Relational importance in early and middle adulthood age groups in South Africa

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We explored the relational importance in early and middle adulthood in a South African setting. Informants were 52 participants (female = 58%, African language speaking = 31%, age range = 18–65; younger adults = 50%). Data on the types of important relationships and the reasons behind the importance for the different age groups were collected through semi-structured, open-ended questions. Thematic analysis indicated family, friends, and spiritual relationships as the most important relationships across the age groups. Other relationships important to both groups, were relationships pertaining to work, pet/s, and self. The middle adulthood age group emphasised the importance of work relationships above those with friends and further indicated relationships with their spouse, success, and neighbours. Younger adults indicated relationships with romantic partners, academics, and society as a whole. The findings suggest a convoy effect on relationship preferences for these age groups in that they highlight the importance of social relationships and how they vary in different developmental phases or stages of life. Implications for consideration of developmental phases in the design of interventions are indicated.

Keywords: adult, early adulthood, middle adulthood, relationship/s

Introduction

An abundance of studies show that relationships play an important role in health and well-being (Cyranowski et al., 2013; Fosco et al., 2012; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Shenk, 2009). For instance, quality of interpersonal relationships is associated with people's morbidity and mortality (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), physical health (Cyranowski et al., 2013; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), social health, and emotional health (Fosco et al., 2012; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), successful living (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Shenk, 2009), and happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Liu et al., 2016). However, little research has been conducted on the types of important relationships and the reasons behind the importance of these relationships for different age groups in developing world settings, such as South Africa. In this study, we sought to explore the most important types of relationships and reasons for the importance thereof to ordinary South Africans in early and middle-aged adult groups.

Relationship resourcing

Individuals depend on close relationships and support (Feeney & Collins, 2018), capitalising on positive events in their lives (Gable et al., 2006; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). Relationships are both a resource and an outcome. As resource, relationships can provide support in times of need (Khumalo, 2020), act as an environmental protective factor to enable people to effectively handle challenges (Forthun et al., 2015), and foster an environment for personal-goal exploration and attainment (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017).

As outcome, positive relationships are important for life satisfaction, high quality of living, bio-psychosocial health, and well-being (Antonucci et al., 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2001; Ryff, 2018; Harrell, 2018; White & Jha, 2018). Other possible outcomes of positive relationships include the promotion of growth, meaning, happiness, and physical health (Khumalo et al., 2020; Seligman, 2011; Wong, 2011). However, relationships can have a cost to well-being in some ages and settings. For example, gender inequality in South Africa can result in various negative outcomes such as sexual coercion, reduced negotiating power for women, women partnering with older men, and heightened exposure to HIV (Harrison et al., 2006). The loss of close relationships during older age could have unfavourable outcomes such as experiencing high levels of negative affect, as well as a decline in physical and emotional well-being (Rook & Charles, 2017). In South Africa, older people may also be expected to provide financial, physical, and emotional support to younger generations while not always being able to afford to do so (Schatz, 2007).

Relational importance in different South African settings

Wissing and colleagues (2014) state that the importance of relationships and reasons for their meaningfulness to individuals are influenced by social, cultural, historical life, and experiences. Considering that people are social beings that want to experience a sense of belonging, the central role of positive relationships in different contexts such as family (Khumalo et al., 2020) and work (Rothmann, 2020) settings are emphasised in a South African context. Khumalo and colleagues (2020) explain the central role of community in positive relationships in South African settings. The African philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanity to others), relevant to many South African cultures, further emphasises the importance of prioritising relationships with family and community (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

Theoretical foundations

According to the Convoy Model of Social Relations (Antonucci et al., 1996), social relationships and support are presented as a convoy of people who play an integral part in a person's life in different levels of closeness represented by three concentric circles; namely an inner circle representing the closest and most important people, a middle circle representing important, but less close people, and an outer circle representing the least close people that still have meaning. In general, the view is that in later life, as a result of role loss, role relationships become less important while the importance of family relationships becomes more prominent (Louw & Louw, 2017). Moreover, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2000) proposes that people may change in relationship priorities over the life span. Specifically, younger adults' well-being was predicted by their social network; while older adults' well-being was predicted by the quality of their relationships. Blanchard-Fields (2007) and Carstensen (2006) propose a possible explanation for this in the form of the increasing motivation to regulate emotional states with age as well as an increasing ability to do so. Further, Scheibe and Carstensen (2010) found that older adults reported higher levels of well-being when compared to younger adults. Brose and colleagues (2013) suggested that this is due to improved emotion regulation skills as age increases. Older age seems to relate to less variable, daily, and momentary negative affect and less variable, momentary positive affect when compared with younger adults (Brose et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2014).

