Sociohistorical Context and Adult Social Development:

New Directions for 21st Century Research

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To date, most explanations of adult social development within the field of psychology assume universal age-related processes. The majority of these explanations, however, stem from studies on a limited number of cohorts that were socialized in specific social contexts. As a consequence, the current knowledge on adult social development confounds age-related and contextual influences. We argue that it is essential to disentangle these influences in order to better understand adult social development. In this article, we apply the theoretical framework of developmental contextualism and provide explanations for adult social development that are firmly based on the sociohistorical context that a cohort experienced during young adulthood. This hypothesis is discussed with the example of romantic relationships. We argue that the relatively strong value that today’s older adults ascribe to close social ties might be rooted in experiences of limited life-path options, existential concerns, and stressful historical events (i.e., Great Depression, World War II, post-war era) during their young-adult years. Today’s young adults, conversely, are socialized in rapidly changing social structures with increasing diversity in life-path options and in relative security with regard to basic material and security needs. We explore how these experiences might shape the future social development of today’s young adults with respect to relationship contexts (e.g., living arrangements, digitalization) and relationship needs (e.g., exploration, self-actualization). We conclude with theoretical and methodological recommendations for future research that will be amply equipped to systematically investigate both age-related and contextual influences that drive development in any previous, present, and forthcoming cohort.

Keywords: adult social development, age-related differences, cohort differences, contextualism

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The major theoretical principles are firmly wedded to historical circumstances.

Gergen, 1973, p. 315

Fulfilling social relationships are conducive to subjective well-being, irrespective of age (Uchino, 2009). Age, however, has been found to be associated with adult social development; that is, with how people approach, organize, and maintain their social relationships. In terms of relationship structure, social networks tend to shrink across adulthood, particularly through the reduction of peripheral networks (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). In terms of relationship quality, satisfaction with social relationships tends to increase with age (Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011), which is, at least partly, explained by how older adults build their relationships.

To date, most explanations of adult social development within the field of psychology reflect universal age-related processes (see Charles & Carstensen, 2010). The majority of this knowledge, however, is based on studies with a limited number of cohorts (i.e., the population of people born at the same point or interval in time; Schaie, 1965) socialized in distinct social structures: Most research findings with respect to development in older age are based on cohorts born in the first half of the last century and socialized during historical episodes such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war era. In their young adulthood, adults of these cohorts had limited life-path options, needed to prioritize their options, needed to be reactive (rather than planned) with regard to family changes, ascribed high importance to family and children, and valued social interdependence (e.g., Rogler, 2002). Today’s young adults, conversely, have a multitude of life-path options, are socialized in rapidly changing social structures, and are subject to proliferating digitalization and globalization (e.g., Ellison,
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Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009). Given these accelerating and interwoven changes, it is essential
to rethink research on adult social development in light of the modern era.

In this article, we argue that adult social development needs to be conceptualized and
studied in view of the respective cohort’s socialization; that is, in view of the idiosyncratic
social experiences and social motivations of a cohort. The notion of a cohort is important here
given that people of each cohort have different opportunities and resources available (Caspi,
1987; Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Hartup & Stevens, 1997), but are also confronted with
distinct challenges and obstacles. In addition, a person who, for example, passed their young
adulthood in Europe during World War II may have different experiences than a person in the
same cohort who lived in the United States of America or East Asia. Hence, cohort
differences result from differences in both time and place, and persons born in different
cohorts tend to not only differ in their mean levels of behavioral characteristics but also in
their developmental trajectories (e.g., Baltes & Smith, 2004). In what follows, we discuss the
hypothesis that each cohort transfers their experiences and motivations from young adulthood
(roughly ages 18–30), which is a particularly malleable and formative life stage with respect
to building adult social roles (Arnett, 2000), through midlife (roughly ages 30–60) to late
adulthood (roughly age 60 years and older; Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, & Specht,
2014). This hypothesis is discussed with the example of romantic relationships.¹

To elaborate on this contextualized view, we first review previous findings on adult
development in the social domain in terms of age-related and cohort differences. Second, we
introduce contextualism as a theoretical framework for understanding and conceptualizing
adult social development in the light of sociohistorical circumstances. Third, we describe the
modern era with its affordances and opportunities and characterize the sociohistorical context
of today’s young adults. Fourth, we derive implications for young adults’ later social
development. We close with theoretical and methodological suggestions for future research.

Before doing so, we wish to emphasize that the described social-structure changes
apply to young adults of industrialized, Western societies. The social structures, experiences, needs, and values of young adults in other countries might be different. It is, however, to assume that the development in industrialized countries that we describe here has—with some delay but then at an accelerated tempo—occurred in developing countries as well; in terms of increasing material wealth (Krausmann et al., 2017), mortality decline (Brenner, 2005), health improvements (Popkin & Gordon-Larsen, 2004), increasing standards of living (Easterlin, 2000), increasing access to education including increasing democratization and scientization (Schofer & Meyer, 2005) and secularization (Inglehart, 2007), and women’s entrance to the workforce (Herr & Shahnasarian, 2001).

