Leadership and generations at work: A critical review

Cort W. Rudolpha,b, Rachel S. Rauvolaa, Hannes Zacherb

a Saint Louis University, USA
b Leipzig University, Germany

ABSTRACT

We present a critical review of theory, empirical research, and practical applications regarding generational differences in leadership phenomena. First, we consider the concept of generations both historically and through contemporary arguments related to leadership. Second, we outline and refute various myths surrounding the idea of generational differences in general, and critique leadership theories that have been influenced by these myths. Third, we describe the results of a literature review of primary empirical studies that have invoked the notion of generational differences to understand leadership phenomena. Finally, we argue that the lifespan developmental perspective represents a useful alternative to generational representations, as it better captures age-related dynamics that are relevant to leadership, followership, and leadership development. Ultimately, our work serves as a formal call for a moratorium to be placed upon the application of the ideas of generations and generational differences to leadership theory, research, and practice.

Introduction

In the popular leadership and management literature, the notion that there are demonstrable generational differences in work attitudes, motivation, and behavior is so ubiquitous that it borders upon axiomatic (e.g., Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016; Grubbs, 2015; Kelan, 2012; Tulgan, 2009). Beyond the popular press, the idea that generational differences exist has also emerged within contemporary leadership theory (e.g., Balda & Mora, 2011; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Graen & Schiemann, 2013) and empirical research (e.g., Arsenault, 2004; Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore, & Cox, 2011; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007). For example, a recent article published in The Leadership Quarterly decrees, “...millennials are most assuredly different than their predecessors with respect to ideas, behaviors and viewpoints, and ... organizational leaders will have to lead these employees, by necessity, differently” (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley, 2017, p. 245).

There are at least three fundamental problems with these assumptions, and indeed with the entire idea of generational differences at large, that are theoretical, methodological, and empirical in nature. First, theories of generational differences are based upon flawed assumptions about the role that “generations” (i.e., represented as higher order, aggregate constructs) play in shaping individual-level outcomes. Second, because we do not possess sufficient methods for studying whether or not generational differences exist, these tenuous theories cannot be empirically tested with necessary or sufficient precision. Finally, across those studies that have attempted to tease apart the effects of generational differences, there is little to no empirical evidence to suggest that such differences exist, or that they manifest as differences in work attitudes, motivation, or behavior (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015, 2017). For example, a meta-analysis of \( K = 20 \) studies by Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, and Gade (2012) found no appreciable evidence for generational differences in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (see also Stassen, Anseel, & Leveque, 2016, for a systematic qualitative review that arrived at similar conclusions). As a result of these three fundamental problems, the scant evidence that does seem to suggest that generational membership influences work outcomes (e.g., Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) is based upon flawed logic (i.e., the inappropriate conflation of chronological age, contemporaneous period, and/or birth year cohort effects), confounded methodologies, and arguably weak theoretical rationales (Fineman, 2011; Walker, 1993). Notwithstanding the weaknesses of theory and the lack of evidence to the contrary, even if generational differences did matter for work outcomes, we would be unable to capture such effects through available empirical methodologies.

In response to the call for papers for the 2018 The Leadership Quarterly Yearly Review, the present manuscript aims to “…identify measures, theories, or practices that should be discontinued in the field.” Specifically, we argue in the following critical review that future leadership research should abandon the concept of generations, and
that we should eschew the notion of “generational differences” as a basis for future leadership theory, research, and practice. In other words, we call for placing a moratorium on the generations concept as it is currently applied to our understanding of leadership. Moreover, based upon and extending previous research in this journal and elsewhere (e.g., Day, 2011; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017b; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Zacher, Clark, Anderson, & Ayoko, 2015), we explain why a lifespan developmental approach to leadership constitutes a promising alternative to research on leadership and generational differences.

To frame our arguments, we have organized this manuscript around five interrelated goals. First, we review the concept of generational differences, as it is broadly understood, by defining the concept, tracing its historical development, and outlining its contemporary (mis)application to understanding various leadership-related phenomena. Second, we debunk several myths surrounding the idea that generational differences matter in the workplace, and we offer theoretical, methodological, and empirically grounded arguments to this end. Third, we outline and critique leadership theories that have been influenced by popular myths regarding generational differences. Fourth, we review and critique primary empirical studies that have invoked the notion of generational differences to understand leadership phenomena. Finally, we discuss the lifespan developmental approach as a promising alternative way of thinking about and representing the complexities of age and leadership. With these five goals accomplished, we call for a “cease and desist” on the application of the idea of generational differences as an explanatory framework in leadership theory, research, and practice.

Reconsidering the problem of generations

The modern notion of “generations” as distinct units of study emerged within the field of sociology. Beginning in the early twentieth century, sociologists sought explanations for the mechanisms responsible for bringing about large-scale social change (Kertzer, 1983). The agent of such change, according to some, was the natural “churn” associated with over-time dynamics across birth cohorts (e.g., Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965). The argument offered by these researchers was that each successive birth cohort brings their own particular experiences to bear on those problems faced by society. Because each successive cohort is temporally and, thus, historically embedded within a given social context, early formative experiences during childhood were thought to uniquely shape the “shared consciousness” of each generation (Mannheim, 1952). The formation and codification of such a shared consciousness from cohort-to-cohort gives rise to unique and distinguishable features that are broadly characteristic of each new generation. From this thinking, the notion of “generations” as we understand them today emerged. As we will review in greater detail later, the role of history and social context underlies explanations for the emergence of generational differences in leadership in contemporary leadership theory (e.g., Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

While interesting from the perspective of a sociological thought experiment that offers explanations for the mechanisms of social change, the ideas of generations and their unique characteristics have been adopted quite broadly to explain myriad other phenomena—including cross-temporal changes in trait narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), preferences for wine packaging (Nuebling & Behnke, 2015), and changes in baseball fandom (Nightengale, 2016). The concept of generational differences has likewise made its way into the domains of IO/OB/HR research over the past two decades (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011; Smola & Sutton, 2002), and into research concerning leadership, specifically (Arsenault, 2004; Gentry et al., 2011). Recently, however, a general consensus has emerged from systematic qualitative (Stassen et al., 2016), quantitative (Costanza et al., 2012), and critical (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017a, 2017b) reviews of this literature which suggests that generational differences do not have an appreciable influence on work processes and outcomes. While these reviews are by-in-large damning to the concept of generational differences at work, such reviews have not adequately considered the role of generations in leadership processes and outcomes (cf. Rudolph & Zacher, 2017b, a conceptual work that debunks various “myths” regarding leadership and generations). Thus, there is still a notable gap in our understanding of the totality and scope of this phenomenon, which can be explained by the fact that the literature on generational differences in leadership is quite fragmented and largely prescriptive in nature (Anderson et al., 2017). Here, we begin closing this gap by offering a systematic review and critique of leadership theory and research concerning generations that builds upon and extends past conceptual works.

Criticisms of generational differences research

Beyond the general conclusion of literature reviews that generations exert a null influence on various work processes and outcomes, it is important to critique how theories of generations influence the conduct of generational differences research. As suggested by Rudolph (2015), generational differences research most often adopts cross-sectional (i.e., single time point) research designs. To translate theories of generations into operationalized variables, generational differences researchers typically split the continuous variable chronological age into several categories to represent the various assumed generational cohorts present in their data. Subsequently, these artificially created categories are related statistically to various work outcomes. This splitting is typically justified on the basis of theory, which proposes that generations can be constructed by grouping people together by ranges of age/birth year cohorts. However, there is little to no consensus about how these categorized ranges of age/birth year cohort should be constructed. Fig. 1 depicts the range and variability in the different operationalizations of generations found in the studies we review, below. There is a great deal of overlap between these groupings from study to study, and, as suggested by Costanza et al. (2012), “This lack of consistency has implications for the conceptual definition of the generations, their operationalization (i.e., when they start and finish), and the assessment of their impact on outcomes” (p. 377).