Research by Scheibe and Carstensen (2010) and Yeung (2017) found that, generally, most older adults experience high levels of affective well-being and emotional stability depending on aspects such as dispositional tendencies, life events, and the management of those events. However, Antonucci and colleagues (2004) and Bruine de Bruin and colleagues (2020) found that although social networks diminish with age, the number of very close relationships remained the same. However, these findings require validation in developing country settings.

Goal of the study

We aimed to explore and describe what the most important types of relationships are for early and middle adulthood; and to explore and describe why these relationships are important in early and middle adulthood in a South African context. Our research questions were:

(i) What are the most important types of relationships for early and middle adulthood in a South African context?

(ii) Why are these relationships important for early and middle adulthood in a South African context?

Method

Research design

We utilised a qualitative explorative, descriptive research design (Botma et al., 2010). Qualitative exploratory research is characterised by developing initial insights when little research can be found on the topic and/-or phenomenon (Botma et al., 2010). Whereas a descriptive study is used to provide truthful descriptions of a phenomenon (Botma et al., 2010). Thus, the objective of this design is to explore and describe the phenomenon of interest, making it fitting for this research study.

Participants and setting

Participants were 52 adults (female = 58%, African language speaking = 31%, age range = 18–65; younger adults (<40 years) = 50%). Table 1 provides an overview of participants' sociodemographic profiles.

Data collection

Informants responded to qualitative, semi-structured, open-ended questions on their most important relationships and the reasons behind the importance. The questions were: "Please list three kinds of most important relationships in your present life," and "For each of them please specify why it is important, and how this importance is manifested (try to be as specific as possible)."

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data, qualitative experts reviewed the questions before data collection. Data were collected with the focus on including multiple perspectives on the topic. The code-recorder procedure was utilised, and two experienced coders analysed the data independently.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University (NWU 00002-07-A2). Participants consented to the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without repercussions. Participants completed the qualitative questionnaire in their own time in a setting of their choosing and were advised beforehand that the setting should be private and quiet. The questionaire was in english.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilised. The phases employed included: (i) becoming familiar with the data; (ii) giving initial codes to text; (iii) identifying similarities to further refine themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) and naming themes. For dependability of interpretations, the first two authors analysed the data independently following the same procedures. Thereafter, a consensus discussion established that the independent analyses were consistent.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Item	Category	Frequency
Gender	Male	23
	Female	29
Home language	Afrikaans	22
	English	14
	Setswana	7
	Other	9
Age	18–39 years of age	26
	40–65 years of age	26

Results and Discussion
The following themes emerged from the data analysis: (i) family (parent/s, sibling/s, spouse, child/ren, grandchild/ren, child/ren in law, extended family, godchild/ren); (ii) friends; (iii) work relationships; (iv) spiritual; (v) romantic partner; (vi) pet/s; (vii) academic and success; (viii) self; and (ix) society as a whole and neighbours. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes, sub-themes, and relevant frequencies.

Most important types of relationships
Family was seemingly the most important relationship for both groups (early adulthood *n* = 25, middle adulthood *n* = 23). Included in family, is parent/s, sibling/s, spouse, child/ren, grandchild/ren, child/ren in law, godchild/ren, and extended family. Regarding family relationships in early adulthood, greater emphasis is placed on the importance of relationships with parent/s (*n* = 16) and sibling/s (*n* = 3). In middle adulthood, participants indicated that the most prominent family relationships were with their child/ren (*n* = 11) and spouses (*n* = 8).

Both groups identified relationships with friends as important (early adulthood *n* = 19, middle adulthood *n* = 12), although the middle adulthood age group put a greater emphasis on relationships with work colleagues (*n* = 13). In contrast, the early adulthood age group put little emphasis on the importance of work relationships (*n* = 1).

Thereafter, the most important relationship indicated by both groups was spiritual relationships (early adulthood *n* = 13, middle adulthood *n* = 10). While the early adulthood age group indicated relationships with romantic partners to be important (*n* = 11), the middle adulthood age group did not. Relationships with pets was

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes, and frequencies of most important types of relationships for early- (*n* = 26) and middle-adulthood (*n* = 26) age groups.

