

Clarifying Organizational Generativity: A Future Forming Perspective for OD Practitioners and Researchers

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Abstract



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As the catastrophic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have made clear, both the practice and research of organizational development (OD) urgently need alternative pathways to the future. Organizational generativity (OG) offers one such promising alternative. While much of OD practice and research are focused on enabling organizations *to better prepare for an unknown future*, OG accommodates new ways for organizations to *proactively create their own future*. As a nascent field of inquiry, however, research on OG is underdeveloped and characterized by a lack of clarity. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to clarify the construct of organizational generativity to be more actionable by OD practitioners, researchers, and managers alike. Using grounded theory, we review and critique the literature on generativity, from the “ancestral” writers in psychology to current OD authors. Through successive rounds of inquiry, we reveal the syntax, the semantics, and the inherent processual nature of organizational generativity. We then derive a conceptual framework describing seven manifestations of generative organizational processes: relational, transformational, disruptive, future-focused, idea-giving, actionable, and procreative. Finally, we discuss implications for OD practice and opportunities for future research.

Keywords: generative, generativity, organizational generativity, organization development, generative process, generative OD practices, OD



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How should organizations approach their futures? Since at least the mid-1980s, the answer for many organizational development (OD) researchers, practitioners, and their clients has been: preparedness. That is, making organizations more resilient and agile in preparation for an era of “permanent white water” (Vaill, 1996) into which we were said to have entered.

Recently, however, many of these decades-long efforts were simply swept aside by the COVID-19 pandemic, driving many organizations out of business and exposing some “uncomfortable revelations about [what we believed to be] agile and sustainable organizations in a VUCA world” (Worley & Jules, 2020, p. 279). In a “call to arms,” Schwarz and Bouckenooghe (2021) encourage OD researchers and practitioners “to rethink how we model and imagine large-scale change. Perhaps, it is time for alternative pathways into the future” (p. 8). In this paper, we propose that for organizations, proactively creating or forming the future, instead of only passively preparing for it, constitutes one alternative and promising pathway.

Organizations proactively forming their own futures is nothing mysterious. Departments for research and development—or entire organizations in the case of research universities—all have the creation of the new as their central purpose. One line of nascent OD research focusing on creating the future is “generativity” (Gergen, 1978, 2015; Pavez & Neves, 2021). Conceived originally by psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s, the salient characteristics of generativity include a concern for the future and the proactive creation of those futures. Within the OD literature, generative organizations are said to be “life-giving” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, 2013; Stacey, 2014) and characterized by energy, randomness, serendipity, and enthusiasm (Harquail, 2013), as well as having the capacity to “produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences” (Zittrain, 2008, p. 70).

While OG seems promising, the treatment within OD research remains unclear, even disparate. The label of generativity is affixed variously, almost arbitrarily, to people, images, patterns, theories, methods, metaphors, questions, narratives, stories, and even to science itself. And there seems to be no clear distinction between “generativity” and

“organizational generativity.” This brings us to the central purpose of this study: To clarify the construct of organizational generativity to be more actionable by practitioners, researchers, and managers working to enable organizations to create their own thriving futures.¹

Scope, Method, and Structure of the Paper

In this paper, we present the results of a 2-year exploratory review of the OD literature addressing organizational generativity, using the method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and culminating in a conceptual framework (Leshem & Trafford, 2007; Jabareen, 2009). Conceptual frameworks provide a shared language for research (Leshem and Trafford, 2007) and are particularly useful for subject matter that is potentially “revolutionary or original” (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11).

Following a processual approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6), the paper is divided into six exploratory “rounds” that correspond to our inquiry as it emerged in the research and writing of this paper. The learnings from each round guided the next, conceiving new insights along the way in a dialogic process between the researchers and the data. We have preserved this ordering and structure because the paper’s research and writing illustrate a generative process of inquiry.

Round 1: Preliminary Inquiry Into Generativity

According to a representative selection of dictionary definitions (*Cambridge English Dictionary*, 2018; *Dictionary.com*, n.d.; *Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary*, n.d.; *Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.; *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, 2018), “generative” carries a variety of meanings, including fat, fertile, productive, and reproductive. Generative can also refer to suddenly appearing or being productive, reproductive, or procreative. Etymologically, generativity can be traced back to

the Greek root *gen*, which contains two meanings: to beget and to arise (Beekes & Beek, 2010).

Generativity has been adopted and adapted by numerous and widely varying disciplines. In computer science, Jonathan Zittrain writes that the internet is “consummately generative” (2006, p. 1980) because it maximizes participation as an input and innovation as an output. In biology, trees are said to demonstrate generative behavior with the non-predetermined, almost improvisational interactions between the tree’s roots and the fungi in the soil (Affifi, 2015). In economics, the generativity of markets gives rise to products and services that are new, novel, and independent of the original inventor (Tajedin et al., 2019; see also Wall, 2015).

