

PRESERVING INTELLECTUAL LEGACY: GENERATIVITY THEMES IN THE NARRATIVES OF RETIRED ACADEMICS

Eleanor m lemmer

University of south Africa, South Africa

Abstract

The ageing of the world's population together with the parallel growth in life expectancy due to positive developments in healthcare creates challenges for the retirement population and for the organizations for which they worked. Ageing also affects higher education systems worldwide. The retirement of the professoriate implies a loss of important knowledge and skills and a temporary shortage of trained and qualified academics to fill the gap left by highly experienced retirees, who at the end of a lengthy career, are repositories of rich academic capital. The intellectual legacy of the professoriate is embodied in original scholarship, the transfer of values, knowledge and skills to upcoming generations in academe, and the maintenance of the scholarly community. This situation raises the question how intellectual legacy may be preserved after retirement to the benefit of the university and wider society. Interwoven with the idea of legacy is erikson's (1950) concept of generativity, which can be described as the desire to promote the advancement and wellbeing of the next generation through parenting, teaching, mentoring, civic engagement and a wide range of other behaviours aimed at producing a positive contribution that survives the self. Failure to achieve generativity leads to stagnation that gives rise to disappointment as a result of missed opportunities. Only a few studies (melo, 2008; mcadams & logan, 2006) have examined how professors who have made significant academic contributions narrate their scholarly lives in terms of generativity theory. Against this background, this paper explores generativity themes in the life stories of five retired professors. The usefulness of life story research in generative theory construction is well-documented (mcadams, 2012). The participants were four men and one woman in the age group 61 to 75 years who had retired after illustrious academic careers. Participants were selected according to the following criteria: all had had a lengthy university career (ranging from 32-45 years) in which they had contributed significantly in the areas of academic leadership, teaching, research, postgraduate supervision and public engagement. In-depth interviews explored how participants expressed generativity in their scientific and creative work during their professional careers, how they sustained generative concerns after retirement and how they plan to extend generativity into old age. Thematic analysis of the narratives produced the following themes: enactment of generativity during the career; re-evaluation of generativity at retirement; continuance of generativity after retirement; generative commitment at the threshold of old age. The study connects with the growing interdisciplinary literature on retirement and suggests how retired academics can be supported to preserve an intellectual legacy by remaining engaged in generative action as they approach the last stage of the life cycle.

References

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