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Are young leaders more sensitive to contextual influences? A lifespan perspective on organizational antecedents of transformational leadership

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Abstract

While the role of the organizational context in enabling leadership behaviours has attracted increasing research attention, the role of leaders’ age in this dynamic has been overlooked. Using transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) and Oc’s framework of context (2018), we examine how aspects of the task, social, physical, and temporal context shape leadership behaviour from a lifespan perspective. A random sample of young leaders and their older colleagues was surveyed (n = 847). Multiple group structural equation modelling was used to test the study hypotheses. Results indicated that the task context, in terms of role clarity, was a stronger predictor of transformational leadership among young leaders than it was among their older colleagues. Social, physical, and temporal contexts did not differ in their effect on the leaders’ ability to exhibit transformational leadership. Our findings suggest that organizations can facilitate young leaders’ role clarity to support their development of constructive (i.e. transformational) leadership behaviours. In addition, our study demonstrates that leadership research benefits from a lifespan perspective to facilitate a better understanding of how leaders’ age influences the emergence of leadership behaviour.

Keywords: young leaders, socioemotional selectivity theory, selection, optimization, and compensation theory, organizational context, transformational leadership

After repeated appeals for greater consideration of organizational context in leadership research, interest in context’s influence on leadership and the leadership process has been trending during the last decade (Johns, 2006; Lundmark et al., 2020; Oc, 2018). Empirical studies of context, however, have not been systematic, nor has there been agreement on how to categorize context for leadership specifically (Ayman & Adams, 2012). Therefore, in a recent review of how contextual factors shape leadership, Oc (2018) suggests an integrative framework for such influences that includes the dimensions of the task, social, physical, and temporal contexts in which leaders interact with their followers.
Although these developments are promising, research on context and leadership has failed to consider the importance of leaders’ age and apply a lifespan perspective to understanding how context shapes leadership. Lifespan theories suggest that leaders in different phases of life may have different priorities and needs, and therefore may be affected by their context in different ways (Zacher et al., 2015). For example, leaders in the early adulthood stage (under 30 years of age) that is characterized by uncertainty and identity formation (Arnett, 2007) may experience context differently than their older colleagues do. However, though the importance of leaders’ age has been documented, it remains to be explored in relation to contextual influences on leadership.

The purpose of the present study is to examine, from a lifespan perspective, how organizational context influences leadership behaviour. Building on transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) and Oc’s (2018) framework of context, we will study how aspects of the task, social, physical, and temporal contexts shape transformational leadership behaviours among young leaders (i.e. under 30) in comparison to those behaviours among their older colleagues. Our study’s main contribution is the application of a lifespan perspective to the examination of context’s influence on leadership behaviour. This is important, given that leadership research has been accused of being ageless and age-blind (e.g. Zacker, 2015). In particular, we put the spotlight on young leaders and contribute to a better understanding of how context shape leadership behaviours at a young age compared to their older colleagues. In addition, we extend the application of Oc’s (2018) framework of context to our assessment of the influence of both individual (i.e. age) and contextual factors on leadership, as well as to our study of the antecedents of transformational leadership, which so far has focused on mainly leader-related antecedents and not contextual antecedents.

**Contextual influences on transformational leadership**

The transformational leadership concept incorporates four dimensions: idealized influence (i.e. acting as a role model), inspirational motivation (i.e. communicating an attractive vision of the future), intellectual stimulation (i.e. motivating followers to think for themselves and to be creative), and individualized consideration (i.e. paying attention to followers’ needs, strengths and aspirations; Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). A large number of studies suggest that transformational leadership is positively related to favourable employee outcomes such as strong performance and well-being (Arnold et al., 2017; Harms et al., 2017; Montano et al., 2017). However, researchers have invested less effort in studying the antecedents of transformational leadership (Tafvelin, 2017).

