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WHAT ARE WE MISSING? Problems with using generational cohorts in leadership research and suggestions for a better direction.

Abstract

The rising costs of recruiting and hiring workers and the seismic shift of age demographics in the United States workforce has created much stir around the concept of generational cohorts. Although much has been done by researchers and practitioners alike to attempt a better understanding of each generational group's leadership preferences, confusing and contradictory results has attracted much criticism. This critique has inspired efforts to look at the concept of leadership and followership preference through an alternative lifespan developmental lens. Because leadership influences are inherently social influences, a person's overall lifespan development level may potentially provide a deeper perspicacity of the phenomenon than examining it from the more conventional generational cohort perspective. However, specific research into this area is lacking. This paper adds to the literature by uncovering what we are missing in research and practice when we look at age-related leadership phenomena solely from a generational cohort perspective. A review of the contradicting literature on generational cohorts and leadership is offered. Next, specific lifespan developmental theories are examined, and propositions and implications of such research are extended.

Introduction

When looking at the size and demographics of the current workforce in the United States, it becomes clear that the average age of the labor force is decreasing (Gronbach & Moye, 2017). This is induced by the very substantial group of novice workers entering the workforce and filling the void left by an equally large group of retiring employees. In an effort to understand this development, people in popular press and media outlets have decided to frame this demographic shift in terms of generational cohorts (Graen & Grace, 2014; E. Ng et al., 2012; Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009; Winograd & Hais, 2011). A generational cohort is a group of people who were born within a few years of each other into the same historical and social-cultural context and have developed common attributes caused by shared participation in similar life events (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Schermerhorn, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010). The youngest generational cohort group in the workforce today has been labeled by many in society as the "Millennials" (Dessler, 2012;

Salahuddin, 2010; Twenge, 2010; VanMeter et al., 2013). As scholars have worked to better understand the leadership preferences of this cohort, they have established that Millennials prefer visionary leadership (Kraus, 2017), value-centered leadership competencies (Maier et al., 2015), ethical and servant leadership traits (VanMeter et al., 2013) and transformational leadership styles over other leadership styles such as transactional, authoritarian or laissez-faire styles (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016; Lee et al., 2016). These various findings support the idea that generational experiences influence the way different cohorts view leadership. Generational cohorts are said to be a group of people tied together predicated on them sharing similar life events in the same historical time period (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Schermerhorn, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010). It is in these shared experiences that they develop a culture of their own.

It should be noted that there is some contention with this line of reasoning as not all research done on generational cohorts has produced clear and evident results. In fact, numerous studies have looked at these generational cohorts and have established very meager, if any differences between Millennials and other generational cohort groups. When looking at leadership traits, some researchers have discovered mostly homogeneous preferences among these cohorts with minimal disparities in desirable leadership traits (Ahn & Ettner, 2014; Arsenault, 2004; Farag et al., 2009; Gentry et al., 2011; Taylor & Stein, 2014; Wieck et al., 2002). Deal, et al. (2010) stated in their review of the literature that "practitioners need to remember that despite the fact that generational differences exist, the differences are modest at best" (p. 196). Because of the modest effect sizes of these findings, some researchers have called for a "formal moratorium to be placed on the application of the idea of generational differences as an explanatory framework in leadership theory, research, and practice" and suggest that leadership scholars look at this phenomenon from a different perspective (Rudolph et al., 2018, p. 55). More specifically, Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) argue that using generational differences to explain age related phenomena is not fruitful in that there is much difficulty in separating the effects of a person's age

(life stage or maturity level), period (effect of their specific historic time period), and cohort (their shared experiences). Even though media outlets, popular press, and business consultants have firmly subscribed to the idea of generational cohorts being a useful concept, leadership scholars have been hesitant to acquiesce.

Some researchers have suggested the use of a lifespan approach as an alternative way of representing age-related leadership phenomena (Rudolph et al., 2018; Zacher, 2015; Zacher et al., 2015). This lifespan perspective on leadership suggests that there are age-related changes in how leadership abilities are viewed (Zacher et al., 2015). This perspective focuses on individual trajectories of continuous development which is argued to be better positioned to explain age-related differences and changes in both the leader and the followers' attitude, motivation, and behavioral outcomes across time (Rudolph et al., 2018). More specifically, the lifespan development perspective or meta-theory, identifies three broad categories of influence on the development that individuals have to process, react to, and act on. These categories include normative age-graded influences (or developmental causes that are experienced by most people as they age), history-graded influences (or causes linked to the historical period each individual develops in), and nonnormative influences (those causes that are unique to the individual) (Zacher, 2015). For example, Barbuto, et al. (2007) reported that the effect of a leader's age on followers' ratings of transactional and/or transformational leadership style was significant as older leaders received higher ratings in the full range of leadership model subscales of idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and effectiveness by their followers.

