Legacy & Generativity Framework for Climate Action
Annotated Bibliography

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Although some earlier research has highlighted both the importance of generativity and feelings of a close personal connection with nature for environmental engagement, the role of these factors has not been studied in a narrative identity context. Thus, in this study, the interrelationships among narrative and questionnaire features of environmental identity and generative concern were evaluated for environmental activists and a comparison sample of nonactivists using a mixed methods design. A situated environmental identity appeared to serve as a foundation for narrative engagement with the environment; however, results also highlighted generativity as a key mediating factor in this relationship across youth and midlife participants.

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Climate change and pollution impact those alive today as well as future generations, suggesting that attitudes toward future generations may be linked with environmental attitudes. Despite the widespread impact of the environment on human lives, there is considerable partisan divide in the United States with regard to environmental issues. The authors investigated relationships between political conservatism, generativity, and environmental attitudes in two studies. Political conservatism was associated with lower pro-environmental attitudes; however, political conservatism was also associated with higher generativity and had a positive indirect effect on pro-environmental attitudes through higher generativity. These results likely reflect partisan polarization with regard to environmental issues. Pro-environmental messages may be more persuasive for conservatives if they are linked to concerns about future generations.

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Getting the growing population of older adults actively involved in issues of climate change requires moving away from a deficit- and loss-focused view of later adulthood. A new narrative should be adopted, recognizing the many contributions older adults can make to addressing the climate crisis. These contributions arise out of concerns for the health and well-being of the next generations and draw on older adults’ legacy thinking, lifelong experiences, professional expertise, and ability to work in multigenerational contexts. Such a new narrative recognizes older adults as a "natural resource" and important "human capital."

This study examined factors that contribute to the commitment of volunteers’ environmental stewardship through motivations, satisfaction, and generativity. Volunteers for the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department were surveyed online. The findings showed positive and significant path correlations for four latent variables (motivations, satisfaction, commitment, and generativity). This study contributes to the literature by showing the potential for generativity to contribute to environmental stewardship, and by enhancing stewardship efforts for agencies and organizations in recruiting and engaging volunteers.


Individual and collective agents, especially affluent ones, are not doing nearly enough to prevent and prepare for the worst consequences of the unfolding climate crisis. This is, the author suggests, partly because existing conceptual repertoires are inadequate to the task of motivating climate-stabilizing activities. The author argues that the concept climate legacy meets five desiderata for concepts that, through usage, have significant potential to motivate climate action. The article concludes with a discussion of some climate legacy-enhancing practical proposals that merit consideration.


Climate change is a complex, long-term public health challenge. Older people are especially susceptible to certain climate change impacts, such as heat waves. The authors suggest that older people may be a resource for addressing climate change because of their concern for legacy—for leaving behind values, attitudes, and an intact world to their children and grandchildren. The authors review the theoretical basis for “legacy thinking” among older people. The authors offer suggestions for research on this phenomenon, and for action to strengthen the sense of legacy. At a time when older populations are growing, understanding and promoting legacy thinking may offer an important strategy for addressing climate change.


The authors examine whether persuasive messages that activate the legacy motive—the desire to build a positive legacy—can increase the willingness of current actors to make sacrifices for future generations. Using a climate change public goods game, they find that when the benefits of cooperation accrue to decision makers in the present, high levels of cooperation are sustained, whereas when the benefits accrue to future generations, intergenerational discounting makes cooperation elusive. Crucially, when the legacy
motive is activated—by promoting death awareness, feelings of power asymmetry, and intergenerational reciprocity—intergenerational discounting is attenuated, and cooperation is restored. Their results suggest climate action can be fostered by framing climate change as an intergenerational dilemma, and by crafting persuasive messages that activate people’s drive to leave a positive legacy.


Many older adults care about the legacy they leave for their descendants. Yet today's elders are unintentionally leaving a legacy of a future climate that will not enhance the lives of future generations. Exactly the reverse, and the Earth will not be like the one they inherited from their ancestors. Our generation can be said to have made a mess of things for future generations. How can older adults work to build a better climate legacy? This question has become a guiding one for the author and other elders as they apply their time and expertise to building a better future climate.


Previous qualitative studies have identified themes of generativity and identity development in the interviews of environmental activists, suggesting their importance as motives for environmental behavior. The purpose of this study was to extend this work by identifying positive relationships between identity maturity, generativity, and environmentalism using quantitative methodologies. The authors found that activists and comparison individuals differed on the identity maturity, generativity, and environmental measures overall. Further, greater identity maturity and generativity were associated with higher environmental engagement. Generativity was found to mediate the relation between identity maturity and environmentalism. Their findings suggest that engaging in generative behaviors may be an important part of the process in forming an environmental identity and engaging in environmental actions.


Based upon Erikson’s theory of psychological development, the concept of environmental generativity has recently been proposed to explain the association between parental status and concern about environmental issues. The present study further explored this issue by examining the relationships between a direct measure of generativity concern and environmentally-related constructs. As hypothesized, generativity predicted preservation attitudes and self-reported ecological behavior, even after controlling for socio-demographic variables and participants’ future orientation and humanitarian values. Theoretical implications of the findings and the environmental generativity concept are discussed.