Round 2: Creating a Database—Generativity in OD

To create a database of generativity in the OD literature, we began by querying Google and academic research databases with the search string “all in title: generativity OR generative,” which produced approximately 500,000 hits, thus constituting the initial universe of data. To select the most relevant sources, we refined and narrowed the results with multiple combinations and variations of the search terms “organization,” “organizational,” “organizational development,” “OD,” “generative,” “generativity,” and “organizational generativity.” We specifically searched within English document titles, abstracts, and keywords. These inclusion criteria and iterations resulted in a set of 28 publications by 37 authors, as shown in Table 1. From these 28 publications, we extracted 157 text fragments that address generativity in organizational contexts. As a reference library, this secured dataset is available upon request.

To ensure the dataset was representative and unbiased, we examined it for an even distribution of publication dates, author contributions, and use of references. As shown in Table 1, about 75% of the

¹Ascribed to Abraham Lincoln, and repeated by Ken Gergen (2015, p. 300), “the best way to predict the future is to create it.” While Gergen also uses the verbs “making,” “shaping,” and, mostly, “forming” in association with future, we chose in the paper primarily for future-forming, but deliberately hold on to the alternative wordings. From a linguistic logic, there are complications, since shaping or forming suggest that “the future” is already “on our desk.” And “creation” has a connotation of “out of the blue.” Perhaps the most appropriate way to describe what we are discussing here, is “positively influencing the future as it enrolls.” For us, “future-forming” encapsulates all, and give the best and most practical description.

Table 1*Generativity in OD: 157 Text Fragments From 28 Publications*

Code^a	Source author and year	Number of selected fragments
1	Avital & van Osch, 2013	5
2	Bright et al., 2013	3
3	Bushe, 2013	9
4	Bushe & Paranjpey, 2014	22
5	Bushe & Marshak, 2015a	1
6	Bushe & Marshak, 2018	3
7	Bushe & Storch, 2015	7
8	Carucci & Epperson, 2008	10
9	Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987	4
10	Cooperrider, 2013	4
11	Cooperrider et al., 2013	6
12	Harquail, 2014	1
13	Hoogendijk, 2015	2
14	Lichtenstein, 2014	6
15	Marshak & Bushe, 2018	2
16	Morgan, 1997	1
17	Paranjpey, 2011	6
18	Paranjpey, 2013	22
19	Richley & Cooperrider, 2013	5
20	Stacey, 2014	7
21	Thatchenkery & Firdida, 2013	1
22	Torres et al., 2013	1
23	van den Nieuwenhof, 2013	1
24	VanQuickenborne, 2010	10
25	Veltrop, 1995	1

26	Veltrop, 2002	10
27	Zandee & Vermaak, 2012	1
28	Zandee, 2013	8
28 Publications	37 Authors	157 Fragments

^a We refer to these 28 publications using the code number in this table, placed between square brackets. For example, “[25]” refers to Veltrop (1995).

data fragments (118 out of 157) were contributed by a total of 14 authors. To examine whether these top-contributing authors might result in a biased depiction of generativity, we compared them to the other 25% of the publications in the dataset using Gaussian logic. These 14 top-contributing authors used the words “generative” or “generativity” as often and similarly attributed and distributed as did the others in the database. Hence, each text fragment in the dataset can be considered approximately equal in weight, and the dataset of 157 text fragments is to be seen as a representative sample of generativity in the OD literature.

Round 3: Exploring the Syntax of Generativity in OD

The goal of Round 3 was to understand the syntax of how generative, generativity, and organizational generativity were presented in the OD literature. Through an iterative process of reading/rereading, structuring/restructuring, and also tallying of the data (Jabareen, 2009), four categories emerged whereby the text fragments addressed generativity: 1) as an adjective or quality, 2) as definition or explanation, 3) as a pre-condition, or 4) related to a certain effect or impact. Each fragment was allocated to one (and only one) of the four categories, as appearing in Table 2.

For a large majority of the fragments, generativity appears as an adjective, a quality of something or someone, such as a leader: “A

generative leader is someone with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures...” [20, p. 4]; or an image: “A generative image allows people to see the world anew, identify new options, formulate new strategies, even reform their identity” [3, p. 92]. Despite being indirect, these and similar examples nevertheless do shed at least some light on the focal construct of OG.

In other fragments, rather than clear definition(s) that could guide practitioners, we found indirect or vague descriptions of generativity, as with this example: “Generativity creates centripetal force, while degenerativity creates centrifugal force” [8, p. 23]. In a much smaller number of fragments, generativity is described as a precondition or a result of something, but causality is not clearly explained, as in this example: “Inquiry, dialogue, and high-quality connections are some of the key steps in creating a generative process” [18, p. 29].

Round 3 turned out to be of pivotal importance, with two key takeaways: First, we realized for the first time the degree to which the OD literature on generativity was unclear, even contradictory in some instances. Second, the direct link between organization and generativity was essentially absent, with the literature mostly referring to indirect associations such as generative metaphor or generative leadership. These realizations were fortuitous, however, because they enabled us to settle on how we

²In Round 4, we broadened our inquiry to include influential “ancestral” authors of generativity. These ancestral authors were not included in the OD dataset, rather they were authors cited by the authors of the OD dataset. In total, there were 57 citations of ancestral authors (see Table 3). Comparing the list of ancestors cited by the 14 top-contributing authors of the OD dataset to the list of ancestors cited by the remainder of the authors in the OD dataset, they are 90% the same, thus indicating representativeness of the 14 top-contributing authors.

could best make a contribution with this study— by clarifying the potentially promising construct of *organizational generativity* and rendering it more actionable for researchers, practitioners, and managers. Round 3 also clearly demonstrated that to achieve the paper’s now-clarified purpose, we first needed to gain a better and more foundational understanding of generativity. To do this, we used the 157 text fragments and the 86 references they contain to identify and learn from the ancestral authors of generativity.