This growing proclivity towards the lifespan perspective on age-related leader and follower processes suggests that it may better explain leadership behaviors and outcomes than the generational cohort perspective. What, then, are we missing when looking at leadership through the popular context of generational cohorts? It is incumbent upon leadership scholars to further investigate this perspective to help shed light on the confusing and contradictory generational cohort

research. Because leadership influences are inherently social influences, a person's overall lifespan development level may potentially provide a deeper insight to the phenomenon than looking at it from the more conventional generational cohort perspective. However, research is lacking into how specific lifespan development theories will affect how leadership is viewed. First, we extend the research in this area by reviewing the literature regarding generational cohorts and leadership. Next, we review various lifespan developmental theories and develop propositions to future research on leadership. Lastly, we offer some implications to why this proposed research is significant to not just leadership scholarship, but to practitioners as well.

Generational Cohorts

Recently, the topic of generations has become widespread in management and human resource circles. When looking at the imminent shortage of college-educated workers, the attraction, onboarding, development, and retention of talent to effectuate the company's employment needs is of the upmost concern (Dessler, 2012). It is from this dilemma that the idea of generational cohorts may have gained traction. A generational cohort is a group of people whose birth dates fall within a few years of each other, placing them into the same historic and social-cultural context (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Schermerhorn, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010). By experiencing similar life events, the theory claims that these individuals have developed shared attributes, characteristics, and preferences (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Schermerhorn, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010). The idea of generational cohorts originated from Karl Mannheim's concept of the "generation unit" in his essay on the sociological problem of generations (Mannheim, 1952). This theory stems from two major perspectives. First, the social forces perspective that places people within multidimensional and interrelated groups that develop throughout history (Gilleard, 2004; Ryder, 1985). The second perspective is the cohort perspective which views generations as simply "collections of people born in a given time period" (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. 140). A majority of research in this area assumes that differences

among social generations is an organizational phenomenon that is evident in the workplace and frames most of the research behind generations and shared generational identities (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Current Generational Cohorts. In the United States, four different generational cohorts have gained prominence and are generally acknowledged in the workforce (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). Unfortunately, agreement among researchers on the exact birth date ranges of these generational cohorts and what exactly to call them does not exist. The youngest generation that is now fully in the workforce has been called the "Millennials." However, this name is not entirely agreed upon as list of names given to this group is very diverse and includes: Baby Boom Echo, Echo Boomers, Gen Y, Gen Y'ers, Generation Yers, Millennials, Net Generation, Nexters, nGen, Generation Me, GenMe, and the "Selfie" Generation (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Anderson et al., 2016; Carucci & Epperson, 2011; Salahuddin, 2010; Sessa et al., 2007; Taylor & Stein, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010; VanMeter et al., 2013). Various studies have started the birth range of this cohort as early as 1977 to 1984 and ended it from 1999 to after the new millennium as late as 2002 (Dessler, 2012; Salahuddin, 2010; Twenge, 2015; VanMeter et al., 2013). See table 1 for consolidated age demographic information.

The generation cohort that precedes the Millennials is commonly termed "Generation X." They too have claimed a variety of titles in the literature including Generation X, Gen X, Xers, Gen Xers, and Generation Xers (Salahuddin, 2010; Sessa et al., 2007; Twenge, 2010). The birth range of this cohort is said to have started anywhere between 1960 and 1965 and end anywhere between 1980 and 1985 (Salahuddin, 2010; Sessa et al., 2007; Twenge, 2010).

Predating Generation X is the cohort that is generally called the "Baby Boomer" generation. Most researchers agree on the name of this cohort as very few alternatives other than similar renditions such as "Boomers" or "Baby Boomers" are given. The popularity of this name stems from the belief that this cohort's namesake was based on the drastic surge or "boom" in the birth rate after World

War II ended in 1945 (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). This cohort's birth range is alleged to have started anywhere between 1940 and 1946 and ended anywhere between 1960 and 1964 (Salahuddin, 2010; Sessa et al., 2007).

The oldest major cohort has some noteworthy inconsistencies in the research. This group seems to consist of several cohorts that are typically lumped together to make up a generational cohort that is largely now absent from the workforce. These multiple cohorts consist of the Veterans having birth dates from 1922 to 1943, WWIIers being born between 1909 and 1933, the Swingers or Silents being born between 1934 and 1945, the Matures being born between 1925 and 1942, or the Silent Generation or Traditionalists being born any time before 1945 (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Salahuddin, 2010; Sessa et al., 2007). Although there are still members of this cohort in the workforce today, few remain. Those who persist do so because they have a financial need to work or just simply enjoy work (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014).