**Adult Development in the Social Domain**

According to Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical system (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979), a person’s environment is constituted as nested structures, which range from micro- and mesosystems to exo-, macro-, and cronosystems. Here, we will focus on the patterns of the exo-, macro-, and cronosystem (e.g., social conditions, culture, history) that a cohort has experienced in their young adulthood and which are thought to shape a person’s social network at the level of micro- and mesosystems (i.e., individual’s relationships with others in their immediate social environment and the interconnections between these relationships) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This network stems from repeated interactions, which are based on direct involvement and mental representations of the relationships (e.g., with family members, romantic partners, friends), to single interactions and zero acquaintances, which imply less involvement (e.g., Wrzus et al., 2013). Social networks can roughly be characterized according to their structure (i.e., objective characteristics including size, contact frequency, and composition) and their quality (i.e., a person’s evaluation of the relationship as positive and/or negative; Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Birditt, 2014).

Age-related differences in the social network—both the structure and quality—have received strong attention in the scientific literature. There is broad consensus that a person’s
relationship network tends to shrink across adulthood, and that a person’s satisfaction with his/her social relationships tends to increase with age (e.g., Luong et al., 2011; Wrzus et al., 2013). Both of these findings have been found in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies and are commonly explained by universal age-related mechanisms: Selectivity of invested resources is proposed as the main age-related explanation of changes in the structure and quality of relationship networks (see Rook & Charles, 2017).

Cohort differences, conversely, have often been overlooked when deriving explanations, although the findings thus far may be confounded by cohort effects (e.g., due to historical events or the cultural climate that a cohort has experienced). Considering such cohort differences is particularly warranted given that participants in the majority of studies on old age (even in the existing longitudinal studies) were adults socialized during the Great Depression, World War II, or the post-war era. These specific socialization circumstances raise the question whether the given findings would be replicable when today’s young adults—who have been socialized in very different social circumstances and have distinct social experiences—reach old age. In fact, studies using a sequential design (i.e., combining cross-sectional and longitudinal data assessment) have revealed differences between the cohorts in how the structure and quality of their relationships change longitudinally.

For example, examining the association between loneliness and partnership status in Germany, Böger and Huxhold (2018) found that among persons of later born cohorts (born in the 1950s), the association between partnership status and loneliness was less strong than among persons of earlier born cohorts (born in the 1920s), and later born single people were more satisfied with being single than their earlier born counterparts. The authors explain that these differences may be because persons in the earlier born cohort placed a higher importance on romantic relationships as a source of economic security and instrumental support, and considered long-term romantic relationships and marriage to be a normative part of the life course. In addition, a study by van Tilburg, Aartsen, and van der Pas (2015)
conducted in the Netherlands found that divorced persons of later born cohorts (aged 54–65 in 2012) reported less loneliness than those of earlier born cohorts (aged 54–65 in 1992), a trend that—according to the authors—may reflect improvements in the social position of people who dissolve a committed partnership. Similarly, Grühn et al. (2008) found inconsistencies between cross-sectional (US participants’ age 10–87 years) and longitudinal (US participants assessed from 1992 to 2004) age differences in empathy, indicating more empathy in later born cohorts but no longitudinal change in empathy. The authors speculate that it might be more acceptable and normative for individuals from later born cohorts to talk about their own and others’ feelings than for individuals who grew up during an earlier era.

To conclude, the age differences that were found in both the structure of social networks and the quality of social relationships might not only be a question of age-related processes but also a matter of cohort differences. As we will discuss later, considering age differences or cohort differences in isolation is insufficient, and only the combination of both factors provides a comprehensive explanation of social development. As a consequence, the perspective of Age × Cohort interactions is needed, which implies that age leads to different trajectories of adult social development depending on cohort. Emphasizing the role of such interactions distinguishes our elaboration on adult social development from both a sociological perspective (that often tends to overlook universal age-related processes in favor of cohort effects) and a developmental-psychology perspective (that often tends to overlook cohort effects in favor of age-related processes) (for similar conclusions, see for example Alwin, Felmlee, & Kreager, 2018; Gilleard & Higgs, 2016). We see a synergy between both perspectives as leading to a more nuanced understanding of adult social development, which makes developmental contextualism an useful theoretical framework.

Developmental Contextualism as a Theoretical Framework

It is a generally accepted perspective that people’s lives are embedded in and shaped by broader societal and historical contexts (i.e., exo-, macro-, and cronosystems;
Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that contribute both to short- and long-term changes in developmental trajectories that are different between cohorts (e.g., Antonucci et al., 2014; Baltes & Smith, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Caspi, 1987; Elder, 1994; Greenfield, 2018; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Rogler, 2002; Schaie, 1965). Examples of these contexts are economic depressions, wars, social revolutions, major epidemics, technological advances, major educational changes, changes in the demographic structure and modernization, as well as changes in the content and practices of nutrition and other forms of health behavior (Baltes & Smith, 2004).