These categorization efforts are undertaken to circumvent what is actually a far more complex mathematical concern regarding the nature of chronological age and birth year cohort in single time point designs: they are perfectly correlated with one another (Glenn, 2005). More specifically, with knowledge of the present year or “period” (e.g., 2018) and the birth year of a given leader or “cohort” (e.g., 1978), this leader’s “age” (e.g., 40) is determined. Thus, because “period” is a constant in single time point designs, age and cohort effects are necessarily perfectly confounded with one another (i.e., not mathematically distinguishable). To make this point more concrete, one cannot under any circumstances draw valid conclusions regarding the influence of cohort versus age effects from single time point data. Moreover, the categorization of the continuous variable age into categories comes at the expense of both theoretical precision, as arbitrary age boundaries are imposed inconsistently across studies (see Fig. 1), and statistical precision, resulting in a distinct challenge to valid inferences (i.e., via decreased power, see MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002; Rudolph, 2015).

These criticisms extend to various cross-temporal methodologies (e.g., Twenge et al., 2010), including so-called cross-temporal meta-analysis (Twenge et al., 2008). Cross-temporal approaches investigate similarly-aged individuals over time, and in doing so isolate (i.e., via purposefully confounding) cohort and period effects from age effects. For example, the responses of five independent samples of 20-year-olds, surveyed in 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010, could be compared to one another. Under the strong assumptions of cross-temporal analyses, observed systematic temporal differences cannot be due to age (i.e., as it is held constant across time and sample), however either cohort or period effects are equally likely “causes” of such observed differences. Accordingly, cross-temporal methods ignore the possibly important
influences of contemporaneous contextual factors, and inherently rely on a special case of the long-admonished ecological correlation (i.e., the dubious practice of correlating group-level means; Robinson, 1950) to draw conclusions about cohort effects (see Rudolph & Zacher, 2017a, for a review and critique of such methods). Importantly, several studies directly speak to the importance of period effects. For example, contemporaneous unemployment rates have been linked to differences in both narcissism (e.g., Bianchi, 2014) and job satisfaction (e.g., Bianchi, 2013) that are often attributed to generational differences.

A great deal of methodological innovation has emerged to account for the confounded nature of age, cohort, and period effects. Recently, Costanza, Darrow, Yost, and Severt (2017) reviewed three popular analytical methods for studying generational differences (i.e., group comparisons using cross-sectional data, cross-temporal meta-analysis using time-lagged panels, and cross-classified hierarchical linear modeling using time-lagged panels). When analyzing generational effects from the same dataset using these methods, the comparative results of each method failed to converge upon the same conclusions. That is to say, common analytic methods for studying generations cannot be triangulated with one another. There is a twofold irony to this observation: on the one hand, research has generally yielded equivocal results regarding the impact of generational differences on work outcomes (Costanza et al., 2012). On the other hand, with very few exceptions, nearly every study that has ever attempted to tease these complex effects apart is based on a flawed methodology (Costanza et al., 2017). Perhaps more troubling, this tenuously grounded body of research has served to inform recent thinking about the role of generations in leadership processes and outcomes (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017).

### The Pervasiveness of Generations

Notwithstanding the preceding limitations and critiques, research in the IO/ OB/ HR realm is particularly wed to the notions of generations and generational differences as meaningful and useful concepts (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). This observation is particularly evident when considering leadership scholarship, specifically (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017; Graen & Schiemann, 2013). There are at least two possible explanations as to why this idea is so pervasive in our literature. First, a social–cognitive explanation suggests that representing age in terms of generations rather than the continuous process of aging provides an inherent advantage for understanding the complex role of age within one's social world. This is a reductionist sensemaking explanation for generational thinking (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015, 2017a). From the standpoint of the “cognitive miser” (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994), construing generations and general characteristics of people who “belong” to them has a distinct adaptive advantage. Within complex and dynamic work contexts, it is not surprising that it is simply easier to understand age-related processes in terms of group-based generational differences, rather than continuous maturational differences.

As Rudolph and Zacher (2015) suggest, a second explanation for the pervasiveness of generations and assumed differences among them is that they are strongly socially constructed. This is to say, in many ways, we have “willed” generations and generational differences into being simply by acknowledging them and by various sociocontextual elements that support their culturally embedded existence. This is the social determinism explanation for generational thinking (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015, 2017a). Research concerning leadership age prototypes speaks to these phenomena. For example, a study by Spisak, Grabo, Arvey, and van Vugt (2014) examined how the perceived age of a leader maps onto follower preferences for different situational dynamics. Specifically, adopting an evolutionary theoretical perspective, this research hypothesized and found support for the prediction that younger leaders are favored during times of change, whereas older leaders are favored in times of stability. This finding was replicated across three empirical studies and suggests that these preferences serve as adaptive functions that are both culturally and socially situated (see also Spisak, 2012, and similar arguments related to leader appearance offered by Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009, and more recently by Antonakis & Eubanks, 2017).

Indeed, because many social institutions adopt a necessarily age-graded structure, the social–cognitive and social constructivist explanations for the pervasiveness of generations are both complementary and mutually determined. On the one hand, we make sense of age by relatively automatic categorization (i.e., younger vs. older leader; generation “A” vs. generation “B”) because it is optimally efficient to do so. On the other hand, we have consequently designed various aspects of social institutions to support and justify our efforts at such categorizations.

Organizations support this process as well, as many administrative systems (e.g., recruitment and selection, promotion, retirement) are inherently age-graded in that they follow a prototypical entry–ascension–exit timeline (Lawrence, 1984). Indeed, the sociological life course perspective (Diewald & Mayer, 2009) would argue that...
because initial entry into the workforce generally occurs en masse, it follows a cohort-like bicultural process (see Schae, 1986).

Theoretical frameworks of leadership and generations

Scholars have written about leadership and generations for quite some time. Early works on this topic generally considered the concept of generations in terms of continuous lineage and leadership succession, and the implications that these have for transitions of power and the maintenance of continuity within organizations from one generation to another. It is important to note that this conceptualization of generations in a genealogical sense is quite different from more contemporary treatments of generations in the IO/OB/HR literature as separate and meaningful units in and of themselves. For example, early work by Gusfield (1957) discusses the emergence of age-graded hierarchies of authority within organizations, and outlines how various intergenerational conflicts may arise when such organizations are faced with questions regarding the allotment of power and the adoption of new policies. Other early works reflect similar questions about leadership and the role of generations. For example, Diamant (1960) describes generational differences in political leadership. Still other early works by Paul and Schooler (1970) and DeSalvia and Gemmill (1971) both report on “generation gaps” in work values that may influence managerial outcomes. A more recent, yet by many accounts “seminal” for its sheer impact (over 1300 citations on Google Scholar), work concerning generational differences by Smola and Sutton (2002) concludes with the suggestion that, “Continued enquiry in this field is important to business leaders as they attempt to understand, motivate, and successfully lead the individuals in their organizations and function as good corporate citizens” (p. 381).

In his classic work on leadership and organizational culture, Schein (2004) invokes a lineage-based argument to explain how leadership influences culture within organizations. Schein refers to the unique role that leadership plays in the establishment and maintenance of organizational culture as an “evolutionary perspective,” suggesting that, “...cultures begin with leaders who impose their own values and assumptions on a group. If that group is successful and the assumptions come to be taken for granted, we then have a culture that will define for later generations of members what kinds of leadership are acceptable” (p. 2). Schein also applies this argument to explain the transmission of culture via a socialization process across “generations” of organizational members: “Once a group has a culture, it will pass elements of this culture on to new generations of group members...” (p. 18). Of note, these arguments provide no inherent meaning to the idea of generations other than as a unit of succession and transmission of culture within organizations. Moreover, generational differences and their potential associations with work outcomes are not invoked here at all.