It should be noted that a new adolescent generation has been recently identified in the literature and popular press. This cohort is termed as Generation Z and the birth dates of this new fifth generation is said to have been born as early as 1995 to 2001 and go up to the present day (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Generation Z has been said to be shaped by the advancement of technology, issues of violence, a volatile economy and social justice movements (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Although some research has been done on this new generation as a cohort, most is in its infancy as the beginning of this cohort is just now starting to enter higher educational institutions and the workforce. As with prior generations, the starting point of this generation is currently being debated.

Table 1

Consolidated Demographic Information for Generational Cohorts				
Generation	**Various Names**	**Birth Year Range**	**Current Ages**	**Population Size**
WWIIers	WWII'ers Veterans The Swingers The Silents The Silent Generation The Matures The Traditionalists	Before 1945 *Sub Groups:* *Veterans* *1922-1943* *Swingers or Silents* *1934-1945* *Matures* *1925-1942*	77 and older *Sub Groups:* *Veterans* *100-79* *Swingers or* *Silents* *88-77* *Matures* *97-80*	39 Million
Baby Boomers	Baby Boomers Boomers	1940 - 1964	82-58	78–85 Million
Generation X	Generation X Gen X Xers Gen Xers Generation Xers	1960 - 1982	62-40	44 Million
Millennials	Baby Boom Echo Echo Boomers Generation Y Gen Y Gen Yers Generation Me GenMe Generation Yers Millennials Net Generation Nexters nGen Selfie Generation Yers	1977 – 2002 *Sub Group: Gen Z* *1995-Present* *(Some studies look at Gen Z as a subgroup of the Millennials)*	45-22 *Sub Group: Gen Z* *27 - Newborn*	70–80 Million
Gen Z	Generation Z Gen Z Zillennial	1995-Present	27-Newborn	65 Million
Citation: (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Carucci & Epperson, 2011; Dessler, 2012; Gesell, 2010; Gibson et al., 2009; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Salahuddin, 2010; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Sessa et al., 2007; Taylor & Stein, 2014; Twenge, 2010; VanMeter et al., 2013)				

Millennial Cohort Differences. The recent fascination with the concept of generational cohorts may stem from the interchange of the two largest generational groups and their influence on today's marketplace (Gronbach & Moye, 2017). Baby Boomers are estimated to be around 78 million in size and will be replaced in the workforce by the new Millennial cohort of equal size, estimated to be within 70 and 80 million people causing organizations to look for ways to attract, lead, and retain this younger cohort (Sessa et al., 2007; VanMeter et al., 2013).

This seismic shift has transferred much of the research concentration to the Millennials and how they compare to and interact with other generational cohorts. Understanding these distinctions is central to the purpose of this study. Gibson, et al. (2009) surveyed 5,057 members of the three main cohorts in the workplace and report findings that confirm the popular profiles of each. When compared to the other cohorts, Millennials seem to value true friendship (or close companionship), achievement, independence, individuality, and determination more than other cohorts (Gibson et al., 2009). Supporting

the stereotype that Millennials job hop, they reported this cohort to regard loyalty less than their predecessors and are quick to bore of a position if career opportunities are not immediately obvious to them (Gibson et al., 2009).

In their influential study on generational cohorts and work values, Twenge, et al. (2010) looked at a sample of high school seniors in 1976, 1991, and 2006 (n = 16,507) to determine if work values have changed over generations. By isolating generational differences from age differences, they report that leisure values have increased steadily while work centrality has declined. Millennials were discovered to place a higher value in work-life balance (d = .22 when compared to Generation X, and d = .57 when compared with Baby Boomers), prefer extrinsic rewards more (d = .26 when compared to Boomers) intrinsic rewards less (d = -.16 when compared to Generation X and d = -.20 when compared to Baby Boomers), and appreciate social interactions significantly less than the other cohorts (d = -.18 when compared to Generation X and d = -.28 when compared to Baby Boomers; Twenge et al., 2010). In a departure from popular belief about the cohort, they were determined to not favor altruistic work values such as helping or societal worth more than the previous generations do (Twenge et al., 2010).

When examining generational cohort management values and practices, Taylor and Stein (2014) used a sequential explanatory mixed method study design to find evidence that indicates generational differences in management values among the three main working cohorts. They concluded that while Baby Boomers and Generation X cohorts valued problem solving and clarifying expectations more, Millennials placed a higher importance in long term planning and effective planning skills (Taylor & Stein, 2014). They also report that the Millennial cohort promulgate teambuilding as their least important management skill (Taylor & Stein, 2014).