The theoretical framework of developmental contextualism takes these contexts into account and suggests that “relationships between historical events and individual behavior produce lasting orientations among persons born in the same time period” (Rogler, 2002, p. 1013). In the following, we elaborate on (1) how these lasting orientations arise, (2) when people are most susceptible to sociohistorical contexts, and (3) how these orientations are translated into later parts of adulthood (see also Greenfield, 2018; Inglehart, 2007; Rogler, 2002).

As for (1), long-lasting orientations and cohort differences are thought to arise from the social climate and historical events that a cohort has experienced. More specifically, sociohistorical contexts influence individuals’ (social) behavior through expected social roles and cultural values (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Greenfield, 2018; Inglehart, 2007), as well as through opportunities and resources (e.g., Edmunds & Turner, 2005) that are available to a particular cohort (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). According to this perspective, the focus of today’s older adults on close social ties, preferably within a family, might be explained by their limited life-path options and experiences of existential concerns (e.g., relative poverty). Experiences of existential concerns might have motivated people from these cohorts to search for secure environments; these environments are, in the social domain, provided by stable social relationships such as close relationships and family ties.

Supporting this view, longitudinal research from the Netherlands investigating the effect of socioeconomic status (indicating different levels of existential concerns) on older
adults’ social relationships found that people with lower socioeconomic status tended to have
smaller networks than those of higher socioeconomic status and that they relied more on kin
than non-kin relationships for instrumental and emotional support (Broese van Groenou &
van Tilburg, 2003). Similar findings are known from studies on persons belonging to ethnic
and racial groups that tend to differ in socioeconomic status. For example, African Americans
(more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status) tended to have smaller and more kin-
dominated networks than Caucasian Americans (see Antonucci et al., 2014).

Existential concerns might not only lead to differences in the structure of social
networks, but also to differences in the quality of social relationships. The probably most
influential insights in this regard stem from the work by Glen Elder (e.g., Elder, 1994) in his
study on children of the Great Depression in the United States of America: Teenage boys and
girls who experienced families’ economic deprivation showed positive psychosocial
development, such as higher life satisfaction in their adulthood. They were readier to take on
responsibilities and to work together toward the communal goal of getting the family through
hard times, which Elder identified as an effective training in initiative, responsibility, and
cooperation. Similarly, a longitudinal study on differences in psychosocial adult development
between older and younger US baby-boomer cohorts (born in 1946 vs. born in 1957) showed
that the earlier cohort (that was forced to compete economically with a larger number of age
peers) reported a steeper increase in favorable psychosocial development across adulthood
than the later cohort (Whitbourne, Sneed, & Sayer, 2009). In line with our argument, the
authors conclude that differential socialization experiences can alter the course of
psychosocial development throughout adulthood.

As for (2), people adapt to the broader social and physical environments by adopting
values (e.g., Finkel et al., 2014; Greenfield, 2018; Inglehart, 2007) and by making use of
available opportunities, chances, and resources (e.g., Caspi, 1987; Edmunds & Turner, 2005;
Hartup & Stevens, 1997). As such, sociohistorical contexts interact with age-graded
influences in that Person × Environment interactions predict behavior (e.g., Featherman & Lerner, 1985). This interplay, however, is thought to differ depending on a person’s life stage. It is argued that the sociohistorical contexts of young adulthood are particularly formative for the development of their adult social relationships for the following reasons: Young adulthood is seen as a dynamic and fluid life period (Arnett, 2000), characterized by critical transitions from social roles of dependency (e.g., in one’s family of origin) to roles of adult responsibilities (e.g., in one’s own family and/or in the working field).

Young adults might be particularly vulnerable to sociohistorical influences because they find themselves in a significant period of questioning who they are, experimenting with different roles, and searching for a niche in society (e.g., Hutteman et al., 2014). They seek to acquire new information in order to explore and to develop their own values, identities, social roles, and life paths (Arnett, 2000; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Greenfield, 2018; Rogler, 2002). We note that people already adopt values within the family context in middle childhood (e.g., McAdams & Olson, 2010), but that it is in young adulthood that people experience a consolidation of or a shift in their values (e.g., Biddle, Bank, & Slavings, 1990). In young adulthood, pre-existing values select people into particular environments, such as college (i.e., selection effects), and experiences within these environments reinforce existing values or change values (i.e., socialization effects). This makes young adulthood a life stage, in which external stimuli, such as social climates, historical events, and social experiences, are particularly formative (Biddle et al., 1990; Elder, 1994).

