality, love and beauty. But it is only since the 1950's that the concept has become central to human-social disciplines.

Generativity as a sign of maturity

In Erik H. Erikson's book, *Childhood and Society* (1987) the eclectic psychologist analyzes, with an expansive, integrative logic, the relationship between people and society from the perspective of orientation towards good. For Erikson, human existence is characterized by a relationship of mutual care between personal and social spheres on the one hand and between generations on the other. Each person grows through increasing interest in the other and in the world to become both an object of care and dispenser of care. Generativity thus represents an essential phase of life in which adult individuals freely choose to become responsible for a 'part' of this world. In that 'concrete detail' there is not only the child and the specific existential and work sphere in which the person is engaged, but also an openness to a universal longing. It signifies a positive response to life's call by opening oneself up to generativity not only in a biological sense but also in a symbolic sense. In doing so, a person brings something new into the world.

Generativity as a sociological key: Three movements

Generativity is not only important for psychological growth. Recently it established itself as a key concept in sociology. A main contribution in this sense comes from a 2014 essay by Mauro Magatti and Chiara Giaccardi, provocatively entitled: *Manifesto per la società dei liberi*

(Manifesto for a society of the free). The two Italian sociologists consider generativity as a new way of thinking. Personal and collective actions indicate socially oriented, creative, connective, productive and responsible acts that are capable of fostering care, innovation, manufacturing, organizing, investing and the generation of new life. Thus, 'to generate' has a purely anthropological meaning and can involve not only the family sphere but also the artistic, cultural, entrepreneurial, economic, political and spiritual spheres.

According to Magatti and Giaccardi (2014) generativity is expressed in three movements that are each characterized by a specific dynamic involving both positive potentials and risks.

Bringing into the world

To give life is the first movement. It is an entrepreneurial phase that consists of creating something new. The driving force is desire, which stimulates the subject to continually search in the face of a restlessness that pushes him or her not to be satisfied with reality as it is (Magatti 2018). While the risk of this stage is represented by narcissism (i.e., the danger of withdrawal into oneself and putting oneself at the center of creation) the potential of this stage is represented by the realization of desire: the subject brings something new to the world. He or she acts and shapes something unique and surprising that was not there before (Arendt 1958).

Taking Care

The second movement is one of care and nurturing. It may appear as an organizing moment, but that does not make it any less effective. This stage is marked by a commitment to accompany and develop what has been generated so that it may flourish and endure over time. Taking care, in fact, is a way of life, of being in the world and relating to others (Mortari 2006). Thanks to the presupposed relationship with the other, caring has two fundamental requirements: a readiness for commitment that translates into daily practice and an affective disposition that renders one capable of care and empathy (Pulcini 2012). Therefore, it also represents the main antidote to risks in the second movement of falling into technical-instrumental logic typical of bureaucratic processes. (Magatti 2018). Instead, 'taking care' demands continuous, deep reconnections between emotion, rediscovery of mission and structure.

Releasing

The last movement of generativity is *releasing* (Magatti and Giaccardi 2014). This represents the most difficult and delicate movement in the generative process. But it allows what is brought into the world - be it a project, enterprise or experience - to be adopted and loved by a community and to belong to others, emancipating itself from its authors and even from what was initially envisioned (Magatti 2018). For the initiators, this signifies relinquishing control over what is generated because this represents the only way to accompany development and transformation.

By following these three movements and overcoming pitfalls hidden in each stage, the generative arc makes possible both personal development and social change in a pluralistic, creative way (Magatti and Giaccardi 2014, p. 36).

Generative or degenerative welfare?

Recently, the concept of generativity has been applied to social policies in health, welfare and pensions. The proposal comes from the Italian "Emanuela Zancan" Foundation research center, with its 50-year history of work in social, health, and educational policy. According to the Foundation president, Tiziano Vecchiato (2012), generative welfare proposes active involvement of people, thus fostering protagonism and multiplicative value.

In fact, the current welfare system is based on three cornerstones: welfarism or passivity of the person being helped; performance logic which often turns into mere provision of services or monetary transfer; and rights-based claims occurring at a purely individual level (Vecchiato 2012). By challenging these three cornerstones, a generative welfare proposal aims to activate personal responsibility in persons involved and a sustaining of mutual solidarity. Experience reveals that it is not possible to combat problems such as poverty and social exclusion unless this struggle is brought forward together with the same people who are suffering these problems, and thus with the same protagonists (Cristao et al. 2020).

But is it possible to integrate personal capacities without replacing them? A generative welfare approach pushes beyond an individualist logic to recognize a person's capacity as one who both participates and gives in turn (Cristao et al. 2020). A generative welfare approach pushes people to recognize themselves not only as bearers of individual rights, but as subjects who, by helping themselves, also find themselves in a position to help others (Bezze and Vecchiato 2013). In this way, the contribution of those helped generates value at the level of community, enhancing individual capacities and empowering a person to express his or her generative potential.

Measuring well-being with an innovative index

Even economists are now looking at generativity. It is from this perspective that Leonardo Becchetti (2018) presented the *Manifesto economico e sociale per la società generativa* (*Economic and Social Manifesto for a Generative Society*). According to the economist, data and experience show people are happy if they are generative, setting in motion that ability to be useful and have a positive impact on at least another human being.

Becchetti, together with economists Vittorio Pelligra and Luigino Bruni (2019), put forward a proposal to integrate measures used in comparing levels of well-being in nations and local territories, using a new index of generativity. The index measures the well-being of all actors in a territory (citizens, businesses, institutions, civil society) in reciprocal relationships and is divided into the following dimensions: generativity of relationships, generativity of socio-economic inclusion, generativity of care and generativity of civic engagement. The results of this innovative index have been published for the third year in a row in Italy (Becchetti et al. 2021) and allow for a new map of Italian provinces that reflects the capacity of actors, institutions and organizations to contribute to the common good.

In conclusion, generativity is a fundamental concept in social work and lends itself to many applications: from spirituality to personal growth, social relationships to active citizenship, from economics to volunteering, and even in public policy. Generativity, in fact, is not only a buzzword. By recognizing it and addressing its challenges, it can bear fruit across many fields of human endeavor. To paraphrase Magatti and Giaccardi's book, our wish for all of us is: *Generative people of the world, unite!*

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