Other theorists take a very different perspective on the role of generations for understanding leadership. They make several strong assumptions about how generations operate in the workplace, and how they influence leadership processes and outcomes, specifically. The underlying argument is that members of different generational cohorts desire and/or require different forms of leadership to realize optimal performance (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017; Deal, Stawiski, Gentry, & Cullen, 2014). This argument has given rise to several myths about leadership and generations recently outlined by Rudolph and Zacher (2017b): 1) That generational differences affect work attitudes, motivations, and behaviors, 2) that generational group membership matters more than age-related changes or contemporaneous contextual influences for predicting work attitudes, motivations, and behaviors, and 3) that actively managing generational differences (i.e., applying differentiated strategies for leading members of generational groups) can alleviate differences in work attitudes, motivations, and behaviors.

Two ancillary assumptions about generations support these myths. First, because assumed differences are tied to generations (and hence one’s birth year), they are relatively immutable and thus must be actively managed in the workplace. This assumption rests upon a fallacy that others have characterized as “cohort determinism” (Walker, 1993), which is the idea that assumed qualities of generational cohorts are prescriptive of the behavior exhibited by its members. Second, a failure to manage generational differences will somehow be maladaptive to the success of an organization (i.e., assumed differences between generations are understood to be negative or counterproductive if left unchecked).

Bennis and Thomas (2002) present an inductively generated theory of leadership and generations based on 43 interviews with both younger and older leaders (pejoratively labeled as “geeks” and “geezer,” respectively). The crux of this theoretical model is that leadership competencies develop because formative events (i.e., those surrounding one’s “era”) along with individual differences mutually inform a process that is termed a “crucible.” According to Bennis and Thomas, “It is a model that explains how individuals make meaning out of often difficult events—we call them crucibles—and how the process of ‘meaning-making’ both galvanizes individuals and gives them their distinctive voice” (p. 4).

The crucible model attempts to differentiate between the concepts of generation and era, however these two mechanisms are somewhat indistinct. For example, generations are defined by Bennis and Thomas as “those periods that occur every eighteen years or so and define all who fall within them” (p. 10). Eras, in contrast, “...are characterized by defining events, and may occur every twenty years or less” (p. 10). According to Bennis and Thomas, differences between the “analog” and “digital” eras define the current workforce. We suggest that these two concepts (generation and era) are indistinct as defined by Bennis and Thomas, because the idea of era closely maps onto the proposed causal mechanisms that are posited to give rise to generations in other literatures (i.e., this distinction is inherently tautological when compared to other theories of generations). For example, from a sociological perspective, Byerman and Turner (1998) offer that generations are groups of people born during the same time span who have shared similar life experiences (e.g., “eras” as Bennis and Thomas would describe them) simply because of sharing similar chronological age. Similar sentiments are presented in earlier work by Mannheim, 1952.

Two other points raised by Bennis and Thomas bear some further consideration here. First, these scholars correctly offer that, “Members of the same generation may react quite differently to the opportunities and challenges that each new era creates” (p. 10). As we have suggested, the overemphasis on the role of generations for shaping psychological manifestations of attitudes, motivations, and behaviors has been deemed the “cohort trap” (Walker, 1993). Second, Bennis and Thomas take a far less deterministic perspective on the role that generations play in shaping leadership behaviors than other perspectives (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017). For example, Bennis and Thomas offer that, “The one key asset that our leaders share, whether young or old, is their adaptive capacity. The ability to process new experience and find their meaning and to integrate them into one’s life is the signature skill of leaders...” (p. 18). The introduction of this concept of adaptive capacity across age groups that supersedes generations further erodes their power for explaining the emergence of leadership competencies, and hints at a developmental perspective rather than a “generationalized” one. Indeed, this notion of the potential for change reflects the basic tenets of the lifespan developmental perspective (i.e., interindividual differences in intraindividual change; see Nesselroade, 1991).

More recently, a theoretical extension of the leader–member exchange (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) theoretical framework by Graen and Schiemann (2013) suggests the need for organizations to design team structures to optimally and strategically engage members of younger generations. This need is justified based upon the assumption that such individuals have undergone an “...entitled socialization process, and have seldom been subordinated by a command and control
style from parents, teachers, or other authority figures until perhaps their first organizational role” (p. 459). Graen and Schiemann’s (2013) extended LMX theoretical framework therefore integrates the idea of generational differences, and this integration is supported by the assertion that, “Recent data suggest that the leadership of people is not adequate work [sic] engaging millennials employees (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010). We cannot afford to lose the creativity and other contributions of this generation as a result of less than friendly managerial climates” (p. 458). Of note, the Espinoza et al. (2010) text cited herein is a popular-press text, which espouses the need to differentially manage millennials. Thus, all of the assertions offered in support of this model are based on secondary data that, like all research concerning generational differences, are of questionable validity.

The crux of the Graen and Schiemann model is that leadership climates should be adapted by enhancing leadership skills, changing reward and incentive systems, and recognizing those individuals who are more effective with members of the millennial generation than traditional command and control management practices” (p. 462). Speaking to the possible policy implications of this model, these ideas have been translated into a SHRM and SIOP co-sponsored white paper (Graen & Grace, 2015) and an associated text by Grace and Graen (2014) that forewarns the coming “millennial spring” and the need to radically redesign organizational structures to account for the onslaught of this new generation in the workforce.

A more recent “generalized” reconceptualization of various leadership theories by Anderson et al. (2017) offers 16 propositions on how various assumptions regarding generational differences must be integrated into leadership theory. Their propositions are organized within five main categories related to specific leadership theories, including transformational leadership, information processing (i.e., cognitions and attributions regarding leadership), leader-member exchange, authentic leadership, and ethical leadership, as well as a broader category pertaining to leaders in general. To take one example, citing work by Twenge and colleagues (Twenge, 2010; Twenge et al., 2010) on generational increases in individualism and the desire to reach personal rather than collective goals, the authors contend that transformational leadership is less effective for motivating members of younger generations to place organizational needs above their own. They also propose that members of younger generations, who are purported in the generational work values literature (e.g., Hansen & Leuty, 2012) to be more highly motivated by extrinsic factors, are less motivated to pursue quality relationships with leaders (i.e., LMX relationships). Aside from changes in individualism and extrinsic motivation, the authors’ other propositions rest on additional assumed generational shifts in work values and attitudes. Decreased work centrality and an increased focus on work–life balance are cited as sources of younger generations’ reduced desire to “emulate leaders with a strong work ethic” (p. 252) and, thereby, the degradation of leader–follower relationships between authentically work-driven leaders and younger generations (e.g., Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Similarly, cross-temporal increases in self-entitlement and rejection of authority (e.g., Laird, Harvey, & Lancaster, 2015) are cited as the source of employees’ decreased interest in being led by others, which, in turn, is assumed to lead to the re-definition of traditional leader–follower relationships and to prompt reformulation of leadership theory to fit these shifts. Interestingly, the authors also present evidence to contradict many of their points, including suppositions that millennials may benefit from the personalized attention and feedback provided by transformational leaders and could pragmatically use high-quality LMX relationships to attain the extrinsic rewards they seek.

Finally, while the works of Schein, Bennis and Thomas, Graen and Schiemann, and Anderson and colleagues represent reasonably codified theoretical perspectives on leadership and generations (i.e., in terms of developing explicit and testable propositions and predictions), there have been other less-formal attempts to outline new theories of leadership and generations. For example, Balda and Mora (2011) integrate the concept of generations into the existing servant-leadership model. The crux of this integration is that, “...millennials will actively seek leadership opportunities as well as extrinsic rewards for leadership roles due to parental messages about the benefits of leadership in terms of individual achievement and success...” (p. 19). This argument is offered on the basis of assumptions that “...millennials need hand-holding (i.e., attention), rapid advancement, and job flexibility...” because of their “…powerful egos and selfish ambition...” (p. 19). A similarly vague model, “cloud leadership,” is offered by Rodriguez and Rodriguez (2015). This model suggests that, “The millennial require [sic] information in a lighting speed using the latest gadgets and apps with flexibility and diversity. A ‘Cloud Leader’ shows availability ‘to be accessed’ with an open schedule for personal encounters and gains respect and ascendancy by showing updated, pertinent and condensed information” (p. 859).