Millennial Leadership Preferences. The multigenerational workforce has focused some researchers' efforts to look at how leadership is perceived and preferred by this younger generation. Understanding how they look at leadership gives some insight to the implicit leadership theories they develop. Sessa, et al. (2007) looked at how the different generational cohorts perceived leadership attributes. Using a specified process, they provided participants with different iterations of a list of 40 different leadership attributes. Based on the respondent's selections, that list was then narrowed to a list of between 8 to 12 attributes and then rank ordered. After surveying these 447 people from four different generational cohorts, their results provided evidence to support their hypothesis that there are generational differences in what people perceive as the most important attributes a leader can possess (Sessa et al., 2007). More specifically, they claim to have established partial evidence to support the notion that managers and subordinates perceive leaders from different generational cohorts to differ in their leadership behaviors (Sessa et al., 2007). Members of the Millennial cohort were perceived to value such leadership attributes as focus, dedication, and optimism more highly than other cohorts while valuing characteristics such as honesty, big-picture orientation, and cultural sensitivity less (Sessa et al., 2007). This lends evidence to the idea that Millennials may have distinct conceptualizations of their prototypical leader. However, besides finding simple preferences, this study does not explore the relationship any further. In their review of the current leadership and generational cohort literature, Al-Asfour and Lettau (2014) provided a summarized explanation of what they observed as the preferred leadership styles of each generational cohort (p. 60). Although not tied to any particular leadership theory, they assert that the Baby Boomer generation prefers a more collegial and consensual leadership style where Generation X does not respect authority like past generations and prefers more egalitarian relationships (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). They also espouse that the Millennial generation "like leaders who pull people together" and favor polite relationship with authority (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014).

In a study of Millennials working in academic libraries across Big Ten academic institutions (as well as the University of Chicago), Graybill (2014) surveyed 49 full time library faculty, managerial professionals, and/or library staff/specialists to find their perspectives on leadership. Using a simple frequency method, the study contends that the leadership attributes indicated by Millennials as the most important are group/teamwork, communications, respect, vision, and influence (Graybill, 2014). Also looking at Millennial leadership preferences in the tourism and hospitality industry, Bodenhausen and Curtis (2016) surveyed 62 students who were about to enter the industry. They maintain that their results show a definite Millennial preference for transformational leadership and employee involvement (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016). Using Podsakoff et al's 1990 measure of transformational leadership (see Podsakoff et al., 1990) and measures of employee involvement, they establish that the transformational leadership related to participated decision making $F(7, 52) = 3.81, p = .002$, information sharing $(7, 52) = 18.74, p < .0001$, performance review $(7, 52) = 8.64, p < .0001$, and training

$(7, 52) = 3.85$, $p = .002$; (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016). Also looking within the hospitality industry, Maier, et al. (2015) surveyed 276 Millennials to identify what the cohort viewed as the most important value-centered leadership competencies. Using Tavanti's 2006 value-centered leadership framework (see Tavanti, 2006), they contend that inclusiveness, empowerment, and collaboration were the most important of the aggregated value-centered leadership competencies measured (Maier et al., 2015). Kraus (2017) looked at Generation X and Millennials and how they perceived emotional intelligence based on Goleman's emotional leadership theory (See Goleman, 2001) and concluded that their emotional leadership style preference was significantly dependent on the person's generational cohort ($F(6, 98)$ 3.390, $p = 004$; p. 69). More specifically, of the six areas included in the model (Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetting, Coaching, Visionary, and Commanding leadership), Millennials preferred Visionary leadership style while Generation X members valued Coaching leadership style the most (Kraus, 2017).

Few empirical studies have focused on Millennials as leaders. However, Haeger and Lingham (2013) looked at patterns of leadership in interactions and leadership expectations between 13 Millennial leaders and 13 of their direct reports who were at least 20 years older. Based on results of their qualitative framework, they report that leadership behavior among younger leaders is being met with confusion by older direct reports causing what they call "generational normative collisions" to happen when expectations are not congruent (p. 290). In their interviews, they uncovered that followers from the older generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers) expected a more people-centered approach to leadership while their Millennial supervisors were adopting more task-centered or results-centered approaches which lead to strained interactions within the dyad (Haeger & Lingham, 2013).

Millennial Cohort Similarities. Not all generational cohort studies of leadership have uncovered distinct differences in the preferences and attitudes of these generational groups. A number of studies have reported very small variances, if any. For example, when looking at leadership traits, Ahn and Ettner (2014) used a mixed-methods design framework to explore how fundamental leadership ideals are viewed throughout different generations. After interviewing and surveying both company executives and early-career stage professionals, they discovered how different generations ranked

leadership values were not significantly different (Ahn & Ettner, 2014). Similarly, Farag, et al. (2009) surveyed 475 registered nurses from two different generational cohorts (Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts). They reported that cohorts did not have a significant difference in the perceptions of their manager's leadership style.

