It Takes Two to Tango: Why Older People Have the Best Relationships

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Abstract
Older adults report more positive feelings and fewer problems in their relationships than do younger adults. Prior theories have focused on aspects of the older adult (e.g., social cognition, motivation) to explain these findings. We propose a social input model to explain why older adults describe themselves as having better relationships. This model maintains that older adults’ reports of positive social ties reflect both their own actions and those of their social partners. When adults of any age find themselves in a tense interchange with an older adult, they minimize tensions to facilitate positive emotional experiences. These behaviors may stem from perceived time remaining in the relationship, forgiveness or abrogation of blame, and stereotypes of aging. Findings suggest socioemotional regulation in late life involves actions on the part of both older adults and their social partners.

Keywords
aging, adult development, social network, emotion regulation, conflict

Although physical and cognitive declines of old age are well documented, personal relationships appear to improve with age. Older adults typically report better marriages, more supportive friendships, less conflict with children and siblings, and closer ties with social-network members than do younger adults (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). When interacting with family members, older people describe more positive interactions and greater satisfaction (e.g., Charles & Piazza, 2007). The consistency of findings across studies involving diverse relationships and multiple methods leads us to ask: What is special about old age that leads to more positive social experiences?

Theories of life-span development have often focused on aspects of the older adult when explaining these more positive experiences. Researchers have attributed older adults’ improved relationships to enhanced social-problem-solving skills (Blanchard-Fields, 2007), a shift in attention away from negative aspects of interpersonal conflicts (Charles & Carstensen, in press), and less affective reactivity when social conflicts occur (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005). These models, following the tradition of cognitive appraisal theories (e.g., Lazarus, 1999), emphasize aspects of the individual in determining responses to emotion-eliciting stimuli. Older adults clearly engage in thoughts and behaviors that lead to positive experiences with social partners, but age-related changes in social environments also may contribute to this success. Classic stress models incorporate the objective severity of stressors when gauging the impact of a stressful experience (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). Stress models acknowledge that aspects of the individual contribute to coping responses, but also recognize that more caustic events pose greater challenges to a person’s resources and are likely to elicit higher levels of distress than more benign stressors do.

Social stressors are the most common daily hassles reported by adults of all ages, yet the number of these stressors decline with age. Researchers suggest older adults selectively cull difficult partners from their network to reduce potentially stressful experiences (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Psychologists have only recently begun to examine another means of diminished interpersonal tension in late life: Older adults’ remaining social partners may treat them more kindly.

Social experiences, by definition, occur with other people. According to the social-input model, social partners may respond to, and attempt to regulate, one another’s emotions in social interactions by communicating their emotions verbally and via facial and bodily expressions. In the developmental literature, researchers have emphasized how caregivers shape children’s emotion regulation processes (Thompson, 1994).

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Social partners may contribute to emotion regulation throughout life, but few studies have explored this issue with regard to age differences in social ties in adulthood. According to the social-input model, when older adults seek to minimize problems in their relationships, their social partners of any age often reciprocate and treat them favorably, sustaining their positive views of these ties. These interactive processes reflect a coordinated dance to generate and sustain older adults’ positive perspectives of the relationship. Emotional experience is not solely the product of the individual, but the result of a combination of thoughts and actions of the older adults and their social partners.

**Differential Treatment of Older and Younger Adults**

The premise that adults of all ages behave differently with older adults is particularly salient when social conflict occurs. Research using a variety of methods finds that older adults are more likely to employ avoidant strategies meant to extinguish (rather than escalate) potential problems in their relationships and are less likely to use potentially harmful direct strategies than are younger adults (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Birditt et al., 2005; Blanchard-Fields, 2007). These observed behaviors however, also may reflect the older age of the social partner. Social partners typically come prepackaged by age: Older people have older social partners and younger people have younger social partners (Fingerman et al., 2004). Thus, research comparing younger and older adults’ reactions to social problems implicitly study dyadic age differences.