As for (3), the experiences of young adulthood have long-lasting effects until late life: Older adults tend to recall a higher number of autobiographical memories from the second and third decades of their lives compared to other periods and to do so more easily (Rubin & Schulkind, 1997), and their values have been found to reflect conditions that were present during their pre-adult and young-adult years (Inglehart, 2007). Young adulthood reflects a period in which processes of meaning-making emerge and consolidate (McAdams & Olson,
and major normative life events (e.g., moving out of the parents’ home, committing to a first serious relationship, entering the job market) are taking place (Hutteman et al., 2014). The salience of these events might explain why young adulthood is a frequently mentioned period in people’s life narratives, and why events in young adulthood tend to have a strong relevance for who people become and what they value. Supporting this view, values adopted in young adulthood have been found to relate to the quality of people’s social relationships in later years (e.g., Blieszner & Roberto, 2006; Monsour, 2001). Importantly, in highlighting the formative role of young adults’ cultural and historical environments on their development, we neither deny that environments influence people of other ages, nor argue that after the experiences of young adulthood the development is “set like plaster” (Costa & McCrae, 1994, p. 21). Previous research clearly shows that people continue to change in response to cultural, social, and physical context across adulthood (e.g., Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). Hence, we do not propose that only the experiences of young adulthood matter, or that they leave irreversible footprints on the person. We rather propose that it is in young adulthood that environmental factors are particularly relevant for adult social development because young adulthood is an especially formative and salient life period.

To discern how today’s young adults might develop later in their lives, we maintain that it is essential to look at their life circumstances and social experiences of today. In doing so, we are led by two main questions: “What is the sociohistorical context of today’s young adults?” and “What are the psychological mechanisms through which the sociohistorical context might translate into adult social development?”.

Modern Era

To recall, the relatively strong value that cohorts of the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war era ascribe to close social ties might be rooted in their experiences of limited life-path options, existential concerns, and stressful sociohistorical events in their
In contrast, today’s young adults in industrialized societies live in relative physical security in terms of increasing material wealth (Krausmann et al., 2017), mortality decline (Brenner, 2005), health increase (Popkin & Gordon-Larsen, 2004), and increasing standards of living (Easterlin, 2000). Other societal changes include increasing access to education, democratization, and scientization (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), globalization (Stiglitz, 2002), and digitalization (Ellison et al., 2009). Such modernization processes are associated with increasing variation in pathways to adult roles as well as with shifts in attitudes, needs, and norms (e.g., Allan, Hawker, & Crow, 2001; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017), and with instabilities in educational and working contexts (e.g., Lent, 2018). These modernization processes and variations feed back into the sociohistorical context, that is, into how people form and maintain their social relationships (e.g., Kislev, 2018). In the following, we discuss romantic relationships as a sample case.

The Sociohistorical Context of Today’s Young Adults

Over recent decades, individuals have tended to “shift away from long-term, steady arrangements and move toward temporary, noncommittal, and consumerist arrangements both professionally and romantically” (Kislev, 2018, p. 2245). Not only has sequential partnering become more common, but satisfaction with being single has increased and attitudes towards separation, singledom, and re-partnering have become more liberal (e.g., Böger & Huxhold, 2018; Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). These changes have resulted in a decline in the status of marriage and in an increasing proportion of unmarried individuals (Wang & Parker, 2014). In the same vein, the prevalence and acceptance of divorce has increased and cohabitation outside marriage has become more common (Coontz, 2007); more men and women are deciding not to marry/have children or to postpone marriage/childbearing, and more women are entering higher education and occupational careers (Lesthaeghe, 2014). As a consequence, relationship careers have become more complex (Oberg & Bildtgård, 2018).
Romantic Relationship Contexts

**Singledom and living alone.** Single-person households are the most rapidly growing type of living arrangement in developed countries (OECD Family Database). In almost all OECD countries, marriage rates have declined over the past decades (OECD Family Database): While in 1970, the average rate in OECD countries was 8.2 marriages per 1,000 people, it was 5.7 in 1995, and 5.1 in 2017. These trends are commonly explained by the postponement of partnership formation and parenthood during a prolonged exploration stage (i.e., emerging adulthood; Arnett, 2000, 2015; Shulman & Connolly, 2013) as well as by the expansion in higher education (Bellani, Esping-Andersen, & Nedoluzhko, 2017).

Not all adults who are not married or live alone are single in the sense of not being involved in a romantic relationship. Nevertheless, the number of people not involved in a romantic relationship has been increasing across countries (e.g., Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008). After World War II, when marriage was the norm and up to 80% of adult people lived with a marriage partner (US Census Bureau), those who stayed single tended to be so due to circumstances (e.g., poverty, family roles, or cultural norms). Today, being married is less likely to be considered a key part of adulthood, and more and more people report having freely chosen to stay single; this is particularly prevalent among higher-educated women (Bellani et al., 2017). As such, chosen singledom does not reflect a deficit or attachment insecurity, but may rather represent a personal choice that is positively linked to overall satisfaction (Pepping & MacDonald, 2019).