Study of the antecedents of transformational leadership is necessary to uncover the process enabling the emergence of transformational leadership behaviours. Given the conventional view of transformational leadership as a set of relatively stable behaviours, research has focused predominantly on revealing its dispositional antecedents (Bono & Judge, 2004; Dóci & Hofmans, 2015; Judge & Bono, 2000). Studies of contextual factors have focused primarily on how context may moderate transformational leadership’s effect on follower outcomes (e.g. De Cremer, 2006; Kapp, 2012), and less on how context may affect transformational leadership’s emergence. Building on prior work on context by Johns (2006) and Oc (2018), suggest that contextual factors in the leadership process may be divided into four dimensions: the task, social, temporal, and physical contexts in which leaders
interact with their followers. Regarding the task dimension, studies suggest that complex tasks reduce the emergence of transformational leadership (Dóci & Hofmans, 2015), while the experience of control and high levels of cognitive demand increase leaders’ likelihood of displaying transformational leadership (Nielsen & Cleal, 2011). Research on social factors has found that a collaborative culture (Demir, 2008) and formalization (Walter & Bruch, 2010) enable transformational leadership, whereas hierarchical decision-making and communication (Wright & Pandey, 2010), as well as centralization (Walter & Bruch, 2010), adversely affect transformational behaviours. Regarding the temporal context, time pressure is negatively correlated with the emergence of transformational leadership (Dóci et al., 2020). Finally, in relation to the physical context, the larger an organization is, the lower the probability is that its leaders will engage in transformational behaviours (Walter & Bruch, 2010). Taken together, these studies suggest that all four dimensions of context have the potential to influence the emergence of transformational leadership; however, no studies have examined the potential role of leaders’ age in this emergence, nor have any applied a lifespan perspective to the investigation of these factors.

A lifespan perspective on contextual influences on transformational leadership

Despite a growing understanding of the function of employee age in the work context—suggesting that age is related to work performance, job attitudes and work motives—the role of leader age is not well-understood (Larsson et al., 2023, Zacher et al., 2015). Although other leader characteristics (such as leader gender) have been investigated in at least five meta-analyses (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly et al., 1992; 1995; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014), leader age is typically not included in meta-analyses or reviews of leadership, and the leadership literature remains “timeless” and silent on the topic of leader age. Hence, knowledge from lifespan psychology has not been incorporated into studies of leadership. In an effort to fill this gap, Zacher et al. (2015) introduced a lifespan model of leadership which aims to integrate theories of leadership with the lifespan psychology literature. The authors suggest that leadership behaviours such as transformational leadership are contingent on leader age, and that the relationship between leader age and leadership behaviours may be contingent on contextual factors such as the surrounding physical environment. In other words, leader age and specific work contexts may interact in their shared influence on leader behaviours (such as transformational leadership). Lifespan theories may help to explain the processes through which this interaction occurs. The lifespan psychology perspective suggests that aging involves both growth and decline, and that individual’s priorities change with age from maximizing gains in young adulthood to maintaining resources and minimizing losses in older adulthood (Ebner et al., 2006). These developmental aspects add dimensions of age beyond years of experience, showing how leaders throughout the lifespan may approach the leader role in various ways. In the present study, we will discuss the interaction of age and context and its implication for leadership based on two prominent lifespan theories: the model of selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990) and social-emotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen et al., 1999), which both offer a way forward in understanding how age matters for the emergence of leadership behaviours (Zacher et al., 2015).
When applying a lifespan perspective to the study of leader roles, either the entire adult lifespan or specific age-related stages could be considered (Rudolph et al., 2018). We focus, in particular, on the early adulthood stage (from 18 to 30 years of age; Arnett, 2007) to capture the experience of young leaders. This fits well with Liu et al. (2020) framework of how challenges and benefits at various stages of an individual’s lifespan affect the leadership development process. Young leaders between 18 and 30 years of age are in the “self and opportunity related stage” which is a period of life that usually precedes family-building and care for elderly relatives (Liu et al., 2020). This period of the lifespan (18–30 years of age) is also commonly studied across theories and models of young workers in general (Super, 1980).

The task context
According to Oc (2018), the task context includes characteristics related to the job and work tasks, which may help or hinder the emergence of leadership behaviours. From a lifespan perspective, two task-context related factors whose importance may differ depending on leader age are role clarity and opportunities for development. Role clarity refers to the awareness of clear objectives, expectations, and responsibilities (Pejtersen et al., 2010) and may enable transformational leadership behaviours as a result of the leader’s clear sense of the boundaries of the leader role, which is helpful when displaying transformational behaviours such as role modelling and coaching. However, it has been argued that role clarity is particularly important for young leaders, who need clear boundaries to know what is expected of them and to perform well in their managerial roles (Buengeler et al., 2016). In situations in which roles are unclear, people may use various adaptive strategies throughout their lifespans, described by selection, optimization, and compensation theory (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Selection refers to decisions about what goals to pursue, as young individuals tend to select goals that lead toward enhanced development, whereas loss-based selection refers to maintaining function and is more prevalent at advanced ages. Optimization consists of the strategies used to apply resources to meet goals, and compensation refers to the process of mitigating a lack of resources (Cadiz et al., 2019). When a managerial role is unclear, applying SOC strategies is often helpful, but the usage of SOC does not peak in early adulthood (Freund & Baltes, 2002). Therefore, young leaders’ SOC strategies may be less developed, and they may not be able to apply them in the same way as an older colleague might to compensate for an unclear leader role. Young leaders may therefore suffer more from role ambiguity than older colleagues do and the impact on young leaders’ transformational leadership may be larger. Thus, we posit:

**Hypothesis 1:** The positive association between role clarity and transformational leadership will be stronger for young leaders than for their older colleagues.

Another factor related to the task context that Oc (2018) argues may affect the emergence of leadership behaviours is the opportunity for development that is available to the leader. As transformational leadership includes the development of others, we argue that to be able to develop others, leaders also need opportunities to develop themselves; thus, learning opportunities may be an important prerequisite of transformational leadership behaviours. According to socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen et al., 1999), these opportunities for development may be particularly important to young leaders. In
SST, young individuals perceive time as open-ended and are prone to seek opportunities for development, which at this stage of development is important to facilitate growth and self-motivation. For older individuals, the drive to seek challenges that may result in growth is less pronounced. Thus, development opportunities are more important for young leaders’ motivation and growth and may enhance such leaders’ capability to exhibit transformational leadership behaviours (such as motivating their own followers and providing learning opportunities for them). We therefore suggest:

Hypothesis 2: The positive association between opportunities for development and transformational leadership will be stronger for young leaders than it will for their older colleagues.

The social context
The social context includes social support provided by colleagues, such as gaining help from colleagues who listen and devote time to social interaction (Pejtersen et al., 2010). Social support is vital for leaders’ transformational leadership behaviours, as it gives leaders access to colleagues who may serve as role models and provide coaching that may enable the leader to be a role model (idealized influence) and provide coaching (individualized consideration) on their own. Within SOC, young individuals strive to develop and learning may particularly benefit from the possibility to discuss problems and get ideas for solutions from their fellow leaders. To extrapolate, younger leaders’ leadership behaviours may be more contingent on social support from colleagues than older leaders’ are. We therefore suggest:

Hypothesis 3: The positive association between social support and transformational leadership will be stronger for young leaders than for their older colleagues.

The temporal context
Quantitative demands refer to leaders’ amount of work, the distribution of workload, and time pressure (Pejtersen, 2010), which, as in Oc’s (2018) framework and empirical studies (e.g. DócI et al., 2020) will negatively impact the emergence of leadership behaviours. According to SST, younger leaders’ leadership behaviours may be more affected by a heavy workload than older leaders might. Older leaders are more emotionally mature and experienced and, therefore, can more easily prioritize work tasks under pressure. Young leaders, with access to fewer emotional resources and less experience to lean on, may be more affected by high quantitative demands and therefore have more difficulty displaying constructive leadership behaviours, such as transformational leadership. After reviewing these arguments, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: The negative association between quantitative demands and transformational leadership will be stronger for young leaders than it will for their older colleagues.

The physical context
From a leadership process perspective, the physical context encompasses environmental conditions (e.g. noise) as well as the actual and structural distance between leaders and
followers, that may help or hinder leaders in their interaction with their followers (Oc, 2018). One such structural aspect is the number of employees that each leader is responsible for, known as span of control. A large span of control can thus be seen as a (structural) physical contextual factor that has the potential to influence the quality of interactions between leaders and employees (Howell & Sharmir, 2005). As span of control affects the social density of an organization, it has alternatively been suggested as a part of the social context (Björk & Härenstam, 2016). The boundaries between different contextual dimensions are not clear cut, with many factors potentially relating to more than one dimension (Oc, 2018). However, as leadership research has mainly focused on distance (between leaders and employees) in terms of physical context (Oc, 2018), we chose to categorize it in terms of the physical context. Given that effective leadership is contingent on the relationship between the leader and the follower, a surfeit of followers is difficult to manage and may easily give followers the perception of a distant and passive leader (Lundmark et al., 2020). Leading a large number of employees may be particularly difficult for young leaders. From an SST perspective, young leaders may struggle more than their older colleagues do to handle the increased workload that comes with having a large number of followers. The same access to fewer emotional resources and less experience that affects young leaders’ management of heavy quantitative demands may make it more difficult to display transformational leadership behaviours under higher pressure. We therefore suggest:

Hypothesis 5: The negative association between span of control and transformational leadership will be stronger for young leaders than for their older colleagues.