Round 4: Ancestors of Organizational Generativity

In this round, we identified the ancestral authors cited most frequently by the authors in the OD dataset. After the removal of duplicate citations, i.e., cross-references among authors already

included in our OD dataset, the publications of the seven top-ranked ancestors, whose publications were referenced a minimum of three times, were selected for further review: 1) Gergen, 2) Erikson, 3) Carlsen, 4) Dutton, 5) Schön, 6) McAdams, and 7) de St. Aubin (see Table 3). In addition, the publications of the ancestors *not* ranked in the top seven were reviewed for possible expansion of the 157 fragments of the OD dataset. Ultimately, the top seven were deemed representative of the remaining ancestors, and no additions to the dataset were made. These top seven ancestors represent several academic domains outside of OD, including (social) psychology, education, linguistics, and philosophy. In Table 3, we summarize the top seven ancestors in the chronological order of their publications.

Table 2

Four Syntactical Categories of Generativity in the OD Publications

Syntax of generativity	Fragments found	Illustrative examples of text fragments and their [sources]
As adjective	86	“A generative image allows people see the world anew, identify new options, formulate new strategies, even reform their identity” [3, p.92]. “Generative organization = healthy organization” [8, p.22]. “A generative leader is someone with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures...” [20, p.4]. “... the generative moment which means members willingness to be changed by what is shared ...” [24, p.23].
As definition	40	“... generativity, which refers to the ability to originate, produce, or procreate...” [1, p.414]. “...generativity deconstructed of 10 postures...” [8, p.134]. “Generativity is having the ability to shape what comes to us” [21, p.430].
As precondition	16	“It appears that the degree of generativity in a group depends on the relative frequency of negative and positive sentiment as manifested in conversation, where positive sentiments outweigh the effects of negative sentiments” [2, p.152]. “The Dialogic Mindset pays particular attention to how generative any method will be with this group of people for that challenge in this situation” [6, p.9].
As result	15	“Great performance and healthy (generative) organizations are directly correlated” [8, p.8]. “... one organizational impact of generative change is increased competitive advantage...” [24, p.21].

Table 3*Ancestors of Organizational Generativity*

Ancestor authors	Years of the publications	Number of citing text fragments	Citing OD source(s) [number refers to Table 1]
Gergen	1978, 1982, 1994, 2003, 2009	18	[1], [2], [3], [7], [10], [16], [18], [21], [22], [27], [28]
Erikson	1950, 1963, 1964	7	[3], [11], [18], [21], [28]
Carlsen & Dutton	2011	5	[3], [11], [28]
Schön	1979	4	[1], [7], [16], [28]
McAdams & de St. Aubin	1992, 1998	2	[18], [28]
McAdams et al.	1998	1	[28]
Jacobs & Heracleous	2005	2	[18], [24]
Ball	2009	1	[24]
Barrett	1995	1	[18]
Bradley	1997	1	[18]
Carich & Spilman	2004	1	[24]
Chomsky	1972	1	[18]
Drazin et al.	1999	1	[18]
Fredrickson	2001	1	[21]
Jaworski	1996	1	[20]
Juarrero	1999	1	[14]
Kotre	1984	1	[28]
Kotter & Heskett	1992	1	[8]
Lane & Maxfield	1996	1	[20]
Ludema	2003	1	[28]
Malhotra	1996	1	[20]
Mantel & Ludema	2004	1	[18]

Ancestor authors	Years of the publications	Number of citing text fragments	Citing OD source(s) [number refers to Table 1]
Malhotra	1996	1	[20]
Mantel & Ludema	2004	1	[18]
Murphy	1995	1	[20]
Neilsen	2007	1	[18]
Witrock	1974	1	[18]

Erik Erikson

According to psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1950), a person passes through eight stages in life, with each stage a combination of chronological growth (from infancy to old age) and psychosocial development. Psychosocial development is composed of a “virtue” and two opposing psychological tendencies—one positive (“syntonic”) and one negative (“dystonic”). The seventh stage occurs in adulthood and is referred to as the “Care” stage, named for the virtue that emerges upon successful achievement of this stage. The positive psychological tendency of the Care stage is “generativity.” The negative tendency is “self-absorption” or “stagnation.” Erikson described generativity as “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963, p. 267) and further described it as encompassing “procreativity,” “productivity,” and “creativity” (Erikson & Erikson, 1981). As we will see in later rounds of inquiry, Erikson’s views on hope, intentionality, and procreative action, are most prominent in our OD dataset.