Review of the empirical literature on leadership and generations

In this section, we outline the results of a literature review of primary empirical studies that have invoked the notion of generational differences to understand leadership phenomena and/or have applied generational theories of leadership. Interestingly, there is relatively little empirical research that studies leadership and generations, suggesting that most of the literature that claims evidence for generational differences in leadership phenomena is based on little more than (theoretical) supposition and (anecdotal) conjecture. While there is scant empirical evidence present in the literature to refer to, this has not stopped a minor proliferation of peer-reviewed academic journal articles that purport to summarize such phenomena.

To identify the literature relevant to leadership and generations, we searched common databases (e.g., Web of Science, Google Scholar) for the search terms “leadership” and “generations.” We also conducted forward searches from Arsenault’s (2004) frequently cited and foundational study of generational differences and leadership preferences. Then, we conducted additional backward searches from relevant studies that were obtained through this process to locate further literature pertaining to leadership and generations. Of the literature identified via our searches, we further considered only empirical studies that were published in peer-reviewed, SSCI (social sciences citation index) or ESCI (emerging sources citation index) journals, or non-indexed but society-sponsored (e.g., American Psychological Association; Society for the Advancement of Management), journals (K = 18). Our review includes K = 14 (77.78%) studies from SSCI journals, K = 1 (5.56%) studies from ESCI journals, and K = 3 (16.67%) studies from society-sponsored journals. Table 1 summarizes the studies reviewed here; Fig. 1 provides a visual representation of the generational cohort year ranges used in these studies. In the following, we first review studies that used cross-sectional survey studies, followed by a review of mixed-method approaches. Unless otherwise specified, these studies utilized participant samples from a variety of industry sectors.

Cross-sectional survey studies

As is the case with many other topics, cross-sectional survey methods are most common in the leadership and generations literature. While many studies directly analyze leadership variables (e.g., ranking leader attributes), a number of other studies examine generational differences in work outcomes to generate recommendations for cohort-specific leadership practices. Wilson et al. (2008), for example, were interested in how components of job satisfaction that differ across
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>Methodology &amp; sample size</th>
<th>Generations of interest</th>
<th>Summary of reported findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahn and Etter (2014)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in leadership values.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional mixed-methods; N = 150</td>
<td>“Older,” “younger”</td>
<td>There are few observed difference in leadership values between “generations” (i.e., CEOs vs. MBA students). Members of all generations admired “honesty” most and “imagination” least among preferred leadership characteristics.</td>
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<td>Arsenault (2004)</td>
<td>Reports a study of “admired” leadership characteristics.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional mixed-methods; N = 790</td>
<td>Veterans, baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>Supervisor-subordinate relationship satisfaction, as well as team work satisfaction, did not differ across generational cohorts, although some other outcomes did.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Brunetto et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in various work outcomes for nurses.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 726</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>Satisfaction was uniformly low in the three generational groups studied.</td>
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<td>Collins, Hair, and Rocco (2009)</td>
<td>Reports a study of age-reversed supervisor–subordinate dyads, leadership expectations, and leadership effectiveness.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 319</td>
<td>“Older,” “younger”</td>
<td>Older workers with younger supervisors expected and reported less effective leadership, supporting the “reverse pyramidal effect.”</td>
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<td>Cox et al. (2014)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in perceptions of and responses to different leadership styles.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional mixed-methods; N = 57 (interviews); 5-6 in each of 6 focus groups</td>
<td>Pre-1975, 1975–1986, post-1986</td>
<td>Each generation expressed leadership style and attribute preferences (e.g., oldest generation valued directive as well as performance-oriented leadership). Generational differences in perceptions of unit climate, but not leadership style, were observed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fang, Tullai-McGuinness, and Anthony (2009)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in perceptions of leadership style and climate.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 394</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X</td>
<td>Generational differences in perceptions of unit climate, but not leadership style, were observed.</td>
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<td>Gentry et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Reports a study of the influence of generational differences in leadership practices on leadership skills.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 6869</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>Managers from different generations show more similarity than differences in terms of both favored leadership practices and skills. Qualitative responses suggest that millennials prefer encouraging and attentive supervisors who support intrinsic motivators (e.g., development opportunities).</td>
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<td>Kultalähi and Viitala (2014)</td>
<td>Reports a study examining “millennial” responses to positive and negative work motivation-related anecdotes.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional qualitative survey; N = 62</td>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>Generational differences were observed in both classes of values, and the authors conclude that Gen Y employees would benefit from leader support for status, rank, and ambition values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murphy, Gibson, and Greenwood (2010)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in instrumental and terminal work values for managers and non-managers.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 4446</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>Observed generational disparities were very minimal, and nurse cohorts seemed to be more homogenous than different.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nelson (2012)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in leader-member exchange and other work outcomes in nurses.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 550</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>There is variability in preferences for different leadership styles that can be tied to artificially-constructed generational groupings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Reports two large studies of differences in leadership preferences between generations.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 447, 20,640</td>
<td>Matures, early baby boomers, late baby boomers, early Gen-Xers, late Gen-Xers, millennials</td>
<td>All three generations studied were influenced by work attachment, but each cohort also manifested specific differences in relative factor importance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shacklock and Brunetto (2012)</td>
<td>Reports a study of generational differences in factors impacting continuance intentions (e.g., supervisor–nurse relationship).</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 900</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y</td>
<td>There were no differences found in generational rankings of desirable and undesirable leadership traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi et al. (2010)</td>
<td>Reports a study of desired manager attributes in different generational groups.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 277</td>
<td>“Cultural Revolution,” “Social Reform,” millennials</td>
<td>Millennials “expect more” from their leaders than do other generations, evidenced by differences in ratings of mentorship and loyalty, among other traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu and Miller (2005)</td>
<td>Reports a study on generational differences in preferred leadership style.</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey; N = 437</td>
<td>Baby boomers, Generation X</td>
<td>Mixed results for culture-by-generation interactions on leadership preferences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a SSCI journal.  
b ESCI journal.  
c Society-sponsored journal.
generations could be used as tools for leading and managing different cohorts of nurses. As such, they examined job satisfaction differences among registered nurses from different generations (“baby boomers” (1940–1959), “Generation X” (1960–1974), “Generation Y” (1975 and later)) using a cross-sectional survey design. Their results indicated that generational cohorts did not differ in their satisfaction with social interactions in the workplace; in fact, no differences between Gen X and Gen Y were observed at all. The baby boomers, however, manifested higher satisfaction with extrinsic rewards (i.e., compensation and benefits) and scheduling than did Gen X and Gen Y, as well as higher satisfaction with professional opportunities, praise and recognition, and control and responsibility than did Gen X. As such, the authors recommend that nurse leaders support self-scheduling, career development opportunities, formal recognition programs, and shared governance models of decision-making to better lead and retain Gen X and Gen Y nurses.

Farag et al. (2009) also examined generational differences in registered nurses with a cross-sectional survey approach, focusing on “baby boomer” (1946–1964) and “Gen-Xer” (1965–1980) nurses’ perceptions of their manager’s leadership style (i.e., transformational, transactional, passive-avoidant) and their unit climate. They found no generational differences in perceived leadership styles, but they did find generational differences in perceptions of unit climate. Specifically, baby boomers characterized their climate as warmer and more administratively supportive than did Gen-Xers. Gen-Xers were particularly dissatisfied with rewards and recognition, their (in)ability to “speak their mind,” at work, and the focus of their manager’s energy and resources (i.e., they prefer managers who focus on “getting things done” within the nursing unit rather than at an organizational level). The authors attributed these differences to Gen-Xers’ need for immediate gratification as well as their reluctance to follow traditional chains of command, and to adhere to leader-imposed structure or expectations.