Gentry, et al. (2011) surveyed 7,049 managers (3,317 baby boomers, 3,303 from Generation X, and 429 Millennials) to study their leadership style preferences. These managers were asked what they perceive to be the most important leadership practices needed for success in their organization and were rated by their direct supervisors on their skill level in these leadership practices. They encountered that although there were some disparities in the various practices endorsed by each cohort, the small effect sizes of these diversities indicate that "any practical differences are minor at best" (Gentry et al., 2011, p. 45). When conducting a mixed method study exploring the differences among female administrators in higher education, Taylor and Stein (2014) report differences in cohort managerial practices in the quantitative phase of their study, but antithetically observed more similarities than variations in the qualitative phase (Taylor & Stein, 2014). Costanza, et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis of 20 studies allowing for 18 generational pairwise comparisons across four generations (19,961 total subjects) looking specifically at job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions, claimed that the relationship between generational membership and work-related outcomes were "moderate to small, essentially zero in many cases" (p. 375). After their review of major generational cohort literature, Deal, et al. (2010) concluded that "practitioners need to remember that despite the fact that generational difference exists, the differences are modest at best" (p. 196).

Contradictions in Millennial Research. In addition to the confusing results in the current literature on the preferences of generational cohorts, there seems to also be some contradictory results. For example, Millennials have been reported to be more materialistic and self-centered (Twenge & Kasser, 2013) and rate social values such as making friends lower than other cohorts (Twenge et al., 2010), but also seem to be more socially motivated and desire companionship (Gibson et al., 2009) and prefer social job attributes such as having good people to work with (Kroth & Young, 2014). They have been discovered to prefer extrinsic rewards such as money and status more than others (Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), but yet also known to prefer social job attributes such as opportunities

for skill development to external job attributes such as job location and receiving regular pay increases (Kroth & Young, 2014). McGinnis-Johnson and Ng (2016) looked at how money influenced Millennials in the nonprofit work sector and uncovered that despite concerns that this cohort is motivated by extrinsic rewards, they are less likely to switch from the nonprofit work sectors to others on account of pay (p. 15). Analogously, Waples and Brachle (2020) found that a firm's high or low level of pay did not affect the influence a company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives has on making the organization more or less attractive to the Millennial cohort (p. 876). They have been revealed to value collaborating with others and being team players (Maier et al., 2015), but when put in management positions, they have been reported to rate team building as one of the least important skills that managers should exhibit (Taylor & Stein, 2014). They have been shown by some to have increased desire for leisure and a decreased prioritization of work to other facets in their lives (Twenge et al., 2010), while at the same time are seen by others as a "very hard-working Millennial generation" (Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2018, p. 954). Bodenhausen and Curtis (2016) claimed that this cohort desires being given clear direction and mentoring from supervisors, yet Sessa et al., (2007) report that Millennials did not rate feedback as highly as other cohorts (p. 68). Millennials were discovered to favor altruistic work values such as societal work less than other cohorts (Twenge et al., 2010), yet have been known to pass employment offers unless the organization offering employment complies with basic corporate social responsibility requirements (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). When commenting on the empirical research published on generational cohorts, Deal, et al. (2010) describe the results as being "confusing at best and contradictory at worst" (p. 191). These seemingly discrepant and somewhat paradoxical findings in the generational cohort literature are certainly a cause for concern and underscore the importance of further exploration into the topic.

Lifespan Development Perspective

Not all research is supportive of the suitability and practicality of the generational cohort theory. It should be noted that there has been some significant animosity towards the perceived usefulness of studying generations in larger cohorts, hailing calls for researchers to take extreme caution in the practice (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015;

Rudolph et al., 2018; Zacher, 2015). For instance, Zacher (2015) argued that the main concern with the generation concept in research is that it takes a continuous variable (e.g., age or time) and divides it into a few distinct pieces by using arbitrary cutoffs and atheoretical groupings (p. 243). Also critical of the practice, Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) contend that using generational cohorts in research is plagued by the challenge of sorting out or differentiating the effects of age, period, and cohort (p. 309). They conclude that it is an insurmountable challenge for researchers to separate and assess the amount of unique variation that is associated with aging (life stage and maturity), the unique variation associated with a specific historical time period, and the unique variation associated with groups of individuals based on shared experiences (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015).