Themes/sub-themes	Early Adulthood	Middle Adulthood
1. Family	25	23
1.1 Parent/s	16	2
1.2 Sibling/s	3	1
1.3 Child/ren	1	11
1.4 Spouse	1	8
1.5 Grandchild/ren	0	3
1.6 Child/ren in law	0	1
1.7 Extended family	0	2
1.8 Godchild/ren	0	1
2. Friends	19	12
3. Spiritual	13	10
4. Romantic partner	11	
5. Pet/s	2	1
6. Academic	2	0
7. Self	1	1
8. Work relationships	1	13
9. Society as a whole	1	0
10. Success	0	1
11. Neighbours	0	1

indicated less prominently in both groups (early adulthood *n* = 2, middle adulthood *n* = 1). The early adulthood age group also included academic relationships (*n* = 2) and relationships with society as a whole (*n* = 1) as important, whereas the middle adulthood group did not. Instead, the middle adulthood age group mentioned a relationship with success (*n* = 1) and relationships with neighbours (*n* = 1) as important. Both age groups put equal emphasis on the erelationship with the self (early adulthood *n* = 1, middle adulthood *n* = 1).

Reasons behind the importance of relationships
Table 2 provides an overview of the findings per age group. The findings show that the two groups expressed the reasons for the importance of relationships similarly and differently in some cases.

Family
Family was reported to be the most important relationship in both groups. However, the reasons for the importance were different. The younger adults mostly described the importance based on what they get out of the relationship:

> *they will always look after you... (P 9)*
> *...they take care of me (P 1)*
> *Family gives me love, support... (P 30)*

They also referred to a relationship with family as important *"...important to me to have a good relationship with family"* (P 2) and indicated open communication as a reason behind the importance: "…*can talk to them about anything*" (P 17).

The older adults placed more emphasis on the intrinsic value and meaning of the relationships with family, which was reported to include a contribution to happiness, both giving and receiving support, trust, love, minimising conflict, blood ties, and family or family members as an inspiration:

> *Share happy times... (P 46)*
> *... family is my source of joy (P 48)*
> *...give me courage when I feel like giving up in life (P 34)*
> *Whatever I give returns to me multiplied in love... (P 48)*

Familial relationships are one of the most significant meaning sources for adults as identified by Delle Fave and colleagues (2013). According to An and Cooney (2006), relationships with family vastly contribute to individuals' experiences of personal growth and individual self-actualisation. The reason being that it seemingly promotes well-being, received support, and self-esteem.

Parent/s
The younger adults placed more emphasis on the parental relationship and focused more on what they received from the relationship when describing the importance. Specifically, they identified the following reasons behind the importance: support (including guidance and advice, providing, financial assistance, and security), aspire to be like parents, loving each other, good communication, having an open relationship with them, parents are important and/or appreciated, sharing certain aspects

(e.g., values and humour), respect for parents, and raised by parents. The findings for the younger adults reflect a larger dependency on parent/s. Specifically, participants mentioned:

> *Appreciate them very much (P 19)*
>
> *My parents show me the right way (P 1)*
>
> *They give me advice… (P 23)*
>
> *…provide for me… (P 10)*

The older adults do not place as much emphasis on the parental relationship. They described the importance of relationships with parent/s in terms of emotional support through encouragement and being able to confide in them and reported that their parents provided a good upbringing:

> *My parents are always there… (P 29)*
>
> *…are still supportive (P 41)*
>
> *I talk to her about anything…she can listen, I love how open and free I am with my mother… (P 12)*

Demir (2010) states that even though parent-child relationships will change during emerging adulthood, the mother-child relationship will continue to be important for their happiness and will have a strong effect on their well-being as compared to the father-child relationship.

Sibling/s

The younger adults appeared to have a confirmation relationship with their siblings, through the strong bond and trust they have with each other. Reasons for the importance included: siblings know them best, guidance from siblings, being friends with siblings, and having good communication with siblings. They explained the importance as:

> *No one knows me more than him… (P 9)*
>
> *…we are friends… We talk all the time (P 12)*

The older adults instead described the positive personality traits their siblings display towards them:

> *Always patient… (P 29)*
>
> *…considerate… (P 28)*

Sidhu (2019) indicates the availability of research implying that healthy sibling relationships can provide support, promote empathy, prosocial behaviour, and academic achievement.