One study found that older adults reacted to interpersonal tensions with both their close and problematic social partners by using avoidant strategies, whereas younger people reported more aggressive confrontational strategies (e.g., yelling; Birditt & Fingerman, 2005). Similarly, a national study of daily experiences revealed that older adults were more likely to say they did nothing in response to interpersonal problems each day and less likely to say they confronted others than were younger adults (Birditt et al., 2005). These studies included a strong association between the ages of participants and ages of their participants’ social partners. In other words, observed age differences in conflict behaviors reflected not only the ages of participants but the ages of their social partners as well.

Likewise, studies of marriage reveal age differences consistent with dyadic processes of regulation. The marital tie is distinct from other relationships with regard to frequency of contact, intimacy, and likelihood of daily stress. Moreover, spouses typically are of similar age. In contrast to other relationships, marital ties may show stability in negative feelings over time. But findings from studies comparing older and younger couples support the social-input model. Older spouses viewed their spouses’ behaviors as less negative than middle-aged spouses did, even when objective ratings found no age differences (Story et al., 2007).

Accumulating evidence further indicates that people vary their behavioral responses with social partners depending on their age. In one study, younger and older adults identified their closest older and younger nonromantic social partners (Fingerman, Miller, & Charles, 2008). They reported reactions to a hypothetical situation where these social partners said something rude and hurtful. With both younger and older social partners, participants reported they would use constructive communication to resolve the problem. But they were more likely to use aggressive confrontational behaviors with the younger social partner and to use avoidant strategies with the older one, even after controlling for factors such as age, gender, typicality of the situation, and relationship qualities (See Fig. 1). Thus, the same participant (regardless of their own age) reported greater potential for conflict with a younger social partner and attempted to avoid escalation of conflict with an older social partner.

A study of middle-aged daughters and their mothers also suggests younger social partners often acquiesce when interacting with older social partners (Fingerman, 2003). Each daughter described a time when she was annoyed with her mother. Then, mothers and daughters came together and were asked to discuss a situation in which they were irritated with the other. Over one-third of the daughters indicated that they could not think of such a situation (despite their earlier reports when queried alone). Indeed, in the best relationships, middle-aged daughters toned down or denied their irritations, but their mothers remained as direct as when interviewed alone.

These patterns are not limited to close relationships. Rather, adults’ normative beliefs suggest a preference for de-escalation of conflict with older adults across a range of relationship types, including relatives, friends, or acquaintances. In another study, participants responded to several vignettes with older or younger perpetrators (Miller, Charles, & Fingerman, 2009). For each story, some participants read a version in which the perpetrator of the social transgression was an older adult and predicted how the offended person would respond. Other participants read an alternate version of the same story, but in this case the perpetrator was a young adult. When the transgressing character was elderly, participants indicated the offended character would avoid conflict. When the transgressing character was a younger adult, the offended character was expected to engage in discussion or aggressive confrontation.

People also may express more sentimental feelings toward older adults than toward younger adults. One naturalistic study collected holiday cards from people aged 20 to 87 years old during the 1990s (when individualized correspondence was common). Older adults received cards with personal sentimental messages, whereas younger adults did not (Fingerman & Griffiths, 1999). In another study, participants selected birthday cards for younger and older social partners (Fingerman et al., 2008). Participants were more likely to choose a sentimental personal message for older adults and a humorous or mocking one for younger adults. Although cards for both younger and older adults expressed positive sentiments, the personal loving messages may contribute to enhanced positivity for older adults. Further research will have to determine whether expression of such sentiments extends beyond greeting cards and the current cohorts of younger and older adults.
Reasons Underlying Preferential Treatment of Older Adults

The social-input model predicts that social partners treat older adults with more reverence and positive regard, but we are only beginning to understand why people provide deferential treatment to older adults. Reasons that have been identified include time perspective, forgiveness, and attributions based on stereotypes of aging.