In the first of a number of studies by these authors, Farr-Wharton et al. (2011) used cross-sectional surveys to examine the quality of nurses’ relationships with their supervisor and their impact on intuitive decision-making as well as consequent perceived empowerment and affective commitment. Specifically, they found that the supervisor–nurse relationship quality explained more variance in intuitive decision-making in Gen X (1965–1979) and Y (1980–2000) nurses as compared to baby boomer (1946–1964) nurses. The authors conclude that management practices for nurses must, as a result, become more sensitive to the differing importance of supervisor–nurse relationships for workplace outcomes across different generational cohorts and recommended “stratified, targeted” management policies. Shacklock and Brunetto (2012) further reported findings from this sample with additional outcomes and different analyses included. They examined generational differences in factors affecting continuance intentions, including supervisor–nurse relationships, autonomy, and flexible working arrangements. They found that all three generations’ intentions to continue working were influenced by work attachment, while Xers were also influenced by their supervisory relationship and baby boomers were influenced by work-family conflict, work autonomy, satisfying interpersonal relationships, and work centrality. Taken together, the authors recommend that leaders focus on improving relationships with Gen X and baby boomer subordinates and take a more complex approach with boomers, such as supporting participative decision-making and providing time and opportunities for peer relationships. They further suggested that Gen X and Y may benefit most from leaders who help them develop a “passion for nursing.”

Brunetto et al. (2012) examined a variety of generational differences in a nursing sample using a comparable sampling and methodological approach. Among other variables, the 2012 study examined satisfaction with training and development and supervisor–subordinate communication relationship quality (i.e., communication frequency, mode, direction, content) using self-report surveys completed by “baby boomer” (1946–1965), “Gen X” (1966–1980), and “Gen Y” (1980–2000) nurses. The authors found no differences in (dis)satisfaction with supervisor–nurse communication relationships or training and development opportunities across generational groups, suggesting that low levels of satisfaction were present regardless of one’s generational cohort membership.

Brunetto et al. (2013) conducted a similar study with a sample of nurses, finding that the supervisor–subordinate relationship and teamwork satisfaction did not differ across generational cohorts (although other outcomes, such as affective commitment, well-being, and turnover intentions, did). While most of their operationalizations of generations were similar to previous studies, the “baby boomer” cohort differed, encompassing individuals born during the years of 1943 to 1964. The authors recommend generation-targeted retention strategies to counteract nursing turnover, particularly given that supervisor–nurse relationships, teamwork, and well-being explained almost half of the variance in affective commitment and turnover intentions across cohorts.

Nelson (2012) also studied nurses and supervisor–subordinate relationships (i.e., LMX), as well as other related outcomes such as work–family conflict (WFC), discretionary power, and affective commitment, using a cross-sectional survey approach. This study examined “baby boomers” (1946–1965), “Gen X” (1966–1980), and “Gen Y” (early 1980s) as generational cohorts, finding mean differences in supervisor relationship satisfaction across the three groups. These differences were very small, however, and baby boomers and Gen-Xers in particular seemed to be more homogenous than different in their satisfaction. Although the other results of the study (i.e., path analysis examining LMX, WFC, discretionary power, and commitment) did not suggest the three former variables accounted for a high percentage of variation in affective commitment, their impact was even less pronounced in Gen-Yers in particular. Overall, there was neither support for substantial generational differences in relationship satisfaction nor clear management practice recommendations as a result of the study.

Instead of examining more general workplace outcome variables as they relate to leadership, Murphy et al. (2010) used a ranking approach to examine generational differences in work values. These authors used the Rokeach Value Survey to assess generational differences in 18 terminal (i.e., aspirational) and 18 instrumental (i.e., modes of conduct) values. Their cross-sectional sample represented “baby boomers” (1946–1964), “Generation X” (1965–1979), and “Generation Y” (1980 and later) cohorts in both managerial and non-managerial roles from airline companies, public sector organizations, and government agencies. Differences in terminal and instrumental value rankings were found for both managers (30 of the 36 traits) and non-managers (36 of the 36 traits), and the authors used this data to derive recommendations for applied management practices. While baby boomer and Gen X non-managers placed less value on ambition as compared to capability, Gen Y non-managers ranked ambition as the most important instrumental value. Thus, the authors suggest that this cohort is more concerned with status and rank than are their other generational counterparts, and leaders would do well to support these instrumental values for this generation of employees.

Rather than examining individuals in isolation, Collins et al. (2009) examined age-reversed supervisor–subordinate dyads (i.e., older workers with younger supervisors) and their respective leadership expectations and ratings of leadership effectiveness. The authors utilized a cross-sectional sample for their survey-based study and found that older workers (i.e., ages 50 and above) with younger supervisors (i.e., ages 39 or below) expected less effective leadership behaviors as compared to all other supervisor–subordinate dyads (i.e., older–older, younger–younger, older–younger). This same effect was found in older subordinates’ ratings of their younger supervisors’ effectiveness as well. The authors suggested that these findings confirm the reverse pygmalion effect, with subordinates’ (lower) expectations having a deleterious effect on their supervisors’ performance. Moreover, they attribute these exchange relationship effects to generational differences.
While these studies are not explicitly linked to leadership attributes, other authors utilize much more direct (i.e., focused on leadership preferences rather than work values, generational perceptions, or dyadic phenomena) methods in their surveys. Yu and Miller (2005) utilized two generational groups for their cross-sectional survey study: “baby boomers” (1945–1964) and “Xers” (1965–1980). While they did not find generational group differences in work expectations, work characteristics, and preferred leadership styles in the overall sample, they did find differences between the two industries included in their sample (i.e., education and manufacturing sectors). Specifically, they found generational differences within the manufacturing (but not the education) group, such that baby boomers preferred a task-oriented leadership style, while Xers preferred a relationship-oriented leadership style. Generational differences in work values, attitudes, and expectations (e.g., job security, job satisfaction, reward preferences) were also observed in the manufacturing group within the sample, but the specific manifestations of these differences were unfortunately not elaborated upon in publication. In contrast, Gentry et al. (2011) explored generational differences from a managerial perspective. They used a cross-sectional survey approach to examine generational differences in perceptions of leadership skill importance and actual leadership skill in these areas. They included “baby boomer” (1946–1963), “Gen X” (1964–1976), and “millennial” (1976 and later) cohorts in public and private sector organizations, finding that managers from different generations showed more similarities than differences in preferred practices and skills, with no generational skill or preference effect sizes of practical significance.

Wiek et al. (2002) examined desired leadership traits using cross-sectional samples of nursing students and management, which were intended to be representative of both “emerging workforce” (ages 18–35, the “twenty-something generation”) and “ entrenched workforce” (35+, the “baby boomers”) cohorts, respectively. These respondents were asked to indicate and rank the six leadership traits that they viewed as most and least desirable (each with three traits, respectively). There were no differences between the generational groups with regard to desirable and undesirable leadership traits, with both groups valuing honesty, supportiveness, and good communication, among other qualities. Still, areas of divergence between the generations are noted: while “twenty-somethings” placed higher value on affirmation and confidence building (i.e., leaders who are “team players” and “motivate others”) as well as knowledge, baby boomers valued different professional skills (i.e., “high integrity,” “fair,” and “empowering”). Furthermore, the twenty-somethings ranked vision and a sense of humor as less desirable in leaders, while the baby boomers ranked friendliness and availability as less desirable.