Method
Participants and procedure
Randomly selected leaders from the Swedish occupational register were invited to participate in this cross-sectional survey study. In total, 4,000 leaders from the private sector were invited: 2,000 young (ages 19–29) and 2,000 older (ages 30–65) leaders. The participating leaders (N = 847) were each responsible for at least 10 employees. Response rates were corrected after removal of those who no longer worked as managers. Of the 2,000 young leaders invited, 209 participated, corresponding to a corrected response rate of 12%. Of the 2,000 invited older leaders, 638 participated, which equals a corrected response rate of 36%. The survey was sent by post, followed by three friendly reminders a couple of weeks later. Distribution and administration of the questionnaire was carried out through cooperation with Statistics Sweden (SCB). Young leaders had a mean age of 27.5 years (SD = 1.6), 120 (57%) were women, and 48% had completed university-level education. The older leaders had a mean age of 49.6 years (SD = 8.2), 206 (32%) were women, and 57% had university as their highest educational level. The average duration of employment at the present position was 2.8 (SD = 2.1) years for younger leaders and 8.6 (SD = 7.5) years for the older leaders. Regarding level of leadership, 62% were first-line leaders and 38% had middle- or senior positions among younger leaders. Corresponding numbers for the older leaders were 44% on a first-line level and 56% were managers on middle- or senior positions. SCB provided an attrition analysis based on their registers, concluding that marital status (being
married), higher age, high educational level, female gender, and having Sweden as country of birth were associated with a higher probability of answering our survey. The study was approved by the national ethical review authority (Dnr 2018/454-31).

Measures

Transformational leadership (TL) was assessed through a 7-item scale (Carless, 2000). Answers were obtained through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (hardly ever/never) to 5 (often but not always). An example item is “I give encouragement and recognition to staff”. Internal consistency (ω) for this scale was .76.

Two aspects of task context were assessed: possibilities for development and role clarity. Possibilities for development were assessed through a 4-item scale from the COPSOQ (Pejtersen et al., 2010). Responses ranged from 1 (to a very small extent) to 5 (to a very large extent) on a 5-point Likert scale. An example item is “Does your work give you the opportunity to develop your skills?” Internal consistency (ω) for this scale was .75. Role clarity was measured by a 3-item scale from the Copenhagen psychosocial questionnaire (COPSOQ; Pejtersen et al., 2010). Answers ranged from 1 (to a very small extent) to 5 (to a very large extent) on a 5-point Likert scale. An example item is “Do you know exactly what is expected of you at work?” Internal consistency (ω) for this scale was .77.

Social support, an aspect of social context, was measured through a 3-item scale of social support from the COPSOQ (Pejtersen et al., 2010). A 5-point Likert scale accounted for answers from 1 (never/hardly ever) to 5 (always). An example item is “How often are your colleagues willing to listen to your problems at work?” Internal consistency (ω) for this scale was .73.

Quantitative demands, an aspect of temporal context, were measured through a 4-item scale from the COPSOQ-II (Pejtersen et al., 2010). Responses ranged from 1 (never/hardly ever) to 5 (always) on a 5-point Likert scale. An example item is “Do you have enough time to execute all your tasks?” This scale had an internal consistency (ω) of .84.

Span of control, an aspect of physical context, was assessed through the question “How many employees are you in charge of?” with the actual number as a response.