Kenneth Gergen

Kenneth Gergen can be appreciated for introducing the term *generative theory*. In *Toward Generative Theory* (1978), he makes a plea for “generative potency: the capacity to challenge prevailing assumptions and to offer alternatives to patterns of conduct.” In *Relational Being* (2009), Gergen refers to generativity as a catalytic process that brings vitality (or life) to relationships:

We are always already emerging from

relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone. Further, as I will suggest, the future well-being of the planet depends significantly on the extent to which we can nourish and protect not individuals, or even groups, but the generative processes of relating. (p. 15)

Donald Schön

Donald Schön (1979) introduces an extensive recipe for seeing things anew. Awareness of our existing frames and the art of reframing are powerful tools to initiate or to become engaged in generative processes. Schön re-frames the definition of a metaphor in such a way that it makes sense to speak of a *generative metaphor*. Schön sees metaphor as not just a narrative but as the intention to design and to live the narrative. In this sense, Schön considers a metaphor as an interactive process between people that unleashes their potential to frame and solve problems.

Dan McAdams

Dan McAdams concentrates on human development and social policy. According to McAdams’ theory of generativity: 1) cultural demand, e.g., “society demands that adults take responsibility for the next generation,” and 2) inner desire, e.g., a desire for immortality, to defy death and leave a legacy, together lead to 3) a conscious concern for the next generation, which, together with 4) a belief in the goodness of the human enterprise, results in 5) a commitment to action, and

finally 6) action, which includes the creating of the new and maintaining of the good and the worthwhile, e.g., traditions, and the selfless offering up of gifts. Finally, McAdams proposes that through 7) self-narration, adults weave generativity into their own identity, and with subjective scripts “specifying what he or she plans to do in the future to leave a legacy of the self for future generations” (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992, pp. 1004–1006).

Arne Carlsen and Jane Dutton

Carlsen and Dutton published *Research Alive: Exploring Generative Moments in Doing Qualitative Research* in 2011. They find that generativity is best understood as being deeply processual. According to them, “generative experiences are moments of aliveness and transition that also have the power to shape researchers’ engagement and spur human growth” (2011, p. 16). They see “generative moments” not simply as cognitive or individual accomplishments, but rather: “They should also be seen as including embodied, affective, aesthetic and relational dimensions” (2011, p. 20).

Summary

In summary, the ancestors associate generativity with intentionality, human interchange, process, thought-to-action events, and procreation. Their ideas of generativity describe social systems in which people take collective action to co-create their own futures—and are thus closely aligned with, and indeed progenitors of, the discourse on *organizational* generativity within OD.

Round 5: Exploring the Semantics of Generativity—in Dialogue With Our Data

The meaning of a word is its use in the language (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, Section 43).

Our Round 3 inquiry of syntax revealed that generativity was most frequently used as a quality. In this round, we turned from syntax to semantics, guided by this question: “If generativity is a quality, then what is it, exactly, that generativity is a quality of?” An iterative process of reading/rereading of the data revealed three categories of entities of which generative was assumed to be a quality: a thing, a human being, or a process, labeled as Q_t , Q_h , and Q_p , respectively, in Table 4.

Generativity as a Quality of a Thing?

In a small number of fragments (16), things or objects were considered to be generative. These fragments contained information about which kinds of things are being addressed as generative. Here, we found more differences than similarities as to the meaning of generativity. For example: “...a generative metaphor is an invitation to view the world with a new lens...” [18, p. 42].

While the number of fragments of generativity as a thing/object was comparatively small, the “things” themselves were quite diverse, including questions, images, affirmative topics, metaphors, patterns, organizations, science, theories, methods, narratives, approaches, and stories. Most of these generative things are of an abstract nature. Images or stories, for example, can reflect anything; thus, anything could potentially be associated with generativity. And because an image or story might be generative for some but not for others, generativity logically cannot be regarded as an immanent quality of a (tangible, visible, or readable) thing. It seems more appropriate to relate generativity with the “act of perceiving,” be it a story or a stone. In other words, it is the interplay between the observed and (some) observers that can be called generative.

Generativity as a Human Quality?

Nineteen (19) fragments described human beings as generative. An example is: “Generative individuals are able to produce new, innovative ideas and to motivate people to act on these ideas” [18, p. 23]. But can we call someone described as *being* generative but not *doing* generative a generative person? Most descriptions address a potential human capability, yet they do not note any actual, corresponding human behavior.

Generativity as a Quality of a Process!

In the large majority of fragments (136 of 157), generativity appears as a characteristic or quality of a process, a feature of what is happening, what is going on between people, or between people and objects. Examples: “Generativity is defined in this chapter as the creation of...” [3, p. 89]; and: “...generative learning is bringing forth the latent concepts of the past and using them to form associations among abstract concepts and ideas...” [18, p. 20].

Here, we saw a direct link between generativity and various series of related events occurring sequentially over time, i.e., processes. From Erikson’s conceptualization of human life as a “process” (Erikson & Erikson, 1981). unfolding in stages, to Gergen’s treatment of human relations’ processual nature of generativity is prominent, even *preeminent*, in the contemporary OD literature. In our inquiry into the semantics of generativity, 86% of our text fragments were associated with processes, clearly indicating that “processual” is a foundational element of the OG construct we sought to clarify.