This trait ranking approach has been used by others in the literature as well. For instance, Sessa et al. (2007) conducted two large survey-based studies of leadership attribute and behavior preferences. They defined six generational groups of interest (“matures” (1925–1945), “early baby boomers” (1946–1954), “late baby boomers” (1955–1963), “early Gen-Xers” (1964–1976), “late Gen-Xers” (1977–1982), and “millennials” (1983 or later)), although not all generational groups were represented in both studies. In examining respondents’ top 12 rankings of leadership attributes in the first study, the authors concluded that there are similarities as well as differences related to generational cohort membership. All cohorts valued honesty, organizational knowledge, listening, and helping others. However, matures valued delegation more than other groups, while millennials valued focus, dedication, and optimism more highly, and honesty, big-picture orientation, and cultural sensitivity less, than the other groups. There were additional differences as well, such as the high value placed on feedback by late boomers and Gen-Xers (and the relatively low value on feedback attributed by millennials), and younger generations’ preference for individually caring leaders and day-to-day focus (rather than “big-picture focus,” as with older generations). Furthermore, their behavioral analysis (using a 360-degree leadership evaluation tool) showed parallels with these attribute rankings, with managers in certain cohorts manifesting behaviors in line with attributes that were highly valued by those in their cohort (e.g., matures were more likely to exhibit delegation behaviors).

Yi et al. (2010) also surveyed generational differences in desired manager attributes. These authors used cohorts specified in accordance with political and societal shifts in their country (i.e., China), including the “Cultural Revolution” (1960s), “Social Reform” (1970s), and “millennial” (1980s) generations. All three generations differed in their preferences of manager “ambitiousness,” with the Social Reform respondents expressing the strongest desired manager identification with this trait, followed by millennials and then by Cultural Reform respondents. Additionally, mentorship, “team player,” and loyalty traits were most highly preferred by millennials, followed by Social Reform and then by Cultural Revolution respondents. Taken together, the authors conclude that this is evidence for millennials “expecting more” from their leaders than do other generational cohorts. In summary, results of cross-sectional survey studies on leadership and generations provide mixed results regarding the existence of generational differences in leadership preferences. The recommendations derived from these studies are accordingly contradictory. For instance, it is difficult to reconcile the need to focus on improving relationships with boomers with their low ranking of leader availability and friendliness (Shacklock & Brunetto, 2012; Wiek et al., 2002).

Mixed-method approaches

In the leadership and generations literature, a number of divergent methodological approaches (i.e., aside from cross-sectional surveys) have been undertaken. In perhaps one of the most formative papers in this literature, Arsenault (2004) conducted a cross-sectional mixed-methods study with four generational groups: “veterans” (1922–1943), “baby boomers” (1944–1960), “Xers” (1961–1980), and “nexters” (1981–2000). This study was intended to investigate different generations’ cultural experiences as well as their views of admired leadership characteristics (e.g., “ambitious,” “caring,” etc.). For this latter goal, Arsenault (2004) made use of a modified version of the Checklist of Admired Leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), upon which respondents were asked to rank 10 leadership characteristics. Analysis of the four groups’ mean rankings indicated that veterans and baby boomers ranked honesty and caring as more important than did Xers and nexters, while Xers and nexters ranked determination and ambition as more important than veterans and baby boomers. However, most of the traits (e.g., honesty, loyalty, competence, and many of the others) were in similar relative ranking positions across the generations (e.g., all groups ranked “honesty” as most important, “imagination” as least important). Arsenault (2004) also used qualitative data from interviews, and specifically those responses pertaining to individuals’ “favorite leaders,” to corroborate trait ranking inferences: for example, Xers and nexters noted admired leaders such as Bill Gates and Tiger Woods, which, Arsenault (2004) argues, supports these groups’ preferred leadership qualities of competence and ambition.

Ahn and Ettrner (2014) completed a qualitative study of generational differences in leadership values, conducting interviews and surveys with both business leaders (i.e., CEOs) and MBA students to examine their views on and rankings of leadership values (e.g., leadership by example, good judgment) derived from Virgil’s 19th century B.C.E. epic poem The Aeneid. There were very few differences observed between these two “generations,” with only integrity (rated more highly by executives) and trust (rated more highly by MBA students) having different ratings between cohorts. Cox et al. (2014) took a mixed-methods approach as well, including interviews, focus groups, and case studies, to assess generational differences in perceptions of and responses to different leadership styles (i.e., participative, performance-oriented). Similar to Yi et al. (2010) approach, they adopted nation-specific generational cohorts for their study, examining (a) those who were
born before 1975, (b) those born between 1975 and 1986, and (c) those born after 1986 (as 1975 and 1986 were established as key social and historical turning points in Vietnam). They concluded that those in the oldest generational group were characterized by “resilience,” naturally preferring a strict hierarchical order and directive leadership but also open and adaptive to performance-oriented leadership. The middle generation was characterized by “adaptability,” as well as a need for autonomy and comfort with both participative- and performance-oriented leadership. The youngest generation (referred to as the “arrival” generation) was highly individualistic and willing to question their leaders’ decisions, valuing autonomy, delegation, and proactive involvement in setting objectives within performance-oriented leadership contexts.

In yet another approach, Kultalahti and Viitala’s (2014) study, which gathered data using the method of empathy-based stories through Facebook, was primarily concerned with “millennials” (1982–2000) motivational influences in the workplace. By examining millennials’ responses to positive and negative work motivation-related anecdotes, the authors concluded that “nice” (i.e., supportive and attentive) supervisors and intrinsic motivating factors (e.g., development opportunities) were most relevant to this generation. Subsequently, they recommend leaders adopt a “coaching” style for millennial employees. In summary, the results of these mixed-method studies on leadership and generations are equivocal in nature: while some qualitative differences between generational cohorts were found, particularly in terms of leadership trait rankings, many of these thematic divergences are not mutually exclusive (e.g., “resilience” and “adaptability” can coexist; Cox et al., 2014) and suggest overlap between generations.

### Recommendations for leadership theory, research, and practice

Considering the preceding critique and review, and the arguments we have offered regarding the dubious nature of applying generational thinking to the study of leadership, we are left to answer the question, “If not generations, then what?” To address this question, we next consider the lifespan developmental perspective as a promising alternative way of representing age-related leadership phenomena (including both leader and follower processes and outcomes), as well as leadership development. Because this theoretical perspective focuses on individual trajectories of continuous development, it is arguably better positioned to explain age-related differences and changes in leaders’ and followers’ attitudinal, motivational, and behavioral outcomes across time. Our discussion is based on and expands previous research that has applied the lifespan developmental perspective to understanding leadership processes and outcomes (e.g., Day, 2011; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Zacher et al., 2015).

### A lifespan perspective on leadership

The lifespan perspective is an integrative meta-theory that originated from the field of developmental psychology. It focuses on general principles of intraindividual development, interindividual differences in developmental trajectories, and malleability of development at different ages (Baltes, 1987; Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980; Nesselroade, 1991). For example, lifespan researchers have observed that, on average, fluid cognitive abilities such as fast information processing, memory, and reasoning decline with advancing age (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999). However, research also shows that people differ not only in the absolute level, but also the rate, of cognitive decline. For example, people who work in more complex jobs or occupations over their careers show slower cognitive decline and later onset of dementia (Finkel, Andel, Gatz, & Pedersen, 2009; Kohn & Schooler, 1978; Oltmanns et al., 2017). Moreover, intervention research has shown that fluid cognitive abilities can be maintained and improved even at higher ages (Hertzog, Kramer, Wilson, & Lindenberger, 2009).

### Core propositions of the lifespan perspective

Baltes (1987) put forward a set of seven propositions that characterize the lifespan perspective and have implications for research on age and leadership. First, the lifespan perspective assumes that development entails both continuous (cumulative) and discontinuous (emergent) processes, and that no age period (e.g., young, middle, older age) is superior to others (Baltes, 1987). This implies that there is no clear-cut distinction between “younger” and “older” leaders and followers, and that leadership research could focus either on the entire adult lifespan or on specific age-related transitions (e.g., school-to-work transition, retirement entry). Second, development occurs along multiple dimensions (e.g., cognitive functioning, personality) and can take multiple directions (e.g., growth, decline, maintenance). Third, gains and losses in functioning are possible at all phases of the lifespan, but losses increasingly outweigh gains with age. Fourth, development is malleable at any age (i.e., plasticity; Baltes, 1987). These propositions imply that leadership research based on a lifespan perspective needs to take multidirectional age-related changes in multiple psychological dimensions into account.