**Modern romantic relationships.** Although the status of singlehood is becoming more prevalent, it is yet not the most preferred long-term status. In fact, only 14% of never married adults indicate they do not want to get married (Pew Research Center, 2017). This implies that most young adults will probably aspire to be involved in a romantic relationship at some point of time. A romantic relationship today, however, is lived differently than some decades ago. Modern relationships have become less institutionalized (Campbell & Wright, 2010) and
more diverse and fluid (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), and material criteria have become less
crucial to mate selection (Sweeney, 2002). Instead, attributes such as involvement in domestic
work or companionship are more important (Dykstra & Poortman, 2010), and relationships
are more strongly grounded in perceived similarity in values and interests or gaining
emotional benefits of the relationship (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Coontz, 2007).

Modern couples do not necessarily live in a shared household. In fact, there is an
increasing number of couples that live apart together (hereafter, LAT; in Western societies,
with a proportion of LAT couples from ages 18 to 74 years ranging between 6–15%;
Reuschke, 2010), which means that they agree that they are a couple, but they live in separate
homes (Levin, 2004). Some of them—particularly long-distance LAT couples—have
developed due to the labor market and are mostly situated within metropolitan regions
(Reuschke, 2010). Others put individuality over relational commitment, which is a goal more
likely to be furthered through a LAT arrangement (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). Although
the motives for a LAT living arrangement are diverse, LAT couples have in common that they
live a new form of intimacy: Care and support flows between individuals with no biological,
legal, or socially recognized ties to each other, and a shared domestic space is not defining of
a couple or a family (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). This new form of intimacy is also observed
in other arrangements of modern relationships, such as consensual non-monogamies
(Mogilski, Memering, Welling, & Shackelford, 2017), or relationships that blur the
boundaries between friendship and sexual relationship (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Shulman
& Connolly, 2013). These new relationship contexts are likely to relate to the needs that
young adults aspire to fulfill.

**Relationship Needs and Values of Today’s Young Adults**

In line with previous research (Greenfield, 2018; Gubernskaya, 2010; Zaidi &
Morgan, 2017), we argue that the main psychological mechanism through which
sociohistorical circumstances translate into social behavior are shifts in needs and values.
When people decide to enter a romantic relationship, they attach expectations to and anticipate need fulfillment from these relationships. Today, as in the course of relative affluence with respect to basic material needs (Easterlin, 2000; Krausmann et al., 2017), the emancipation of women and educational improvement (Herr & Shahnasarian, 2001; Schofer & Meyer, 2005) combined with increased individualism and autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 2014), relationship-specific needs and values have been moving away from the traditional and economic norms of marriage and childbearing (Gubernskaya, 2010). The balance has tended to shift from romantic relationships being expected to serve needs of security, reliability, and support, to romantic relationships being expected to provide emotional benefits in terms of happiness, passion, and love (e.g., Campbell & Wright, 2010; Coontz, 2007) and to allow for self-actualization and self-realization (Finkel et al., 2014). The expectations attached to need fulfillment have a two-fold connotation: On the one hand, in modern relationships, there are more opportunities to negotiate the tasks, roles, and needs of both couple members (Botkin, Weeks, & Morris, 2000); on the other hand, this opportunity might also imply challenges for the modern couple, resulting in more relationship-specific monitoring and evaluations, potentially rendering such relationships more fragile (Coontz, 2007).

**Implications for Adult Social Development in the 21st Century**

In line with the postulates of contextualism, we argue that the contexts and needs of today’s young adults will shape the structure and satisfaction of their future relationships.

**Structure of Social Relationships**

With regard to relationship structures, today’s young adults might continue to develop their social relationships toward diversity and complexity. This includes a variety of family and partnership forms, living arrangements, and a high prevalence of singlehood, which together might constitute “the new normal” (Walsh, 2012, p. 3). This variety might continuously become more accepted: Today, compared to the 1960s, considerably fewer children are growing up in a traditional family of two parents in a first marriage (46% vs.
73%; Pew Research Center, 2015). In addition, in many countries, fertility rates have decreased over the past 50 years (for instance, in the OECD countries, from 2.7 children per woman in 1970 to 1.7 in 2017; OECD Family Database). This has resulted in the situation that the percentage of today’s young adults who have grown-up in single-child families has increased (as compared to today’s middle-aged and older adults; Cohen, 2003). Hence, it is arguable that these young people will consider diverse family structures (e.g., living in a household with one or two parents, being only child or having siblings, being child of same-gender parents) and family contexts (e.g., step parents, single parents, working fathers and mothers, blended family) as even more usual and acceptable than previous generations (Allan et al., 2001).