Round 6: Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Generativity of Organizational Processes

With the completion of Round 5, we believed the processual nature of generativity to have been firmly established. However, one final round was necessary to achieve the paper’s overall objective—clarifying organizational generativity—and to make the construct more actionable for practitioners. Our task was to identify the qualities (or manifestations) of generative processes themselves and organize them into a conceptual framework that practitioners could use. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 3), frameworks should be detailed enough to

Table 4

Three Categories of Entities Addressed as “Generative” in Our OD Dataset

Category	Label assigned to generativity as a quality of:	Number of fragments ^a	Illustrating text fragments and their source [number in Table 3]
Q _t	Some thing (t = thing)	16	“The Dialogic Mindset pays particular attention to how “generative” any method will be with this group of people for that challenge in this situation” [6, p.9]. “Mantel and Ludema (2004) conducted a study in which participants in an AI intervention were asked to provide narratives that were generative, in other words, narratives that reflected the most powerful and compelling hopes and aspirations of the people” [18, p.14].
Q _h	Someone (h = human)	19	“Generative individuals are able to produce new, innovative ideas and to motivate people to act on these ideas. Affect and emotions serve a powerful force for guiding collective behavior (Neilsen, 2007)...” [18, p.23]. “Generative capacity refers to a person’s capability to be creative and innovative. Idea work is best done in environments that are conducive to enhancing one’s generative capacity” [1, p.117]. “... generativity deconstructed of 10 postures...” [8, p.134].
Q _p	Some action (p = process)	136	“A generative leader is someone with the capacity to sense and actualize emerging futures...” [20, p.4]. “ ... generative emergence refers to the intentional creation of organizations” [14, p.11]. “AI’s generativity is not about its methods or tools, but about our cooperative capacity to reunite seeming opposites such as theory as practice, the secular as sacred...” [10, p.4].

^a In our analysis, a text fragment can refer to qualities of a process as well as qualities of a human being or a thing; thus, the sum in this table exceeds the total of 157 fragments.

be “usable in practical applications...[and] should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations” (Glaser & Straus, 1967, p. 3).

The guiding questions for this final round, therefore, were the following. If our research into organizational generativity is directly associated with processes in organizations, how can practitioners recognize these processes as being generative? How do they manifest themselves? If asked by a practitioner to describe a generative process, what would be our response? Focusing on the 136 processual (“Q_p”) fragments, we coded that data to arrive at a conceptual framework of seven qualities or manifestations of generative processes in organizations. The results appear in Table 5.

Idea-Giving

Generative organizational processes are idea-giving. They generate, or better yet, they are experienced as the generating of new ideas. Generative, idea-giving processes “rejuvenate, reframe” [1, p. 121]; they stimulate “special versions of seeing” (Schön, 1979, p. 255) and seeing “old things in new ways” [3, p. 91] and also [5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 17, 18]—including ways that challenge the status quo. More than simply “intention” or “orientation,” idea-giving organizational processes also bring actual content to the table, such as plans. And not plans necessarily “ordered by top management” but created by whomever is involved, according to their sense of what the present circumstances are really asking.

Relational

Generative processes are manifested as inherently relational; that is, they are “lived within the context of relationships” [8, p. 4]. People relate and communicate, and thereby enact relational processes within organizations. To experience a generative relational process from the inside is to experience “high-quality connections” [18, p. 29] in inquiry and dialogue with colleagues. A generative relational process “catalyzes [that] connectivity” between and among people [19, p. 375]. Acting relationally can be manifested as remembering, even amidst a busy work schedule, to “make time to gather and share” [24, p. 67].

Actionable

Generative organizational processes are actionable. They stimulate people to act—including in novel ways [18, p. 39] and sometimes with unpredictable results [14, p. 11]. Actionable generative processes create different conversations about starting anew. Practitioners are not “stuck;” there is less “analysis paralysis.” Actionable processes provide a sense of what to do, of what comes next. Actionability encourages moving beyond just producing plans to enacting them and living them. This manifestation of generativity in the context of an organization refers to the pure act of dynamically organizing something deemed of value.

Transformational

Generative organizational processes are manifested as transformational. Generative, transformational processes emphasize “bottom-up experiments and learning as you go” [6, p. 10] and “shifting the norms of activities in organizations” [2, p. 150]. Transformation can also be very personal—that is, transformational processes can either initiate or result in significant inner, personal change, which may or may not be apparent to others.

Procreative

Generative organizational processes are procreative and encourage stories that “tell it as it may become” [11, p. xiii]. They produce desirable action or are “conducive to producing in abundance,” meaning growth-oriented action—procreativity self-perpetuates and self-replicates, procreating even itself beyond its catalyzers and partakers. Procreative, generative processes can be manifested as future-forming. Compared with procreativity, the familiar notion of “sustainability” begins to seem replicative of the past and even defensive toward the future. Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, procreativity is also about leaving behind and focusing instead on that which better serves future situations/generations.

Future-Focused

Generative organizational processes are future-focused. They fuel, and are fueled by, feelings of hope and aspiration for future generations and their emergent well-being; they “take what they

have learned and pass it on” [18, p. 22]. Although perhaps not in a physical sense, this manifestation or quality of a generative process suggests a certain direction in which the organization needs to go, also taking into account the widest possible circle of stakeholders.