When looking at generational cohorts strictly from a leadership perspective, Rudolph, et al. (2018) put forth four "dangers in generationalized thinking" with respect to the leadership process. The first danger asserts that using this perspective creates false dichotomies (p. 54). They point out that generationalized thinking advocates for exclusivity rather than inclusiveness by focusing on "groups and group differences rather than individuals and individual differences" (Rudolph et al., 2018, p. 54). Second, this thinking oversimplifies and reduces the complex phenomenon of aging into a very abstract and abridged model of the world where a more intricate approach is needed. The third danger they call attention to is that by using this generational model, the role of the cohort is overemphasized and the developmental process (i.e., interindividual differences and intraindividual development) are largely ignored. Lastly, they claim that generation thinking is dangerous because "it prescribes a resignation to fate" in that it assumes that membership in a specific faction of people determines individual attributes (Rudolph et al., 2018, p. 54). These criticisms have propagated the idea that when looking at age-related phenomena in leadership development, processes, and outcomes, a different approach is needed. This has caused a predilection for the lifespan developmental perspective as it is seen as a promising alternative to the generational cohort mindset (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Day, 2011; Rosing & Jungmann, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2018; Zacher et al., 2015). It is because of this that understanding lifespan development theory is central to this study.

The lifespan developmental theory originated from the field of developmental psychology and is primarily concerned with ontogenesis, or the "description, explanation, and modification (optimization) of developmental processes in the

human life course from conception to death" (Baltes et al., 1980). The overarching goal of this perspective is to gain knowledge about general principles of life-long development, interindividual developmental similarities and differences, and the degree and conditions of individual malleability or adaptability of development (Baltes, 1987). Although called a "theory" by many researchers (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009; Truxillo & Burlacu, 2015; Zacher et al., 2015), it is widely understood that lifespan developmental psychology is more of an orientation or a family of theories (meta-theory) that implies a conceptual and methodological framework that is used for the study of behavioral development (Baltes et al., 1980). In order to clarify this, Baltes (1987) put forth seven theoretical propositions for characteristics of lifespan developmental psychology that provides some prototypical features of the approach (p. 611).

The first proposition of lifespan developmental psychology recognizes ontogenetic development as a lifelong process where no specific age is paramount in influencing or controlling developmental characteristics. At all stages of development, both "continuous (cumulative) and discontinuous (innovative) processes are occurring" (Baltes, 1987). Second, lifespan development is characterized by multidirectionality where there is considerable diversification in the dimensions and directionality of ontogenetic changes. During the developmental process, increases in certain behaviors can be accompanied by decreases in other completely different behaviors. Analogously, the third proposition states that development is not a necessarily incremental growth or a simple movement towards higher efficacy, but rather the dual existence of both growth and decline. Throughout life, gains and losses are possible at all stages of development. Like in other areas of psychology, Baltes' (1987) fourth proposition points out that there is much intraindividual plasticity or within-person modifiability found in the course of the individual's lifespan development (Baltes, 1987).

As his first four propositions are in line with other developmental taxonomies, his fifth and sixth ideas (historical embeddedness and contextualism) have "expanded the spectrum of influence that are considered determinants of behavioral development" by creating a new taxonomy of influence that "entails factors beyond the ones considered in past work on psychological ontogeny" (Baltes, 1987, p. 619). The idea of historical embeddedness specifies that ontogenetic development can vary and be influenced by sociocultural conditions that exist within given historical periods. Individual development is generated by both ontogenesis and biocultural change. Simply put, "as individuals develop, society

changes as well" (Baltes, 1987, p. 619). Correspondingly, the sixth characteristic of this lifespan development perspective points out that this historical embeddedness is joined by another facet of embeddedness involving contextual influences. These developmental influences include a trifactor model of age-graded influences (e.g. biological maturation and age-graded socialization events), history-graded influences (including historical events and modernity), and nonnormative influences (i.e. abnormal idiosyncratic influences). And lastly, Baltes (1987) suggests that lifespan developmental psychology is interdisciplinary and needs to be studied in the contexts provided by other disciplines. These propositions have been adopted by many leadership scholars and have been used to chart the course of future leadership scholarship.

Lifespan Developmental Theories. Although it is seen as a meta-theory, Baltes (1987) admits that the initial interest of researchers on lifespan developmental psychology "often converges on the immediate search for one overarching and unifying theory" but that the future direction of the subject will not be identified with a single theory (p. 612). Analogous to this statement, this perspective has produced a few popular theories in the last few decades. In one such instance, Baltes and Baltes (1990) put forth their metatheory of development on selection, optimization, and compensation (or SOC theory) to explain how people adapt to age-related losses and gains over time. SOC theory states that as individuals get older and start to experience losses in their abilities, they engage in selection by methodically choosing or re-evaluating their goals in terms of preference (elective selection) or by necessity (loss-based selection). Individuals then engage in optimization by appropriating various means such as effort, energy, time allocation, and practice of skills towards improved functioning in the achievement of these goals. Finally, when engaging in compensation, the individual substitutes means and resources to counteract loss or decline in goal relevant activities (Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). For example, an aging expert pianist may experience skill loss with age. In order to maintain a high level of piano playing ability, the pianist may focus on playing fewer music pieces (selection) and practice these pieces more often (optimization). Seeing a decrease in mechanical speed, the pianist may also try to increase the audience's impression of his or her fast playing by first introducing slower segments before speeding up play in order to make the latter appear faster (compensation; Baltes, 1997). Since individuals of all ages possess different levels or performance in the workplace, leadership is inevitably tied to helping subordinates use their