Spouse

The younger adults did not place much emphasis on the importance of relationships with a spouse. There was mention, however, that this person was important:

> *"…my everything…" (P 15)*

The older adults described the importance of relationships with their spouse in terms of loving each other, providing a nurturing/secure environment for their children, the sense of security it gives, as being a blessing, giving life meaning, contributing to happiness, caring for them, and companionship:

> *…we share love… (P 41)*
>
> *…provide a safe haven for our children (P 31)*
>
> *…looks after me… (P 39)*

Participants further shared:

> *…they also fill my heart with joy, happiness… (P 41)*
>
> *…give meaning to my life (P 51)*

Carstensen and colleagues (2000) stated that older adults have close relational networks including marital relationship that are better established. Happily married individuals report higher levels of happiness, well-being, and satisfaction with their lives (Diener & Suh, 2000).

Child/ren

The younger adults placed little emphasis on relationships with children but indicated that children were a blessing:

> *"…a blessing…" (P 8)*

Relationships with a child or children seemed to be more prominent in the older age group:

> *He makes me proud… (P 39)*
>
> *…fill my heart with pride… (P 41)*

The older adults also prioritised supporting their children, raising their children, and taking care of their needs:

> *…so that I can support them… (P 38)*
>
> *I protect them, care for them… (P 41)*

They also reported receiving support from their children:

> *Always there to help me… (P 29)*
>
> *…help with household needs (P 36)*

Additionally, they placed importance on the meaning, love, and happiness that the relationship with their children evoked:

> *…give my life…joy, pleasure, and laughter (P 44)*
>
> *…give my life meaning (P 41)*
>
> *…we share love… (P 50)*

Grandchild/ren, child/ren in law, godchild/ren and extended family

The relationships with grandchild/ren, child/ren in law, godchild/ren and extended family were only revealed by the older age group as important in their lives. This is indicative that older adults' social networks may expand as they grow older. They expressed that a relationship with their grandchild/ren was important because they contributed to happiness and because the grandchild was the only grandchild at that time:

> *…enjoy my grandchildren (P 29)*
>
> *It is my only one… (P 34)*

The motivation behind the importance of relationships with child/ren in law included contribution to happiness and that having a good relationship with this person added to the relationship with their own child: "*…talking to them each day is a recipe for happiness…*" (P 35). Giving

support was provided as a reason for the importance of a relationship with a godchild/ren:

"To provide support to y God child…" (P 43)

The importance of extended family was only indicated by the older, Tswana participants:

Help each other in time of death… love each other (P 37)

Keep the family together and minimize conflict (P 52)

Luong and colleagues (2011) stated that older adults are focused on establishing and maintaining relationships that they experience as rewarding and ending those that are not. This statement seems to capture the older group's emphasis on both their relationships with their spouse as well as those of their child/ren, child/ren in law, godchild/ren, and extended family.

Regarding family relationships, the younger group placed greater emphasis on receiving support from others, whereas the older group indicated that they do not only receive support, but also give support to others. Wissing and colleagues (2014) indicated that families usually become a primary source of physical (e.g., food and shelter), social (e.g., teaching of appropriate social norms), and psychological (e.g., encouraging self-development) support for young adults. This was also confirmed by Tagliabue and colleagues (2014) that parents support young members in the long transition to adulthood through providing basic needs and space to develop and grow within certain values and learning social norms. The reason for this could be that young adults emphasise their future by focusing on development and growth, whereas older adults are more focused on the here-and-now and how they can optimise their current experiences (Delle Fave et al., 2013).

Friends
Younger adults placed a greater importance on relationships with friends with a focus on the contribution to their personal developmental growth. Friends were reported to provide them with support, encouragement, love, socialisation, and keeping them grounded:

My friends are always there for me when I need them (P 10)

…encourage one another (P 19)

Friends help make life less lonely (P 12)

Younger adults also seemed to be more future oriented as they reported sharing dreams and values with friends:

…we share thoughts (P 25)

They share my values, morals, and beliefs (P 21)

Furthermore, the younger adults reported that they appreciate and value their relationships with friends:

Friends play an important role… (P 4)

I'm grateful that I have loyal true friends… (P 12)

They also provided understanding from friends and learning from each other as a motivation:

…to understand each other (P 3)

…learn from each other… (P 21)

Older adults also shared the importance of friends in terms of support and socialisation but emphasised sharing the spirit of togetherness (*Ubuntu*), a sense of belonging, positive personality traits/characteristics of friends, friends play an important role in one's life, love, trust, and ideas given by friends:

Friends give me a support system in good times and bad (P 31)

Human contact (P 37)

…sense of belongingness… (P 46)

An and Cooney (2006) also found that relationships with friends play an integral role in the experience of personal growth, individual self-actualisation, self-esteem, support, and seemingly promotes well-being.