In addition, the greater emphasis on independence, self-fulfillment, and autonomy of today’s young adults might render their social networks more dynamic and less stable when they get older. Such dynamism would make re-partnering and alternative partnership arrangements more common and the attitudes toward them more liberal, which has a twofold implication. First, romantic relationships might become more instable: Having experienced previous endings of relationships and knowing about the fragility of relationships might decrease relationship stability. Internet dating platforms further provide opportunities to find a new partner (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014), which might increase the perceived probability of re-partnering and, thus, make the dissolution of an unsatisfying relationship more appealing. Conversely, the choice to re-partner, even without marriage, makes relationship histories and trajectories more fluid, thereby protecting against the loneliness that can be associated with unwanted singlehood. This fluidity is, again, enhanced by technologies that enable people of any age to enter the partner market (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

As described, relationship dynamics might be shaped by online technologies and digital devices, such as computers, smartphones, or tablets. Such technologies have been described as being both a “social connector and separator” (Waytz & Gray, 2018, p. 474):
They allow people to maintain relationships across countries and continents (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014) and until old age (Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Webster, 2019), and might foster social abilities (e.g., empathy and emotion recognition) when they complement deep offline relationships or supplant relationships when offline relationships are difficult to attain (Waytz & Gray, 2018). Digital devices and online technologies, however, might also trigger relationship instability given that online communication sometimes complicates offline communication (Weinstein & Davis, 2015), and might impair social abilities when they supplant deeper offline connectedness (Waytz & Gray, 2018). As the use of digital devices and online technologies is rapidly increasing, both their connecting and disconnecting consequences for close social relationships are highly relevant in the present and will continue to be relevant in the future.

**Satisfaction with Social Relationships**

As for satisfaction with romantic relationships, we see at least three scenarios:

First, today’s young adults will be equally satisfied with their new relationship conditions and partnership arrangements when they grow older as today’s older adults are satisfied with their traditional conditions and arrangements: This might be the case because satisfaction with alternative or traditional social-life arrangements seems to heavily depend on a person’s values, needs, and the social norms of the society and culture in which they live (Kislev, 2018). These values, as described above, are not set in stone but tend to reflect the conditions that were present during a person’s young adulthood (Inglehart, 2007). In support of this view, a recent investigation found that satisfaction with romantic relationships is today more strongly based on increased egalitarian values than it was two decades ago (Hülür & Castano, 2019).

Second, today’s young adults will be less satisfied with their new relationship conditions than are today’s older adults with their conditions. This difference in satisfaction might be due to decreases in relationship stability, a higher likelihood to engage in short-term
relationships that might be less emotionally satisfying, and less investment in close
relationships that would buffer against loneliness in old age (Hawkley, Wroblewski, Kaiser,
Luhmann, & Schumm, in press). In addition, the displacement of offline social interactions by
online communication might decrease satisfaction because online communication does not
reach the same levels of emotionality and intimacy (Weinstein & Davis, 2015).

Third, there will be a polarization: Given today’s young adults’ higher relationship
monitoring, their tendency to re-partner, and the generally less prescriptive norms about the
permanence of relationships, it is likely that satisfying relationships will be continued while
unsatisfying relationships will be dissolved. The quality of relationships might further be
polarized by online technologies and digital devices: While some people are more sensitive to
social media feedback, others are less sensitive (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Constant
monitoring of online feedback can potentially damage people’s views of themselves and their
relationships, particularly when they are associated with upward comparisons (Vogel & Rose,
2016). As a consequence of this polarization, today’s young adults’ romantic relationships
might become more fragile but, at the same time, relationships that persist might be more
satisfying than were the long-term relationships during earlier times (Finkel et al., 2014).

Future Directions

The outlined findings, observations, and trends prompt suggestions for how to think
about adult social development (i.e., content) and how to conduct the research associated with
developmental processes (i.e., methods).

Content

First, although the study of cohorts is not new to the field of psychological research, it
has received less attention than in other fields, such as sociology and history. Hence, in order
to fully comprehend adults’ social development, for which the concept of cohorts is relevant,
it is essential to stimulate interdisciplinary exchange and research. Together with researchers
working in other disciplines, psychologists can identify the contexts in which people have
been socialized (see also Elder, 1994; Gillear & Higgs, 2016). An example of a multidisciplinary approach is the convoy model of social relationships (e.g., Antonucci et al., 2014): This model has been developed based on insights from sociological, anthropological, and epidemiological work and has the goal to investigate how the structure, function, and quality of people’s social networks “are influenced by personal (e.g., age, gender) and situational (e.g., role demands, norms, values) characteristics” (Antonucci et al., 2014, p. 84).

Another example is the work by Hareven (2018) that includes interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and historical perspectives on contemporary family relations with the goal of investigating family as “the ‘missing link’ between individual lives and the larger processes of social change” (p. XV). Although these avenues are promising, interdisciplinary work focusing on sociohistorical contexts in the study of adult social development is still rare (for a similar conclusion, see Gillear & Higgs, 2016).

Second, neither theories nor empirical findings are culture-independent; rather, they reflect the times and contexts within which they were proposed and derived (e.g., Arnett, 2008; Gergen, 1973). As such, interdisciplinary work can be used for the (re)interpretation of given age-related differences in consideration of the specific contexts in which participants have lived (an example of a promising approach for how to use different existing longitudinal datasets to [re]interpret social processes in adulthood can be found in Blieszner, Ogletree, & Adams, 2019). We propose that, as a new standard, a thorough examination of the particular contexts in which participants have been socialized needs to be undertaken. This approach would involve a stronger focus on possible interactions between age-related and cohort-related influences on adult social development.