potential to reach their goals (Baltes & Dickson, 2001). How a follower is influenced by a leader's ability to discern their needs may become exceedingly important as they use these strategies to adapt to loss or decline in ability. Since SOC models and strategies have been shown to relate to job autonomy, performance, satisfaction, and engagement, (Moghimi et al., 2017), it is reasonable to suppose that an individual's developed use of these strategies may also be tied to their attitudes towards different leadership styles and strategies. It is based on this premise that we make the following propositions:

Proposition 1: *As people begin to lose their abilities and simultaneously use selection, optimization, and compensation strategies, this lifespan development change will influence their preferences and attitudes towards leadership.*

According to Baltes' (1987) lifespan development theory, there are three broad categories of influences on development that include normative age-graded influences that are encountered by people as they age, history-graded influences that are linked to the historical period in which individuals develop, and nonnormative influences on development which are unique to each individual (Zacher, 2015). More specifically, age-graded influences entail such items as biological maturation and common socialization events such as school entry, marriage, and retirement (Zacher, 2015). In concert with the SOC theory and following the lifespan developmental perspective, Carstensen (1991, 1992) advanced the idea that a person's perception of time plays a fundamental role in the selection and pursuit of their social goals. This idea, termed socioemotional selectivity theory (SST), claims that social motives are either related to the acquisition of new information or the regulation of emotion (Carstensen, 1992). The theory suggests that the anticipation of time will play an important role in social cognition and social behavior. When individuals perceive time to be open-ended, they focus on goals associated with gaining knowledge and learning about the social and physical world at the expense of emotional rewards. They concentrate more on social goals that manifest around future events and preparing for the future such as networking with colleagues and building relationships that will influence their career. As people grow older, they begin to realize the time they have left as being more and more limited. As they perceive their time as being short, they adopt a focus on emotional regulation and social interaction becomes increasingly valuable to them (Carstensen et al., 1999). They prioritize goals based on emotional satisfaction that are in the moment and

deepening relationships with loved ones. They look for experiences that are more emotionally enriching and are more selective in their social partners.

It is important to note that although this naturally occurs with age, this type of emotional development is not entirely linked to age. Carstensen et al (1999) report that people with terminal illness (in this case HIV-positive, symptomatic participants who had an average age of 37) were found to exhibit similar social preferences as those who were older and toward the end of life. The theory also claims that "endings other than death, such as geographical moves or political transitions, may instigate the same kinds of changes in social preferences observed in old age" (Carstensen et al., 1999, p. 175). For example, "a college senior who is approaching graduation is uninterested in meeting new students and instead shows strong preferences for spending time with their best friends" (Carstensen et al., 1999, p. 167). Extending this idea to the world of work, it is then appropriate to surmise that a person's proximity to other 'endings' like retirement (the end of their working or employed life) is an immense life event and therefore will influence their social preferences and views on inherently social interactions with people, such as interactions with various leaders in their lives. Because of this assertion, we propose the following:

Proposition 2: *As people approach the end of their careers, this lifespan development change will influence their preferences and attitudes towards leadership.*

Other lifespan theories that received some attention in the literature are Lawrence's (1984) theory on implicit timetables, strength and vulnerability integration theory (Charles, 2010), and Heckhausen, et al.'s (2010) motivational theory of lifespan development. One of the most influential theories in this area is Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial developmental lifespan theory as some claim that research on his concepts is actually accelerating (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). Erikson's (1950, 1968) theory is based on an "epigenetic principle" stating that "anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan parts arise, each part having its special time of ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole" (Erikson, 1968, p. 92). Erikson developed eight psychosocial stages or crises to explain the attainment of social attitudes and skills through ego development. According to Erikson's theory, as each "part" or stage arises, a new crisis or challenge emerges (see Table 2). Erikson (1950, 1968) did not view these crises as detrimental, but rather a normal occurrence. As a favorable ratio is reached in each crisis between the contrasting psychosocial dichotomies, psychological

strengths are achieved that will influence future social interactions. For instance, in the crisis between trust and mistrust, a tendency towards trust will result in the psychological strength of trust.