The baby boom generation will be reaching old age from 2010 to 2030, a time when the human species will need to make enormous changes in response to global warming, species extinction, and other environmental threats. This future, population aging with environmental challenge, is entirely foreseeable. What is unpredictable is how we will respond. This article examines the question, what kind of world will we be leaving to our children and our grandchildren? What is our collective legacy of our time on earth? The author looks at reasons that people do act in behalf of a collective future and envisions the 'eco-elder,' who will embrace a more expansive form of generativity that can inspire creation of a world we can leave behind.


Older adults are vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but they represent an enormous resource in efforts to prevent and mitigate its impact. This article summarizes the benefits and barriers associated with environmental activism by older adults. Benefits include enhancing older adults' health, self-efficacy, and generativity, and providing volunteers for environmental organizations and communities. Barriers to widespread engagement of older adults include their lower levels of support for pro-environmental policies and less concern about climate change, and their systematic lack of access to environmental volunteer opportunities. It also outlines efforts to mobilize climate change activism targeted to elders, and addresses barriers grounded in ageism.


Conserving the planet for the next generation has come to be an essential component of sustainable development, with “future generations” being the term most frequently included when citing definitions of sustainable development. However, beyond words, does a concern for a future beyond the current generation have any bearing on actions taken in the present? This paper examines the concept of generativity as a component of sustainable development, and specifically, in relation to green consumption. The results show a positive correlation between generativity and green consumption values, as well as between generativity and buying behavior, and generativity and prosocial attitude. The paper concludes that the concept of generativity merits further exploration.


During the past 35 years, academic researchers have been examining the relationship between environmentally responsible consumption behavior and numerous antecedent variables. Because sustainability requires a long-term perspective, the study included
generativity, a construct developed by Erikson and self-enhancement values as antecedent variables for environmentally responsible consumption behavior. The results of the study indicate that individuals who score high on generativity are more likely to have eco-friendly intentions and more environmentally responsible consumption behaviors, but generativity interacts with self-enhancement, resulting in an interpretation that is different from that typically found in environmentally related studies.


This article explores whether a private governance initiative can harness legacy concerns to address climate change. The socio-temporal trap is an important barrier to climate change mitigation: the costs of reducing carbon emissions will be incurred by this generation, but most of the benefits will accrue to future generations. Research suggests that social influences—including concerns about legacy—can induce individuals to overcome collective action problems, but individuals know that future generations will not have information about who acted today in ways meriting social sanctions or rewards. The article examines the nature of legacy concerns, their effects on behavior, and the feasibility of a private legacy registry designed to record individuals' responses to climate change in ways that will be disclosed today and easily accessible for many generations.


The aim of this paper is to use Erikson's approach to human development, and specifically generativity, as a framework by which to explore older people's experiences of environmental stewardship activities. Using data from a large qualitative study of environmental volunteer residents in the coastal fringes of Queensland, Australia, the paper provides important, illustrative, empirical support for Erikson's theory of generativity in later life. Findings suggest that older people are much more likely to connect their environmental actions with the longer-term future, and express a need to leave a lasting legacy for future generations. Whilst the work presented here is only a small, localized study, use of Erikson's theory of human development as a framework helps demonstrate the importance of a generative response in later life.


Despite several decades of research on more effectively communicating climate change to the general public, there is only limited knowledge about how older adults engage with an issue that will shape and define future generations. The authors focus on two key factors that may motivate younger and older adults to engage in climate change action, legacy concern and place attachment, and assess whether older adults differ in any appreciable way from the general population in this domain. The authors randomly exposed participants of different ages to either a Legacy, Place, or control writing induction task before they completed various self-report measures. Both induction
conditions were associated with significantly greater pro-environmental behavioral intentions and donations for all age groups when compared to the control condition. Legacy motivation and biophilia were used as manipulation checks and found to partially mediate these effects. Findings suggest that legacy and place message framing may be useful in prompting adults of all ages to take action to help combat climate change.


The natural environment has been a missing part of the context in public policy forums and educational programs when discussing the implications of an aging society. The authors believe that stewardship and the sustainability of natural resources should be considered in addition to economics and health care when addressing the themes of well-being and quality of life for future generations. This article presents an overview of the usage of the concept environment in aging studies and presents critically important concepts such as sustainability, stewardship, natural capital, carrying capacity, and ecological footprint in recognizing the relevancy of including the natural environment in these discussions about our aging society. Also, the authors propose directions for future research and discuss advocacy and organizational activities.


Long time horizons and social distance are viewed as key psychological barriers to proenvironmental action, particularly regarding climate change. The authors tested whether individuals’ motivation to leave a positive legacy can be leveraged to increase engagement with climate change and other environmental problems. In a pilot study, the authors found that individual differences in legacy motivation were positively associated with proenvironmental behaviors and intentions. In a subsequent experiment, the authors demonstrated that priming legacy motives increased donations to an environmental charity, proenvironmental intentions, and climate-change beliefs. Domain-general legacy motives represent a previously understudied and powerful mechanism for promoting proenvironmental behavior.