Fifth, development takes place in and is influenced by a given historical and sociocultural context. Sixth, development is influenced by age-graded normative influences (e.g., decline in memory experiences by most people), history-graded normative influences (e.g., historical events), and non-normative (idiodynamic) influences (e.g., becoming unemployed). Finally, the study of human development requires a multilevel, interdisciplinary approach, ranging from the neurobiological, to the behavioral, and the macro-institutional levels (Baltes, 1987). These propositions suggest that leadership research based on a lifespan perspective needs to take contextual factors as moderators of relationships of age with leadership processes and outcomes into account.

While Baltes (1987) outlined seven lifespan theoretical propositions, the fifth (i.e., that development is influenced by historical, evolutionary, and sociocultural factors) and sixth propositions (i.e., that development is the result of the interplay of normative age-graded influences, normative history-graded influences, and non-normative idiodynamic influences) are arguably most relevant to an alternative way of representing age and leadership phenomena. Importantly, while the lifespan perspective does not use the concept of generations, it acknowledges that historical and sociocultural conditions can impact experiences and behavior at the individual level. However, the lifespan perspective does not assume that contextual factors have shared effects on entire generations at an aggregate level (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017a). Thus, a fundamental difference between a generational and a lifespan approach to leadership concerns levels of analysis (Chen, Bliese, & Mathieu, 2005). While the generational approach analyzes relationships at the group level only, the lifespan perspective explicitly takes a dynamic and multilevel approach.
Previous applications of a lifespan perspective to leadership

Thirty years ago, Avolio and Gibbons (1988) pointed out that research on leadership was largely “timeless,” in that it did not explicitly adopt a lifespan perspective. An exception is an early article by Post (1973), who suggested that average age-related increases in cerebral degenerative disease may impact older leaders’ cognitive functioning and personality which, in turn, may negatively impact their political and decision-making abilities. Moreover, Post (1973) proposed that, “there is a tendency for an increased urge [among older leaders] to accomplish long-cherished goals... Of particular importance is the interaction of exaggerated pre-existing attitudes with decrease in judgment” (p. 109).

Since Post’s (1973) article, only a few researchers have used propositions from the lifespan perspective to gain a better understanding of leadership processes and outcomes (e.g., Day, 2011; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Zacher et al., 2015; see Rosing & Jungmann, 2016, and Truxillo & Burlacu, 2015, for reviews). However, in contrast to the current article, this research does not explicitly position the lifespan perspective as a useful alternative to the notion of generational differences in leader and follower behaviors and outcomes. In the following, we describe initial theoretical and empirical approaches that demonstrate the usefulness of adopting a lifespan perspective on leadership.

Reflecting on a set of special issue articles presenting longitudinal studies in The Leadership Quarterly, Day (2011) observed that researchers had neglected studying changes in leadership across the entire adult lifespan: “The focal question in this area is why do some individuals continue to be effective and productive leaders well into their 60s, 70s and even beyond that age, yet others reach a pinnacle in their 40s and 50s?” (p. 569). Adopting a lifespan perspective, Day (2011) suggested that investigating successful aging and lifelong development with regard to leadership would be particularly important in times of demographic change and workforce aging.

Walter and Scheibe (2013) reviewed the literature on relationships of age with leadership behaviors (e.g., task, relational, and change-oriented) and outcomes (e.g., task and relational effectiveness). They concluded that findings are highly inconsistent. They developed a framework of leadership, age, and emotional experiences based on the lifespan literature on emotional aging (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). According to the model, and consistent with the lifespan theory of socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), leaders’ age influences leadership behaviors and outcomes via two paths, an increase in emotional regulation abilities and an increase in positivity maintenance orientation with age. The links between leader age and these mediators are moderated by leaders’ “functional age” (e.g., physical health) and “psychosocial age” (e.g., future time perspective). Furthermore, the effects of the mediators on leadership behaviors and outcomes are moderated by cognitive and emotional demands presented by the work context.

A limitation of Walter and Scheibe’s (2013) model is that it does not take the role of followers into account. However, researchers have emphasized the importance of followship in leadership processes and outcomes (e.g., Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2014; Ulh-Bien, Riggo, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014), and empirical research also focuses frequently on follower preferences for certain leadership styles (e.g., Cox et al., 2014; Sessa et al., 2007). To address this gap, Zacher et al. (2015) proposed a broader lifespan model of leadership that takes follower characteristics into account. Specifically, they proposed that leader age is not only associated with changes in certain leader traits and characteristics (e.g., task competence, interpersonal attributes, and motivation to lead) but, based on implicit leadership theory (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984), they developed a relational demography approach (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), and theorizing on organizational age norms (Lawrence, 1984), also with follower attribution and identification processes. The age difference between leaders and followers is likely to influence the strength of associations of leader age, age-related characteristics, and behaviors with follower attributions and identification.

Over the past decade, a small but growing number of studies have adopted a lifespan perspective to investigate the role of age in leadership. For example, Kearney (2008) showed that age differences between team leaders and team members moderated the association between transformational leadership and team performance, such that the relationship was positive when the team leader was older than the members, and non-significant when the leader's age was more similar to the average team age. In a series of studies, Zacher and colleagues (Zacher & Bal, 2012; Zacher, Rosing, & Frese, 2011; Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011) showed that follower evaluations of older leaders’ effectiveness depend on whether followers perceive a fit between leaders’ age and their behavior (e.g., older leaders are expected to show more supportive and mentoring behavior than younger leaders), as well as follower age stereotypes.

More recently, Buengler, Homan, and Voelpel (2016) showed that younger leaders deviate from common leader prototypes in terms of (older) age and (high) status. Moreover, these researchers found that contingent reward behavior was more effective among younger compared to older leaders in terms of negatively predicting turnover. In contrast, participative leadership was ineffective among younger leaders, supposedly because this form of leadership behavior requires leaders to be prototypical and to have high status. Finally, Kunze and Menges (2017) conducted a study on the consequences of average age differences between leaders and followers, specifically age differences between younger leaders and older followers, at the organizational level. Using a sample of 61 companies, they found that greater average age differences were associated with the experience of more negative emotions, which, in turn, related to company performance. Moreover, follower expression of emotions moderated these relationships, such that there was only an indirect relationship between average age differences and company performance if followers expressed their feelings toward their supervisors. Overall, these recent empirical studies demonstrate the usefulness of adopting a lifespan perspective to study age-related differences in leader and follower processes and outcomes.

Lifespan perspectives on leadership development

Beyond research on leadership processes and outcomes, the benefits of lifespan thinking could inform leadership development practice. Popular press works have offered a variety of top-down strategies for managing generational differences via various provisions for developing younger generations at work (e.g., Dep, 2016; Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016). One recent publication has gone so far as to suggest that equity-assisted interventions (i.e., leadership development involving horses) may be useful for promoting leadership competency development among millennials (Meola, 2016). Interestingly, more recent works have offered corollary bottom-up strategies (i.e., specifically aimed at members of younger generations) about how to overcome generational differences when assuming leadership roles in organizations (e.g., Espinoza & Schwarzbart, 2015; Karsh & Templin, 2013). Apart from the popular press, recent academic works have likewise emphasized leadership development from a generationalized lens (e.g., Hagemann & Stroope, 2013; Marcinus-Murphy, 2012).