Table 2

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Period in life	Crisis	Psychosocial Strength
Infancy	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
Toddlerhood	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will
Preschool	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
Childhood	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence
Adolescence	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity
Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love
Middle Adulthood	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care
Late Adulthood	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

Citation: (Erikson, 1950, 1968)

It should be noted that all of these stages should be viewed as a continuum and not as categories. As stated in his model (see table 2), all of these psychosocial constructs "exist in the beginning in some form" (Erikson, 1968, p.95). To explain this, Erikson (1968) gives the example of a baby and how he "may show autonomy from the beginning as he tries to wiggle his hands free when tightly held" but it is not until the second year that he begins to experience the crisis between autonomy versus shame and doubt. (p. 95). Also, the qualities developed through these crises are not always permanent as later conflicts may revive earlier ones and readjustment may occur (Ochse & Plug, 1986). These stages and the other various lifespan theories and perspectives help explain psychological development throughout the lifespan.

Currently, research into how leadership is influenced by different people's social development seems to be limited as most leadership scholars have fixated on chronological age as their framework of choice. Chronological age differences have been used as a context to look at leadership characteristics, preferences, and habits (Gielnik et al., 2012; McClelland & O'Brien, 2011; E. S. Ng & Sears, 2012), leader-follower dyads (Collins et al., 2010; Kunze & Menges, 2017), and teams (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Kearney, 2008; Ries et al., 2013). Chronological age has even been looked at in terms of leadership prototypical characteristics (Buengeler et al., 2016; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011; Spisak, 2012; Spisak et al., 2014; Zacher & Bal, 2012).

However, since chronological age does not fully measure or explain a person's individual thought and behavioral developmental process, there is a need for more research into how psychosocial development effects how we view leadership. Additionally, despite this more populous interest by leadership scholars in age, it should be noted that a few have looked at leadership through the standpoint of the lifespan developmental theory of generativity. Generativity has been shown to maintain or impede transformational and transactional leadership behaviors (Zacher, et al. 2011). It has also been shown to moderate the relationship between age and leader effectiveness, follower satisfaction with the leader, and follower extra effort (Zacher, et al., 2011). As generativity or legacy beliefs have been shown to be part of a larger psychosocial developmental process (Erikson, 1950, 1968), it is plausible that these leadership influences may stem from a more extensive developmental evolution. Unfortunately, little has been done to link a more comprehensive psychosocial model to leadership. This postulation has prompted us to propose the following:

Proposition 3: *As people progress through these psychosocial developmental stages, this lifespan development change will influence their preferences and attitudes towards leadership.*

Implications of Leadership Practice

Currently, many books, videos, and training materials claim to have the answers when it comes to leading and managing Millennials and have offered abundant and definitive advice for practitioners. A simple Google search of the phrase "leading Millennials" will bring up 39 million hits filled with phrases such as "things you should know," "mistakes to avoid," and "tips for leading" this cohort. However, when looking to the academic community for endorsement of these suggestions, the disagreement one discovers among scholars is quite unexpected. What is promulgated as fact by practitioners continues to be disagreed upon and rigorously debated by academics. There seems to be a disconnect as the academic community has not been able to corroborate these apparent facts. For example, while some claim they have discovered differences in Millennial leadership preferences (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016; Taylor & Stein, 2014; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), others have claimed there are no significant differences (Ahn & Ettner, 2014; Farag et al., 2009). Yet other scholars have reported differences but caution to their miniscule effect sizes and pragmatic usefulness (Costanza et al., 2012; Gentry et al., 2011). It is alarming that many consultants and popular press authors continue to tout the stark differences in generational cohorts as authentic and codify advice based on these differences while the academic community has been unable to adjudicate any sort of decision or come to a consensus on the topic. The social implications of this problem for both practitioner and the general public is simply the use of what could be fruitless and ineffective management and leadership practices. Again, what are we missing because of this infatuation with generations? We may be missing out on a more robust understanding of how person's age-related life stage changes the way they view leadership. Conceivably, looking at leadership interactions based on lifespan developmental levels may provide more fruitful results for some researchers, managers, and educators alike. Although some leadership scholars have called for research in this area (e.g. Rudolph, et al. 2018), research on leadership and aging seems to be limited (Rosing & Jungmann, 2015; Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Looking at how chronological age relates to areas of leadership provides some insight as most of the leadership scholarship of recent has been done in the areas of chronological age and differences in leader-follower dyads (Collins et al., 2010; Kunze & Menges, 2017), the age effects on teams (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Kearney, 2008; Ries et al., 2013; Rosing & Jungmann, 2015), chronological age as a prototypical leadership trait (Buengeler et al., 2016; Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011; Spisak, 2012; Spisak et al., 2014; Zacher & Bal, 2012), and the effects of generativity (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, et al., 2011). And although we offer three promising propositions, more empirical studies need to be done to link leadership and specific lifespan development theories.

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