As an example, we consider the well-documented age-related increase in selectivity of the investment of resources (Rook & Charles, 2017) that might lead to different outcomes in different cohorts: Older people tend to strategically invest their resources into close, meaningful social relationships and tend to abandon investment in peripheral relationships.
This selective investment is thought to be driven by a combination of increasing scarcity of physical, cognitive, and material resources in older age (Braun, Rohr, Wagner, & Kunzmann, 2018) and shifts in goals that are motivated by an awareness of approaching the end of life (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). It is an open question whether today’s young adults—after an exploration stage—will set similar relationship priorities as previous generations; or whether today’s young adults will have goals and needs in older adulthood that are more heterogeneous than those of previous generations.

As for the first option and as the theory of emerging adulthood suggests (Arnett, 2000, 2015), today’s young adults might prolong their exploration stage, but would subsequently have similar relationship needs as previous generations had (e.g., focus on close relationships). The expansion of the exploration stage might be an adaptive response to recent complexities in today’s young adults’ lives (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). In fact, although today’s young adults experienced improvements in their physical resources, they are confronted with new modes of existential concerns, such as global climate change (Herington, 2017) and insecurities of career and economic destinies (Leccardi, 2006; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

As for the second option and as we argue in the present article, the age-related selectivity might be directed to other priorities in today’s young adults when they become older—priorities that might be very heterogeneous given that the priorities of today’s young adults are much more diverse than those of previous cohorts (Arnett, 2015). For instance, priorities might reflect more diverse family structures and contexts (Allan et al., 2001), more egalitarian values in romantic relationships (Hülür & Castano, 2019), or more online-based communication styles (Waytz & Gray, 2018).

Future research is needed to test whether today’s existential concerns will foster adult social development that is postponed but similar to that of today’s older adults, or whether today’s young adults will experience a social development that is unique to this cohort. Such
open questions call for methods that explicitly consider age-related differences, cohort-related
differences, and—most importantly—their interactions when studying adult social
development. In the following, we suggest methods suitable to such investigations.

Methods

**Sequential designs.** It is well-known that a combination of cross-sectional and
longitudinal designs is essential to arrive at a comprehensive picture of both age-related and
cohort-related differences and their possible interactions (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade,
1977). Conducting such sequential designs allow researchers to (1) compare different cohorts
at a given time; (2) track these cohorts’ trajectories over time; and (3) observe people of
multiple cohorts developing over time (Baltes et al., 1977). Sequential designs permit
researchers to disentangle cohort differences that emerge randomly (e.g., due to replicability
problems) and cohort differences that are meaningful (i.e., based on the cohort’s different life
experiences). However, such designs are very costly, and, as a consequence, rarely adopted
(for an example see Antonucci et al., 2019). Therefore, we propose three additional methods:
comparative research, experimental research, and the use of new technologies.

**Comparative research.** Considering cultural differences might be a proxy for
predicting cohort differences that result from differences in contexts (e.g., Greenfield, 2018).
A promising approach in this area is cultural priming, which is based on the assumption that
the presentation of culture-specific cues activates corresponding behavior (see Markus &
Kitayama, 2010). For instance, Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) have shown that priming
interdependence by pronouns such as *we* and *ours* (vs. independence; *I, mine*) led US students
to endorse collectivistic values (e.g., belongingness, family safety, or social obligations) more
strongly, whereas priming independence led Chinese students to endorse individualistic
values (e.g., freedom, independence, or living a varied life) more strongly.

In addition, not only are investigations between cultures useful but examinations
within the same culture are also important, such as studies of the “micro-historical” contexts
of sub-cultures (e.g., different ethnic groups; see Antonucci et al., 2014). In the same vein, the (lack of) sociohistorical effects on social development might be investigated in comparative studies, enabling researchers to uncover the processes that have existed across phylogeny and across cultures (Cacioppo et al., 2015). An example of this approach is a study on aging monkeys showing that age-related social selectivity is not exclusively human, but can also be found among Barbary macaques (Almeling, Hammerschmidt, Sennhenn-Reulen, Freund, & Fischer, 2016). Such research might hold the potential to disentangle universal age-related differences that are biologically or genetically influenced from more specific age-related differences that are driven primarily by (sub-)culturally specific contexts.