As alluded to, a lifespan perspective takes a more nuanced and continuous approach to understanding age-related influences on the development of leadership skills over time. This perspective is thus a natural link to improved thinking about aging and leadership development (cf. Day, 2011). From a lifespan perspective, learning and development is a lifelong process. Arguably, leadership development theory has already adopted a lifespan perspective to some extent. For example, Day and Harrison (2007) have argued that, “…investments made in leader and leadership development need to be strategically made over time and with an integrative purpose” (p. 370). Likewise, Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and Mckee (2014) comprehensively...
review various developmental theories that have been applied to leadership development.

Quite a bit of scholarship has focused on intergenerational learning and mentoring as a means of facilitating leadership development. Indeed, a recent review by Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Voelpel (2016) outlines a comprehensive agenda regarding the classification, promotion, and design of such initiatives. Beyond obvious benefits for leadership development, at least two relevant and important outcomes of intergenerational contact may be realized through such mentoring programs. First, intergenerational exchanges are of central importance to the transfer of both institutional (i.e., organizational) and substantive (i.e., job) knowledge (Harvey, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). Second, intergenerational exchanges are important for engaging the generativity motives that emerge in older adulthood (Henry, Zacher, & Desmette, 2015). Generativity motives include both a concern for guiding future generations and for leaving an enduring legacy (see McAdams & de St Auby, 1992). Generativity has been shown to be an important mechanism in a variety of leadership processes and outcomes. For example, Zacher et al. (2011) examined the moderating influence of generativity on relationships between age and various leadership behaviors, finding that higher generativity in older leaders facilitates both transformational and transactional leadership behaviors. Similarly, Zacher et al. (2011) found that leader generativity moderated the relationships between leader age and three criteria of leadership success (i.e., lower perceptions of leader effectiveness, follower satisfaction with leader, and follower extra effort). More specifically, older leaders with higher generativity had higher levels of leadership success than leaders in lower generativity. In summary, a nuanced and dynamic lifespan developmental perspective (i.e., contrasted against a reductionist and static generational perspective) on leadership and leadership development is better positioned to explain age-related patterns in leadership. A lifespan developmental perspective offers that age-based and history-based normative effects, as well as various idiiosyncratic influences, must be taken into account to fully understand intraindividual dynamics in leadership.

Summary of the critique of generational differences

We have been particularly critical here of past attempts at understanding the role of generations and generational differences in the workplace in general, and to leadership more specifically. Our criticism of this mode of understanding the complexities of age underlies what we can classify here as four dangers in “generationalized thinking” (i.e., engaging the schema of generational differences to interpret age-related phenomena) with respect to leadership processes and outcomes. In contrast, the lifespan perspective has corollary advantages to that offered by generational thinking. Table 2 summarizes these dangers and how adopting a lifespan perspective remedies them.

The first danger in generationalized thinking is that it creates false dichotomies; it is exclusive rather than being inclusive as it encourages a focus on groups and group differences, rather than on individuals and individual differences. The lifespan perspective does not require one to artificially construct age groups or clusters, but rather conceptualizes and operationalizes age directly as a continuous variable (Baltes, 1987). Second, generationalized thinking is dangerous because it represents a crude model of the world; it represents reductionism in that it distills very complex aging phenomena into grossly over-simplified terms. The lifespan perspective represents the complexities of aging more accurately by adopting an inherently multilevel approach (i.e., by conceptualizing development within contexts). The third danger in generationalized thinking is that it is distracting; it focuses attention on the “wrong” mechanisms of age-related change by overemphasizing the role of cohorts at the expense of developmental processes (i.e., ontogenesis). The lifespan perspective focuses instead on interindividual differences and intraindividual development in absolute levels and rates of change. Finally, generational thinking is dangerous because it prescribes a resignation to fate; it is deterministic in that it assumes generativity membership determines individual attributes. The lifespan perspective explicitly includes principle of plasticity/malleability, which suggests that intraindividual change is possible at any age (i.e., individual characteristics are not explicitly codified/ratifed at any certain age). By calling attention to these dangers and how adopting a lifespan perspective can address them, we hope that they can be proactively mitigated in the future.

Summary of literature review

Despite the dangers of generation-based leadership research as it is currently conducted, is it apparent that this topic of study has taken hold within the empirical literature. This research is not limited to any one industry or perspective in particular: from nursing to education, from managers to employees (and dyadic relationships between the two), studies exploring generational differences in leadership preferences and other relevant outcomes are increasingly found in the...
literature. Additionally, this research has been conducted not only in the United States, but also in Asia, Australia, Europe, and South America. A variety of methods are present across this literature, including qualitative interviews and focus groups alongside more traditional cross-sectional survey approaches, and data analysis approaches vary accordingly.

Regardless of the methods employed by these authors, however, valid generational inferences cannot be drawn from this work. There is great variability in how authors operationalize generational cohorts, with ages or birth years varying widely even for the same defined group (e.g., Generation Y: 1986 and later in Cox et al., 2014; 1975 and later in Wilson et al., 2008; “the 1980s” in Yi et al., 2010), or even collapsed into “younger” and “older” groups rather than more traditional generational cohorts (e.g., Collins et al., 2009; see Fig. 1). Not only does this lead to a lack of continuity across the leadership and generations literature, but, as aforementioned, these arbitrary generational groupings are implicitly conflated with chronological age. Moreover, the results of these studies are mixed at best, suggesting minimal differences between generations in terms of leadership preferences and producing leadership recommendations that are difficult to reconcile.

Still, the influence of these publications cannot be underestimated, as this literature resides in relatively impactful journals, is highly cited in both published and unpublished works (i.e., theses, dissertations), and is used as a basis for many of the popular press articles and books consulted by students, researchers, and practitioners alike.

**Summary of the lifespan perspective**

We argued that the lifespan developmental perspective offers a more sophisticated way of thinking about age and leadership than research on generations. The good news is that the major propositions of the lifespan perspective and its associated theories have received much empirical support over the past three decades, both within and outside of the work context (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Rudolph, 2016). However, while a few researchers have already applied the lifespan perspective to gain a better understanding of the role of age in leadership, our reviews of the literature suggest that generationalized thinking is still the more dominant approach among leadership researchers and practitioners.

Thus, the most crucial next step appears to be that existing theoretical models, such as the emotion-based model of age and leadership (Walter & Scheibe, 2013) and the lifespan model of leadership (Zacher et al., 2015), are empirically tested and theoretically integrated. For example, researchers could adopt a dynamic leader–environment fit framework (cf. Zacher, Feldman, & Schulz, 2014) to study how age-related changes in leaders interact with changes in environmental characteristics (including age-related changes in follower attitudes, motivation, and behaviors) in predicting leadership behaviors and outcomes. Conducting research across the lifespan, in the longitudinal sense of the term, is a time-consuming and challenging endeavor (e.g., specific concerns regarding timing of measurements, reactivity, and attrition effects, to name a few; see Wang et al., 2017) that is only compounded by the complexities of conducting research within organizations. Despite these challenges, we hope that our framing of the lifespan perspective as a paradigm rather than a prescriptive, rigid methodological framework allows for the adoption of lifespan thinking in nearly any research context. We hope that the ideas presented here serve to inspire future research efforts to this end.

**Conclusions**

In this article we presented a critical review of theory, empirical research, and practical applications that purport to consider generational and generational differences in leadership. We have considered both historical and contemporary accounts of leadership-related phenomena concerning generations. These discussions suggested the existence of several “myths” surrounding generational phenomena, which were refuted accordingly. We also critiqued academic leadership theories regarding generations and reviewed primary empirical studies that apply generational differences to understand leadership phenomena. To account for the shortcomings and dangers of generationalized thinking, we presented an integrative and extended lifespan developmental perspective that better captures age-related dynamics that are relevant to leadership and leadership development.

Considering the various perspectives reviewed and critiqued herein (i.e., theoretical, empirical, or applied) and the paucity of evidence to support the existence of distinct generational groups, we now call 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. Our hope is that this manuscript serves as a critical and provocative, yet also theory- and evidence-based call-to-reason, and that we can catalyze new debates by bringing controversies surrounding these phenomena to light.

**References**


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