Disruptive

Generative organizational processes are manifested as disruptive. Any interactive process includes moments of disruption, contradiction, and disequilibrium, which are unexpected but could be experienced as valuable. One has to respond to disruption to make it valuable, which gives this manifestation a stronger or more visible

Table 5

Conceptual Framework of Generative Processes in Organizations

Manifestation	Number of fragments ^a	Illustrating examples within the 136 analyzed text fragments
I (idea-giving)	58	creativity, rejuvenate, reframe [1]; see the world anew, creation of new images, see old things in new ways [3, similar in 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 17, 18]; new images and ideas [7]; extending visions [9]; inspiration to create something new [11]; new insights [16]; new lens, appreciate what you want to multiply, challenge guiding assumptions and generate fresh alternatives [18]; poetics of possibilities [19]; new view on organizations: not as problems but as miracles [20]; special version of seeing [22, similar in 27, 28]; imagination, creativity, to be changed by what is shared [24]; ideas that create inspiration [28]
R (relational)	38	building relationships [3]; generativity is a choice, lived within the context of relationships [8]; dialogue, links a person with the social world, triggers a connection, inquiry/dialogue, high-quality connections [18]; catalyzes connectivity [19]; make time to gather and share [24]
A (actionable)	30	put life back in frozen situations [7]; rigorous actions; stir up the passion, great performance [8]; ongoing stream of intentional action (with unpredictable results) [14]; compels people to act in novel ways, liberates individuals to adapt new practices [18]
T (transformational)	29	shifting the norms or activity in organizations [3]; generative change stimulating experiments bottom-up and learning as you go [6]; generate health, growth, adaptability; de-generativity is left unattended [8]; generative change is ongoing [18]; ongoing change, transformational/identity change [24]; opposite of mechanistic change [26]
P (procreative)	22	tell it as it may become [11]; integrating conditions for emergence, link emergence with intention, to create an emergent entity [14]; models that lead us to an emerging future, repetitive dialogue [18]; to spawn self-evolving practices [20]; the generative as an absolute quality of life itself [23]; change that builds upon itself [24]; to grow a capacity for growing, tend to be recursive; achieve multiple and even multiplying benefits, once you’ve grown the organization’s capacity for learning, it keeps on growing—gradually becoming self-regulating, self-improving, self-evolving [26]

Manifestation	Number of fragments ^a	Illustrating examples within the 136 analyzed text fragments
F (future-focused)	19	to make human life all that it is capable of becoming, forming expectations for the future [9]; purposefully charged and life-centric [11]; people who experienced it, spread the word / endless [13]; future actions, hopes, and aspirations, guiding the next generation, care about the future of next generations, to pass on what has been learned [18]; expansion of shared values toward human good, social good meaningful and enduring [19]; create the future / participate how reality unfolds, sense and actualize emerging futures [20]; not only improve but live-giving [25]; benefit future wellbeing [28]
D (disruptive)	8	capacity to reunite seeming opposites (theory-practice; secular-sacred) [10]; create disequilibrium, produce stress, amplify to critical threshold [14]; enjoining dualities [19]

^aOne text fragment can refer to more than one of the seven manifestations. Hence, the sum of numbers in this table exceeds the total of 136 fragments.

push for actual change than the Transformational manifestation. Disruptive processes can be generative because they have the “capacity to reunite seeming opposites” (e.g. theory-practice; secular-sacred) [10, p. 4].

Summary

To put our framework to the test, we come back to the question posed above: if asked by a practitioner to describe OG, our current response would be: OG is an organization’s future-forming potential, manifest as seven qualities of processes that are enacted by the members and stakeholders of the organization; processes that are relational, and inviting of broad participation; processes that are transformational—sometimes to the point of being disruptive; and organizational processes that are future forming, with ideas, action, and procreating. While we believe this framework to be both clarifying and actionable—we provide guidelines for practice below—we also recognize it is not final. Like the processes it describes, the framework too is processual; it is ever-emerging. Paraphrasing Miles and Huberman (1984), Leshem and Trafford (2007, p. 95, emphasis added) write that conceptual frameworks should be “the *current version* of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated,” with the understanding that the framework will

evolve with subsequent practice and research—i.e., in generative fashion. Conceptual frameworks, including this one, are never “final” or “complete,” but they can be useful nevertheless, for both practice and research and particularly for opportunities that—like generativity—are new and exploratory (Weaver-Hart, 1988).

Discussion

This paper is fueled by the conviction that OD practice and research, rather than only preparing for the future, should focus on organizations proactively forming their future and that ‘generativity’ offers a promising approach for doing precisely that. A preliminary investigation showed that the extant OD literature addressing generativity was underdeveloped and often unclear. The purpose of the paper then came into focus: to clarify the construct of organizational generativity to be more actionable for practitioners, researchers, and managers. We chose grounded theory, itself a generative approach that would enable us to capture and report on this clarifying “in flight” (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2015, p. 199) as it emerged. In successive rounds of inquiry, we revealed the syntax, the semantics, and the inherent processual nature of generativity in organizations,

culminating in a sevenfold framework for clarifying generative organizational processes as relational, transformative, disruptive, future-focused, ideagiving, actionable, and procreative. Below, we provide guidelines for putting the framework into practice and then close out the paper with suggestions for future research.