Work
The younger adults placed less importance on work relationships. To them, work relationships seem to be important for their own need fulfilment:

"…enhancing my career in the future…" (P 19)

Older adults seem to regard work relationships highly with the following motivations: receiving support from work colleagues, contribution to productivity and work performance, can have fun/enjoyable relationships with work colleagues, tolerance from work colleagues, spending a lot of time at work, improving teamwork, sharing hardships and prosperity, friendship/camaraderie, that it is good to have positive relationships with work colleagues, work colleagues contribute to development and growth, and work colleagues give hope. This is indicated in the following quotations:

…important to create supportive, enjoyable, warm, trusting, fun and loyal relationships… (P 41)

It can help us to be productive (P 43)

…share hardship and prosperity… (P 46)

Share camaraderie, friendship… (P 50)

Older adults emphasised the importance of work relationships and accorded greater importance to these relationships than with friends. It should be noted that not all the participants in the younger age group may have entered the workforce, and some might have still been studying when participating in this study. Jung and Takeuchi (2018) stated that middle-aged people are more likely to focus on work relationships than seeking new relationships outside this context. Middle-aged professionals engage more in interactions and in self-regulatory behaviours related to their careers, resulting in greater career satisfaction (Cate & John, 2007).

Mastroianni and Storberg-Walter (2014) report on the role of social interactions within the work environment and its contribution to well-being. Work relationships that were positive, collaborative, and trusting, facilitated well-being, and were regarded to be important. Moreover, when individuals felt valued and respected within work relationships, it contributed significantly to their well-being and health. Therefore, the quality of work relationships

played a more valuable role than the quantity of work relationships.

Spiritual
Both age groups emphasised the importance of spiritual relationships. Younger adults expressed that they could not exist without God, unconditional love and acceptance from God, positive emotions experienced in a relationship with God, contribution to quality of life (e.g., gives meaning, gives hope, guidance, to learn/grow), the different roles that God fulfil, and that a relationship with God is important:

> Without my religion my life just may seem meaningless (P 2)
>
> Gives hope for future… (P 23)
>
> …my relationship with God is the most important one (P 10)

The older adults also expressed the importance of spirituality. They attributed this to: God gives life meaning/purpose, the different roles God fulfils (e.g., Provider, Creator, Saviour, Comforter, friend, and Healer), God as a source of strength, God gives hope, God provides light in this world/direction/wisdom, and contribution to life:

> …to find meaning in life (P 47)
>
> Source & strength of my life… (P 28)
>
> God gives me hope … (P 43)

The findings are similar to those by Kimball and colleagues (2013) who found that participants articulated the value of a relationship with God and how it promoted their well-being. Delle Fave and colleagues (2011) found that oout of seven countries most did not highly value the spiritual domain of life except for South Africa. Accordingly, Ohajunwa and Mji (2018) indicated the importance of spirituality for well-being in an African context. In South African studies, spirituality is identified as a possible contributing factor to psychosocial well-being in rural communities (Koen & Robertson, 2021; Nell, 2015). In other South African studies, Doman (2019) reported a positive correlation between the measures of spirituality and well-being; while Wissing and colleagues (2021) found spirituality to be a source of meaning.

Romantic partner
The importance of romantic relationships was only reported by the younger adults. They expressed the following reasons: receiving emotional support, love them and loved by them, romantic partner is best friend, share certain aspects with romantic partner (e.g., humour, special moments, and interests), positive characteristics/personality traits of romantic partner, mutual respect, and contributes to happiness:

> To love and to be loved is something a person needs (P 24)
>
> … my best friend… (P 22)
>
> …share everything with him (P 24)
>
> … respect each other… (P 25)

Younger adults also reported looking forward to having a future together:

> "It is important as this is the person I will build my life with" (P 17).

During emerging adulthood, establishing and maintaining a relationship with a romantic partner is important (Demir, 2010). In some cases, these relationships become the main source of social well-being and happiness when compared to other interpersonal relationships (Demir, 2010).

Pet/s
Both age groups reported the importance of relationships with pets. Noticeably this was more prominent in the Afrikaans-speaking group. Reasons for the importance to younger adults included unconditional love/acceptance and calmness/peace:

> Their love makes you want to love more (P 4)
>
> …acceptance of pets…precious… (P 22)

Older adults indicated that pets are always there for you and ask little in return:

> Just being around pets gives peace and calmness to the mind and heart (P 4)
>
> …only give to ask little in return (P 38)

Numerous studies support the importance of relationships with companion animals and suggest that they can enhance people's health and psychosocial well-being (Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2009).