**Experimental research.** Experiments are particularly suited to investigate the processes that constitute specific adaptations to the respective ecologies of adult development (Freund & Isaacowitz, 2014). In the previous section, we discussed cultural priming as a promising experimental approach to simulate specific contexts that are hypothesized to drive social development. Another example of experimental research that directly focuses on adult social development is the study of future time perspective. There is some evidence that experimentally induced perception of restricted remaining life time leads young adults focusing on familiar social partners (e.g., Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990; Fung, Carstensen, & Lutz, 1999), which would speak to cohort-independent but age-based social selectivity. However, in another study (Valero, Nikitin, & Freund, 2015), the same experimental manipulation enhanced motives in different life domains (i.e., affiliation, power, achievement), pointing to the possibility that restricting remaining life time enhances the selectivity for what people value, which might be very individual and cohort-specific. These contradictory findings might be explained by the fact that the experimental manipulations used in all these studies confounded time perspective and resources (such as health, availability of social relationships, or insecurity with respect to the future; see Valero et al., 2015). Thus, findings from these studies may be interpreted in the context of (lack of)
resources, which supports the argument of the present article. More importantly, these studies exemplify the crucial point of experimental designs with regard to this article’s key hypothesis: the unambiguous experimental manipulation of specific context factor(s) that might drive cohort differences in adult development. To the best of our knowledge, with the exception of the aforementioned studies, there are no studies using experimental manipulations that would simulate adult social development and its mechanisms. However, there are examples of studies from other research fields, particularly from research on cognitive development that support the notion that experimental research is a promising path for studying adult development (Freund & Isaacowitz, 2014). Hence, applying the experimental approach to the hypothesis of the present article, future studies on adult social development might test whether priming material scarcity and existential concerns leads to a focus on close and kin relationships, whereas priming self-actualization and life-path opportunities leads to expanding the focus to diversity and non-kin relationships.

**New technologies.** The use of new technologies has been changing psychological research (e.g., Bleidorn & Hopwood, 2019; Martin, Weibel, Röcke, & Boker, 2018; Mehl, 2017): Technological developments, especially smartphones, allow the tracking of people’s social activities in their daily lives and collecting subjective close-to-the moment data about their feelings and thoughts (Mehl, 2017). These snapshots allow the identification of the dynamics of daily social activities in context (Martin et al., 2018) and the use of machine learning research (Bleidorn & Hopwood, 2019). In a similar vein, people’s daily virtual behavior (e.g., emailing, tweeting, blogging, or posting) can be analyzed with regard to socially relevant research questions. For instance, data on virtual behavior could be analyzed to study age-related and cohort-related differences in language use (e.g., the pronouns *I* and *we*) that express different levels of relatedness (for a review on natural language use, see Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Combined with knowledge on sociohistorical
context, these technological innovations offer a promising and unique source of insights into adult social development in daily life contexts.

Taken together, we believe that interdisciplinary and comparative research can provide valuable insights into those sociohistorical contexts that interact with age in predicting adult social development. With regard to more fine-grained methods, we plead for experimental designs and the use of new technologies to identify, assess, and analyze contextual effects in their interaction with age-related processes on adult social development.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we discuss that—although age-related effects have been found in the social domain—age has been described as an “empty variable” (Neugarten, 1977, p. 633). To address this “emptiness”, we assert that the current knowledge on adult social development is confounded by the sociohistorical contexts wherein participants of the existing empirical studies were embedded. Highlighting that the “major theoretical principles are firmly wedded to historical circumstances” (Gergen, 1973, p. 315), we suggest for disentangling age-related and cohort-related effects on adult social development and use developmental contextualism as a theoretical framework. We discuss how the sociohistorical contexts in which young adults have been socialized shape their social development throughout adulthood, while not proposing that only young-adulthood experiences matter, or that these experiences leave indelible footprints on the person. As the core of this article, we provide theoretical and methodological directions for future research on adult social development. We hope that this article will motivate future collaborations across disciplines and cultures in the joint attempt to better understand the universal and context-specific mechanisms that underlie adult social development in the 21st century. Such research will be amply equipped to systematically investigate the processes that drive development of any previous, present, and forthcoming cohort.

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References


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Footnotes

1 A person’s social context and network includes a variety of social relationships on the micro- and mesolevel (e.g., friendships, family relationships, romantic relationships; Wrzus et al., 2013). Each of these relationships can be discussed in light of a contextualism perspective. In this article, we argue that intimate romantic relationships are one of the closest and most important relationships (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). This leads us to elaborate our following proposition with regard to romantic relationships primarily.

2 For example, longitudinal studies in a meta-analysis on social network changes and life events across adulthood last from 0.1 to 17 years with an average of 3.1 years (Wrzus et al., 2013). Although longitudinal studies including information on social relationships and spanning longer times exist (e.g., the German Socio-Economic Panel has started in 1984 and now spans 35 years), to the best of our knowledge there have been no more recent publications on cohort differences in adult social development spanning longer time intervals than those in the aforementioned meta-analysis by Wrzus and colleagues (2013).

3 A worthwhile prospect for future studies would be to investigate how interactions between age-related and cohort-related differences unfold in very old age. For example, there is evidence showing that cohort-related increases in well-being disappear towards the end of life (e.g., Hülür et al., 2016), which calls for a more differentiated view on Age × Cohort interactions towards the end of life. For the present research, this would imply that very old adults, who are often in need of care, have similar needs irrespective of their socialization experiences. We, however, await future research to test these hypotheses among people in late adulthood.