Putting Organizational Generativity Into Action—Practical Guidelines

So how can OD practitioners, managers, and consultants add the idea of generativity to their practice? How can they use and improve the framework we have developed to assess the generativity of their current processes and to create new ones? Below, we offer a kind of recipe for practitioner “cooks” to use, based on the assumptions that the cooks are aware of their intentions and beliefs regarding organizational generativity as a future-forming capacity. Therefore, a moment of self-reflection on personal purpose could be regarded as a proper preparation before taking up the guidelines in practice.

Be Aware of Intangibility

To begin, an important disclaimer needs to be made. First, our paper offers *an alternative* to traditional/historical OD practice. And our central topic, generativity, has significant implications (if not complications) for concreteness and measurability when compared with more established theories and methods. With generativity, the (im)material we are craftily holding and molding here is that of human interactivity itself, the effects of which (successful or otherwise) are to be fully measured only in the future. Even if we replace the word “concrete” with “specific,” we will face the limits of language and those using it. When observing relational processes, any concreteness about their generativity might be found in dialogically obtained consensus among participants, or “partakers”—and with this dialogue itself influencing the process. What one could report, in the most specific way, is this: “our process appears to be generative, in the sense of showing certain manifestations at a certain moment.” Besides reporting on more tangible deliverables so far, we should report and reflect on the potential of future delivery. In the realm of generativity, we are dealing with moving targets.

Try Raising Managerial Tolerance for “Processual Generativity” or “Organizing Generatively”

Forming the future—like most innovative practices—implies risk and uncertainty, and the tolerance for such activity will vary according to many factors, including managers’ risk appetite, organizational culture, and of course, financial and economic conditions, micro and macro. In addition, generative processes are just that—they are processual, and by definition, never-ending, and are often characterized by a certain “ongoingness,” all of which runs counter to the prevailing idea of processes (and managerial practice in general) as having discrete and finite endpoints or outcomes. When speaking with those unaware of or perhaps even skeptical of generativity, better to begin those (generative) conversations now—as Margaret Wheatly reminds us: “Even great and famous change initiatives begin this way, with the actions of just a few people, when some friends and I started talking” (2009, p. 145). Continue having these conversations as long as needed.

Observe the Process Itself

This may sound obvious, but in practice, we often see processes being assessed only by the (end or interim) results, products, or deliverables instead of looking at the process itself. Edgar Schein writes: “The emphasis is on “process” because I believe that how things are done between people and in groups is as—or more important than—what is done” (Schein, 1999, p. 3). Relatedly, and particularly for external/internal OD consultants, beware of the focus shifting away from the process toward persons, things, or both.

Find the Right Processes

Organizations are crowded with (relational) processes (Hoogendijk, 2017/2021). Every organizational actor is involved in multiple processes but may not be highly aware of such. It is not obvious where to start when trying to find a process to assess its possible generativity. Insofar as an organization has made an effort to describe processes, by which we mean further than job and task descriptions, or org charts, these process descriptions contain clues about where to start the search.

Processes are supposed to deliver something. So, try to find the point where products or services are expected. The receiver of that can be—will mostly be—an internal client waiting for a report, advice, a newsletter, a promotion, a change, etcetera, or an external client waiting for what has been promised. From that point of delivery, trace back among the people involved in co-producing that (internal/external) service or product. They may represent a department, a team, or just a more random bunch of people. Observe their conversations and their interactions. The fact that the processes, as we address them in this paper, sometimes are so hard to find is that organizational life generally has been designed around functional or hierarchical structures through which processes flow.

Observe From Within the Process

We recommend that practitioners sense or experience the process from within as a participant or partaker. This is a profound assignment, as John Shotter (2006) explains:

We have here, then, a process of inquiry in which practitioners become co-researchers and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been ‘struck by’ in the unfolding process. It is a process in which both researchers and practitioners alike are engaged in creating with each other an ‘action guiding’ sense from within their lived and living experience of their shared circumstances. (p. 601)

Because generative processes are relational, they cannot be fully assessed with only external measures or snapshots. A brainstorming process may fill the walls with hundreds of Post-It notes, but that does not mean it was experienced as generative or resulted in new ideas. Conversely, a period of inactivity or collective silence during a creative process might appear unproductive but can just as likely contribute significantly to generativity and the envisioning of new perspectives. Otto Sharmer and Katrin Kaeufer, for example, in the *SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (2015), speak of “catching social reality creation in flight” (p. 199). The implicit knowing of taking part in a generative process seems the most significant. Making this knowledge explicit needs to be done with the utmost care, if it should be done at all.

Start With What Is Already There

Before attempting to initiate generative processes, first find out if and where self-sustaining, self-improving, or self-organizing processes already exist and how viable they are in your environment. Rather than the processes as a whole, assess these specific qualities—the sustaining, the improving, or the organizing—intuitively on possible manifestations of processual generativity. Such assessments will contribute to further understanding and, perhaps with some generative OD guidance, shed light on ways to even strengthen the generativity of the respective processes. In other words: leave the gap analysis in the toolbox. What we focus on appreciates or grows in value (Stavros et al., 2015).

