



Stand by me: Intimacy in life narratives of romantic relationships and friendships predicts higher generativity at age 26

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This Research was supported by a SSHRC grant to the third author



Introduction

What is generativity?

Broadly speaking, a concern for (and commitment to) the well-being of future generations. To the extent that generativity varies across persons, generativity can also be understood as an individual difference variable.

What is intimacy?

Intimacy has often been described as feelings of closeness, and a willingness to openly share intimate thoughts with another person (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason & Har-Even, 2008).

Generative concern is linked to well-being

Generative concern is positively correlated with life satisfaction, psychological well-being, positive affect, emotional stability, and successful parenting outcomes.

The link between intimacy and generativity

An Eriksonian model suggests that intimacy in close relationships during young adulthood is a developmental precursor to generativity during midlife. Despite wide interest in Erikson's model, the relation between intimacy and generativity as psychological constructs has rarely been tested.

The "relationship defining" narrative

In this study, we used a "relationship-defining" narrative task to elicit the stories told by young adults about their same-sex friends and romantic partners. This task was adapted from the widely used "self-defining" narrative tasks of McAdams and others (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; McAdams, 2001; McLean & Thorne, 2003). These tasks are based on the idea that autobiographical memories become organized around the construction of a sense of identity during the period of adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), and continue to be core elements in the adult's sense of self.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

H1: Participants who tell relationship narratives that display high levels of intimacy with romantic partners will have higher levels of generative concern at age 26.

H2: Intimacy with same-sex friends will also predict generativity, but indirectly. That is, romantic intimacy will fully mediate the relationship between friendship intimacy and generative concern.

RQ1: What sorts of themes emerge in the types of stories people tell about relationship-defining moments with friends and romantic partners?

RQ2: Are there any prototypical themes from the autobiographical narratives that predict generativity at age 26?

Method: Participants

- ❖ 100 emerging adults were interviewed at age 26
- ❖ 68% were female
- ❖ 74% had completed post-secondary education
- ❖ 71% were in a committed romantic relationship
- ❖ 13% were parents

Method: Materials

Loyola Generativity Scale ($\alpha = .875$). The LGS is a 20-item self-report questionnaire. A sample item would be "I try to pass along the knowledge I have gained through my experiences."

Overall Theme. Story theme was coded from the narratives using an open-coding procedure (see Patton, 2002) until a number of overall themes became clear.

Intimacy. Both narratives were scored on intimacy using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (No intimacy) to 4 (Very high level of intimacy). In all cases, the ending or conclusion of the story was given more weight than the beginning.

Thematic Analysis

Romantic Narrative Themes

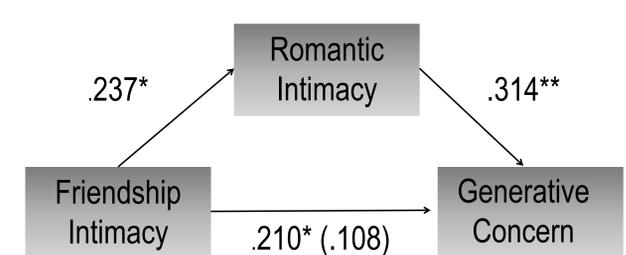
Theme	Description	Frequency
True Love	Realization of a future with the partner, that the partner is "the one"	60%
Relationship Building	Forward progress of a relationship	13.3%
Independence	Desire for independence from the romantic partner	15.6%
Breakup	A relationship ends	11.1%

Friendship Narrative Themes

Theme	Description	Frequency
True Friendship	Supporting or being supported by a friend through tough times	50.5%
Relationship Building	Forward progress of the friendship	14.4%
Task-Oriented	A focus on shared activities or events	21.6%
Friendship Conflict	Friendship becomes weaker, or dissolves entirely	13.4%

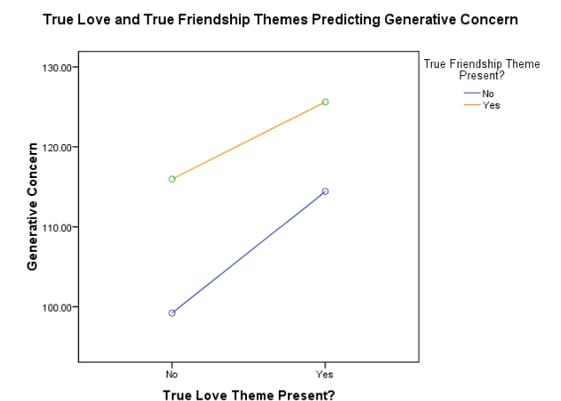
A positive prototype story emerged within each type of narrative: True Love and True Friendship. Both stories center on secure, positive relationships with others

Figure 1



Romantic intimacy as coded from narratives fully mediates the relationship between friendship intimacy and generativity, Sobel's test = 3.26, $p = .001$

Figure 2



True love and true friendship themes uniquely predict generative concern at age 26 ($R^2 = .249$)

Discussion

Romantic intimacy fully mediated the relationship between friendship intimacy and generative concern, using the Baron and Kenny (1986) method (see Figure 1). This supports our 1st and 2nd hypotheses.

Prototypical stories emerged in each domain, and these prototypes uniquely and positively predicted generative concern, providing answers to both research questions.

We found support for the general Eriksonian framework on personality development during emerging adulthood, suggesting that more successful experiences within the domain of intimate personal relationships might facilitate the growth of the succeeding stage of generativity within the life cycle.