Statistical analyses

Mplus software, Version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998) was applied for the statistical analyses and all models were estimated with robust maximum likelihood (MLR). Analyses were performed in several steps. Initially, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses to examine reliability and to build the measurement model in full as well as for young and older leaders separately. Second, in line with recommendations, we measured invariance to enable group comparisons (Vandenberg, 2000). Established measures of model fit were applied: the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Invariance was approved over groups when ΔCFI < .01, ΔRMSEA < .015 and ΔSRMR < .03 between configural and metric and from metric to scalar when ΔSRMR < .01. (Chen, 2007.) Structural equation modelling (SEM) and multigroup analyses were conducted to investigate our hypotheses. SEM has three major advantages compared to traditional multivariate technics, it explicitly assesses measurement error, it estimates latent variables, and allows for model testing where structures can be imposed.
and tested if they fit the data (Hoyle, 2012). Structural models were performed to investigate the relationship between contextual factors and transformational leadership. Thus, all contextual factors were regressed on transformational leadership. To investigate potential differences between the groups of younger and older leaders, the Wald test was performed. The structural models were evaluated through the investigation of several model fit indices, including chi-square ($\chi^2$), in line with recommendations (Bentler, 2007). Acceptable fit was supposed when SRMR and RMSEA were less than .08 and when CFI values were higher than .90. Exceptional fit was assumed when CFI had values larger than .95 (Marsh, 2007).

### Results

The means, standard deviation and correlation between study variables are presented in Table 1. Three antecedents; opportunities for development, role clarity, and social support correlated with transformational leadership in the expected direction for both young and older leaders. Workload and span of control was uncorrelated with transformational leadership in both groups.

### Test of hypotheses

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined our measurement model, which showed acceptable fit: $\chi^2(200) = 586.52, p < 0.05$, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.05, CFI = 0.92. Next, we tested invariance between the group of older and younger leaders to ensure that our measures were perceived in a similar way in both groups. As presented in Table 2, invariance at the scalar level was demonstrated, enabling further comparison of the two groups.

To test our hypotheses, we then performed multigroup structural equation modelling, comparing the relative importance of contextual factors to the emergence of transformational leadership behaviours among our two groups of young and older leaders. The results are presented in Figure 1. In support of Hypothesis 1, the relationship between role clarity and transformational leadership was stronger for young leaders, and Wald’s test suggested that the difference was significant ($Wald = 4.25, p = .04$). In relation to opportunities for development, there was no significant difference between the two groups, contradicting Hypothesis 2. However, a closer look at the analysis suggests that opportunities for development in fact had a stronger relation to transformational leadership for older leaders, although the differences between the groups were not significant ($Wald = 3.03, p = .08$). No significant differences were found for any of the other contextual factors, contradicting Hypotheses 3–5.

### Discussion

From a lifespan perspective, we examined how an organization’s inner contexts (i.e. in terms of task, social, physical, and temporal components) interacted with leaders’ age (i.e. younger vs. older) to influence transformational leadership. From the perspective of SOC and SST theory, we hypothesized that beneficial contextual conditions would be a prerequisite for young leaders’ transformational leadership to a greater extent than for older leaders’. We found partial support for this claim. Our results suggested that role clarity, an aspect of an organization’s task context, was essential to younger leaders’ display of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Latent mean young</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Latent mean older</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Opportunities for development</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.414</td>
<td>.412</td>
<td>−.087</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.375</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Role clarity</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td>−.249</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social support</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.448</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>−.343</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quantitative demands</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>−.077</td>
<td>−.460</td>
<td>−.324</td>
<td>−.014</td>
<td>−.083</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Span of control</td>
<td>30.68</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>−.185</td>
<td>−.123</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>20.56</td>
<td>117.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transformational leadership</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.315</td>
<td>.511</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>−.169</td>
<td>−.190</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Young leaders = 209. Older leaders = 638. SD: standard deviation. Correlations in bold were significant at level p < .001. Values presented to the left under the diagonal represent young leaders and values to the right over the diagonal represent older leaders.
Table 2. Test of invariance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models</th>
<th>Chi square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>Model comparison</th>
<th>( \Delta )RMSEA</th>
<th>( \Delta )SRMR</th>
<th>( \Delta )CFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configural</td>
<td>821.05</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric</td>
<td>842.57</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>Configural vs. metric</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scalar</td>
<td>912.66</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>Metric vs. scalar</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 847 \), young leaders \( n = 209 \), older leaders \( n = 638 \). Items correlate over time.
transformational leadership, significantly more so than it was for older leaders. Contrary to what we expected, associations between transformational leadership and opportunities for development (i.e. task context), social support (i.e. social context), quantitative demands (i.e. time context), and span of control (i.e. physical context) did not differ to a statistically significant degree between young leaders and their older colleagues.

Although our results indicate that role clarity is important for both younger and older leaders’ transformational leadership, it is, as we expected, vastly more so for young leaders. Thus, as suggested by SOC theory (Freund & Baltes, 2002), when young leaders lack clear boundaries for their managerial roles, they will be less able than older leaders are to compensate for this shortage by using developed strategies that come with age and experience.