Use Questions as Instruments of Inquiry

In qualitative research, questions are the most common instrument of inquiry. To find out whether process manifestations adhere to our sevenfold conceptual framework (see Table 5), we need to ask questions. The most basic form would be like “Is this process relational?”, “Is it transformational?”, and so on. We can make the questions more specific if we inquire into the behaviors of the partakers. Let us illustrate this by presenting one question for each manifestation. Take into consideration that every question can be asked to yourself as well as others involved in the process.

Relational. Do the partakers stay connected, and keep the conversation going, even when the “leader” (facilitator, chair, etc.) is no longer present?

Transformational. If the partakers kept a journal of their behavior and opinions, would their notes show changes over time?

Future-Focused. Do the conversations and considerations in any way show explicit attention to an (ever-changing) future?

Disruptive. Do the partakers memorize unexpected events in the process?

Idea-Giving. Are new ideas (options for action) created and considered regularly?

Actionable. Are new ideas carried out or tested in practice, and is even the slightest attempt to contribute to process improvement appreciated?

Procreative. Does the process also create deliverables that are beneficiary to its future partakers or stakeholders?

Practice, Practice, Practice—Generativity Requires Craftsmanship

Recognizing generativity involves observing phenomena one might have overlooked before. It can only take place in contact with the process to be observed. This is a craft that may benefit from practical advice or support and includes becoming (more) sensitive to the phenomena of non-generative or even degenerative processes. Reframing is useful, as are “What if?” questions and asking not only “What is next?” but also “What is possible from here? What opportunities does our current situation (and our various re-framings of it) afford?” Recognizing generativity can be aided by remembering the characteristics of *non- or degenerative processes* or situations: detachment, apathy, resistance, tunnel-vision, unsafe, domination, indecisiveness, stagnation, alienation, incivility, and protectionism. The practical advice would be: if you detect such or similar manifestations of non-generativity, just be aware, do not focus on them but on new, more generative narratives.

Whether we should call these skills “new” or necessary, the fact is that they can be regarded as “advanced.” Be it Scharmer’s (2009) fourth level of listening: “generative listening;” be it an excerpt of the “Inner Development Goals,” as presented by Ekskåret Foundation (2022); be it Appreciative Inquiry, not the method but the internalized way of being. Becoming actionable in OG requires purpose, practice, deep understanding, and learning, not necessarily in this order, and there are no exams.

Future Research

To the extent that organizational generativity is truly an alternative pathway for OD, future research will likely proceed in a direction other than that of traditional OD. The question then becomes, what other theories and research agendas, either within, adjacent to, or well beyond OD, are aligned with the further exploration of OG?

Until now, OG has been strongly connected to the world of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2013); our research has also made clear that generativity is more broadly a processual quality. Generativity may also be enabled or accelerated by other relational practices where diversity and inclusion, and equality between people in organizations are taken seriously, like Open Space, Deep Democracy, or The Circle Way. In this context of relational practices, our concept of generativity is not the next. It is rather an approach to find out whether or to what extent these practices contribute to their generativity, i.e., to the intended future-forming effects. The method does not work by itself; it is always about the practitioner-facilitator who applies the practice. Those who add OG to their competencies are likely to ignite something new and meaningful.

In his ODC Distinguished Scholar Presentation, Andrew van de Ven (2020) proposes an “alphabetic” pathway to the future, from OC (organizational change) to OD (organizational development), and toward OE (organizational engagement), the latter of which seems most aligned with, or a stepping stone toward OG. The future-forming research of Ken Gergen (2015) shares much in common with OG as conceptualized herein.

Adjacent to OD, research on post-bureaucracy forms of organizing (e.g., Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Maimone, 2017) and organizational designs prioritizing fluidity over fixity (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2016) hold promise. Regarding dialogic OD, since dialogue is to be considered a process without an *a priori* or fixed result, one could argue that dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, 2015b) is to be considered adjacent to OG. Nevertheless, while OG emerged inherently from a future-forming intention, dialogic OD is strongly positioned as a (welcome) alternative for diagnostic OD. Furthermore, a dialogical process is surely a relational process, with the potential of becoming generative, but may not necessarily “check all the seven boxes.”

Finally, and outside traditional OD altogether, scholars from economics (Tajedin et al., 2019), computer science (Zittrain, 2008), and healthcare (Pawson et al., 2011) have already identified generativity—with its procreativity, akin

to autopoiesis (Maturana, 2012)—as one way to avoid the “known knowns” that currently constrain the research of OD (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014; Schwarz & Bouckenooghe, 2021).

Perhaps future research on OG may bring us into the domain of the “unknown unknowns”? When we “manage” to better understand the generativity of processes in organizations, and if we succeed in strengthening or perhaps even multiplying generative processes, then we may assume that such enhancements contribute to the generativity of the organization as a whole. Is the generativity “of” an organization to be considered the cumulation of generativity “in” that organization? Is an organization simply the sum of its processes, or is the relation between the parts and the whole perhaps of a different kind? Answering these questions may require a way of thinking that is more emergent and less analytical. What will emerge from further inquiries into the generativity of an organization? What would be entailed by generativity as a more fully developed method of inquiry? What if, as Gergen (2015) suggests, research was less about mirroring the world and more about making our world?



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