Academic and success
Only the younger adults reported the importance of academic relationships. Doing well academically was identified as the reason for the importance:

> It is important to make a relationship with your academic so it can be easy for you to enjoy them and pass them (P 12)
>
> To understand… (P 2)

Older adults reported the relationship with success to be important to not fail: *"I believe if my success is constant, I will never fail in life"* (P 40). Seligman (2011) alludes to the role of accomplishment in his PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment) model of well-being and argues that success can contribute to people's experience of well-being.

Self
Having a relationship with yourself was identified as important by both groups. One younger adult explained:

> "A good relationship with myself will ensure success…" (P 7)

An older adult expressed that the relationship with yourself was important to accept and respect yourself, to have inner peace and a better understanding of yourself:

> "Have to maintain good relationship with myself, accept…myself…respect myself…Have the inner peace… Understand my strength and weaknesses" (P 38)

Khumalo and colleagues (2020) emphasise the importance of having a healthy relationship with yourself. Many factors receiving attention such as self-awareness, self-knowledge, authentic self, identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, and self-compassion (Khumalo et al., 2020) are a reflection of how complex this relationship can be.

Society as a whole and neighbours
Younger adults mentioned that to have a relationship with society brought them peace and harmony:

> *"So that there can be peace and harmony between me and all around me" (P 7).*

The older adults, instead, appreciated the importance of neighbours:

> *"Neighbours provide emotional support…To help each other especially in sadness" (P 30).*

Khumalo and colleagues (2020) and Nyamnjoh (2019) explicate the import of positive community relationships.

Implications for research and practice
Although several similar relationships were deemed important by both age groups, the reasons for the importance thereof differ in some instances. The value of relationships were different by social developmental periods. Norona and colleagues (2017) suggest that relationship skills continuously develop throughout the developmental stages. Relationship development is influenced by environmental context, time perspective, and life priorities (Delle Fave et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2005). Delle Fave and colleagues (2013) suggest that young adults focus on personal growth through establishment of friendships and intimate partners. Older adults tend to focus on optimising the value on lived experiences in daily life domains through commitment in family relationships. This is also revealed in the current study in which the middle adulthood group expressed how family relationships were important in their lives. In contrast, the early adulthood participants emphasised the importance of romantic relationships.

Erikson (1963), in his social developmental theory, states that individuals within early adulthood develop significant relationships with friends and family, but also place importance on finding love and companionship, whilst in middle adulthood the focus is on career and family (Butkovic et al., 2019). Therefore, the present findings are in support of expectations stated in Erikson's developmental theory. Kafetsios and Sideridis (2006) and Antonucci and colleagues (2014) also purport that relationships are different for adult age groups as they evolve and build as a result of experiences.

The studies of Mortimer (2012) and Gayman and colleagues (2011) align with the findings that support received from relationships is of essence. The reason being that the transition to early adulthood is challenging and difficult and, as a result, early adults require support to promote a successful transition. Therefore, early adults rely even more on their available social relationships, as it is a critical stage within the life course (Wood et al., 2017).

Tokuno (2012) also states that the perceived social support of early adults is invaluable.

Limitations and future recommendations
A limitation of this study is the written structured interview format that does not provide elaborate in-depth data. While the findings revealed clear similarities and differences between the two adult age groups in line with developmental expectations, future research should focus on a qualitative approach with a focus on gathering in-depth data on the phenomenon.. Another limitation is that a formal inter-coder reliability index was not sought. Consensus was sought among coders which somewhat mitigates this limitation. However, future research should seek to apply a formal inter-coder reliability index. The current study did not consider sociodemographic differences (e.g., language, race, education, employment) when data were analysed. However, some differences were noted. As such, future research should consider language, race, education, and employment to unearth possible contextual and sociodemographic differences other than age. Such research can help to understand the role of life-situatedness.

Conclusion
The findings are congruent with developmental theories and the developmental tasks that are generally expected for early and middle adulthood age groups. Our findings also suggest that theories of well-being should take life phases into account when indicating most important antecedents, dynamics, and manifestations. Findings also point to the importance of considering developmental phases in the development of interventions and are indicative that interventions cannot apply a "one size fits all" approach.

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