Figure 1. Multiple group structural model of the contextual antecedents of transformational leadership. *Note.* The first parameter in bold displays estimates in the group of young leaders and the second parameter represents the results from the group of their older colleagues. Correlations between contextual antecedents were removed for clarity. TFL: transformational leadership.
Consequently, a lack of role clarity makes it harder for younger leaders to perform desirable leadership qualities (i.e. act transformational).

The importance of considering different needs depending on leader age has also recently been advocated (Liu et al., 2020). From a lifespan perspective, this early adult stage is characterized by volatility and uncertainty (Arnett, 2007). This is also the stage when younger people enter their first managerial role and start forming an identity as a leader (Liu et al., 2020). At this stage, the need for awareness of the boundaries of the entered role can thus be seen as vital for guiding young leaders in the process of developing appropriate strategies for when and how to enact transformational leadership practices.

The other examined aspect of leaders’ task context—opportunities for development—was unrelated to young leaders’ transformational leadership. However, for older leaders, we found a statistically significant relationship. Though the difference in strength between the two age groups was non-significant, the results indicate that opportunities for development may be more important for older leaders, in contrast to what we expected. There may be a number for reasons for this; for example, young leaders may be preoccupied by entering the managerial role and learning how to champion its boundaries. It may also be that older leaders are in need of stimulation and inspiration to continue with their goals. Leaders at this stage of development care more about finding a sense of meaning and purpose (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, it may also be the case that completing challenging and knowledge-expanding leadership programs is as important at this stage as remaining motivated in developing and implementing leadership skills.

Surprisingly, we found no significant associations between transformational leadership and any of the variables representing the social, temporal, and physical contexts, nor did we find any differences in these relations between younger and older leaders. The role of social context in leadership emergence is less well researched, and investigation has shown mixed results so far (Oc, 2018). In our SEM analysis, we included several contextual antecedents simultaneously, which may indicate that, relative to the presence of other antecedents, social support is less powerful (when compared to the statistically significant correlations between social support and transformational leadership; see Table 1). Recent findings also suggest that social support may be a blunt instrument when it does not specifically identify its own form, type, or source (Jolly et al., 2021). Thus, what kind of support matters for whom and when may differ substantially depending on leaders’ perceived needs and preferences. Additionally, the relationship between temporal contextual factors (such as quantitative demands) and transformational leadership may be highly dependent upon other factors. For example, available job resources (e.g. job security and team climate) may interact with such temporal aspects’ association with outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), in this case, leaders’ transformational leadership. Span of control as a physical contextual antecedent has in other studies been linked to leaders’ transformational leadership (Lundmark et al., 2020). However, in this study, we relied upon leaders’ self-report data both to measure span of control and to measure transformational leadership. Previously, other sources have been used in such measurements (e.g. organizational data on span of control and employee reports of leaders’ transformational leadership; Lundmark et al., 2020). Additionally, span of control may be more or less important, depending on the setting of the job; for example, whether all employees are situated at the same place, whether there is shift work, etc. In conclusion, compared to aspects of the task context, the
association between transformational leadership and the evaluated aspects of social, temporal, and physical contexts may be more sensitive to other factors in each individual leader’s specific work setting than such associations are to the leader’s age.

Implications

Recent contributions to the literature suggest that management and leadership research may benefit from taking a lifespan perspective (Liu et al., 2020; Zacher et al., 2015). We based our hypothesis on the lifespan theories SOC (Baltes et al., 1999), and SST (Carstensen et al., 1999), in combination with a contextual leadership approach (Oc, 2018). Our results indicate that SOC theory may indeed facilitate an understanding of how leaders’ age interacts with the link between role clarity and transformational leadership. In other words, role clarity may help younger leaders compensate for their lack of developed strategies. Conversely, SOC was not supported in terms of younger leaders’ benefit of having access to social support in their development and learning. Likewise, none of the hypotheses based on SST were supported, which may question the explanatory value of this theory for understanding age differences’ effect on the context–transformational leadership link. However, studies that simultaneously include a range of contextual antecedents to examine the antecedents’ relative power are rare. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to take a lifespan perspective on the contextual leadership process. As discussed above, it may be that these contextual variables interact with other contextual and individual variables besides age. Therefore, to more fully understand how age is involved in this process, more studies are needed before these theories can be discarded.

From our results, it is evident that role clarity plays an important part in leaders’ transformational leadership, and especially so for younger leaders. Clarity in roles contributes to setting boundaries for what to do and when to do it, guiding (in this case) leaders’ behaviours. Beyond formal role descriptions, role clarity may benefit leaders by encouraging them to develop their own strategies and confidence in their abilities to form and control their work, as well as by enhancing their relationships with their senior managers (Kauppila, 2014). In other words, a way of improving role clarity for (young) leaders could be for their immediate manager or a senior mentor to continuously guide them in their exploration of boundaries and development of strategies for how to act within the leadership role. From the perspective of older leaders, it would seem beneficial to have development opportunities highlighted in the organization’s plan for managerial learning. The concept of leadership development as a continuous process, meeting different needs as it progresses, may help keep leaders motivated to perform a high standard of leadership throughout their leadership careers.

Limitations and future research

Though this work responds to calls for study of the contextual leadership process and for more studies in management and leadership research to take a lifespan perspective, our study is not without limitations. First, the data gathered for the study is cross-sectional and uses only leaders’ self-report data. The study design thus limits the possibility to draw conclusions about the direction of relationships and may inflate regression weights (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Additionally, self-reported leadership has been questioned from the perspective
that it does not necessarily correspond to the perceptions of those influenced by it, and that the latter are a more valid measure of leadership outcomes (Jacobsen & Bøgh Andersen, 2015). However, as our main interest was the differences between younger and older leaders in the studied associations, the design used is less of a problem. Interaction analysis (i.e. in this case, with age groups as a moderator) is less sensitive to the use of cross-sectional data (Spector, 2019), and leadership outcomes are beyond the scope of our study. Moreover, the studied relations were based on the contextual leadership framework (Oc, 2018) and previous empirical findings on the contextual antecedents of transformational leadership (e.g. Lundmark et al., 2020), are in support of our implicit assumptions on the direction of correlation. Nevertheless, future studies, if possible, should strive to replicate our findings by using a longitudinal design and multiple sources of reports (e.g. employee reports on transformational leadership).

Second, in line with our focus on young leaders in particular, we used age groups (i.e. leaders below and above the age of 30) in our analysis to compare young leaders to their older colleagues. It could be questioned whether this age-stage approach is appropriate when considering differences in how contextual antecedents relate to leadership behaviours, and if 30 years of age is a significant marker in terms of leaders’ development. We based this cutoff on suggestions in the leadership literature identifying significant age-dependent developmental phases from a lifespan perspective (e.g. Liu, 2021). However, as lifespan studies on leadership are still nascent, little empirical support is available for the exact time points at which differences may appear, and whether they do so differently. Thus, in an early study on the subject, we tested what the literature suggested to be reasonable. Given our results, we suggest that future lifespan studies on the leadership process could, alternatively, test other age groups or treat age as a continuous variable. Studies using a truly longitudinal lifespan design—following leaders over their careers and including additional contextual and individual variables—would also be helpful in clarifying shifts in leaders’ prerequisites and needs over time.

Third, the response rate differed between our two age groups where young leaders had a lower response rated compared to older leaders. According to Statistic Sweden, young individuals have a low response rate in surveys in general, which partly explain this difference. Therefore, we cannot be sure if our findings generalize to the population of young leaders in Sweden at large.

Fourth, although this study focuses on young age and leadership specifically, because tenure and age tend to overlap future studies need to investigate how years of experience may complement our understanding of young leaders’ prerequisites. Perhaps interview studies could be conducted to dwell further on this issue to mitigate problems with multicollinearity.

Conclusion
We applied a lifespan perspective on how context influences leaders’ leadership behaviours, in an effort to address calls for reducing the age blindness of which leadership research has been accused. In particular, we found that young leaders (i.e. under the age of 30) differ from older leaders in their need of role clarity for performing transformational leadership behaviours. Therefore, helping young leaders develop strategies to deal with the
uncertainty of a leadership role may be warranted. We also found, contrary to our expectations, that older leaders’ opportunities for development may be an important aspect to consider if they are to perform well in their role. More studies on the antecedents of leadership from a lifespan perspective are needed so that we can more effectively match supportive measures with different needs throughout an individual’s leadership career.

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Data availability statement
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [ST], upon reasonable request.

REFERENCES