Future time perspective and forgiveness

Research supporting socioemotional selectivity theory finds individuals alter their behaviors as a function of their temporal horizons; when individuals view their future as foreclosed, they engage in behaviors to maximize positive emotional rewards (Charles & Carstensen, in press). Likewise, when individuals perceive time remaining with a social partner as foreshortened, they may avoid conflict with that partner. In the study of mothers and daughters described previously, some middle-aged daughters explained their lack of openness with their mother as an effort to protect the elderly mother because little time remained to be with her (Fingerman, 2003).

The role of time perspective in social interactions was tested explicitly in another study. Relationship time perspective was manipulated by having participants imagine that an elderly social partner was retiring to Hawaii or that a close younger social partner was leaving for a cultural immersion program overseas (Fingerman et al., 2008). When reporting how they would react to a social transgression committed by these individuals, participants chose avoidant strategies for both the younger and older adult under constrained time conditions. When other participants were asked how they would respond to this same gaffe committed by a close younger adult who was not moving, they were more likely to endorse an aggressive confrontational approach. The limited time remaining to interact with older adults may help explain observed age differences in responses to conflict situations. Rather than spend the time fighting, people would rather make their remaining encounters with older adults rewarding. In most cases, time remains to reconcile differences that arise in conflicts with younger adults. Further, social partners may seek to mentor or change young adults’ behaviors for the long run.

A shortened relationship time perspective also may lead to greater forgiveness. As with some younger adults, some older adults make unpleasant company. People may forgive difficult older adults because there is little time remaining to resolve conflicts. Allemand (2008) found people were more forgiving of violations of social expectations when they viewed time remaining for themselves or with their social partner as foreclosed. Likewise, in our study, participants attributed greater forgiveness to older adults than to younger adults committing the same social transgression (Miller et al., 2009). Thus, partners may be more forgiving of difficult older adults than they would be of difficult younger adults. This forgiveness may serve a beneficial function for each social partner. Avoidant behaviors can evoke negative consequences if people harbor bad feelings they never express. By forgiving the older adults, social partners may regulate their own feelings and let go of the conflict, sustaining favorable relationships without growing resentful.

Stereotypes and respect

Negative stereotypes about old age may paradoxically facilitate positive social exchanges. In one study, participants read a story about a person leaving a store without paying for a hat. Participants viewed older adults as less culpable and as warranting less severe punishment than younger adults who committed the same act (Erber, Szuchman, & Prager, 2001). Participants based this leniency on the assumption that older adults were forgetful. Similarly, when people rated a slow worker, they viewed an older employee more favorably because they attributed the behavior to uncontrollable consequences of aging, whereas they viewed a younger worker more harshly (Erber & Long, 2006). Furthermore, social partners may not confront an older adult because they believe the older adult is intractable and will not change (Fingerman, 2003; Miller et al., 2009). Thus, even negative stereotypes of aging can elicit preferential treatment of older individuals in specific contexts.

Positive norms for the aged, such as the need to respect one’s elders, also might play a role in deferential treatment. Our prior research included only a few items assessing respect for the offending social partner and they were not independently associated with preferential treatment for older adults (Miller et al., 2009). Future research should focus on this issue, particularly in cultures in which respect of elderly adults may be even greater than in the European American culture.

Suggestions for Future Research on Socioemotional Regulation

Much remains to be learned about the joint regulation of social experiences. Studies suggest that people may attempt to regulate one another’s emotions in ways that benefit older adults.
Emotion regulation in social settings resembles a dance, with each person acting and reacting in response to his or her partner. Social partners may dampen their emotional responses to interpersonal tensions because they expect the older adult to respond with avoidance and may respond confrontationally with younger adults in anticipation of the younger adult’s confrontation. Thus, socioemotional regulation involves a “pas de deux,” with each partner anticipating the other’s next move.

Moreover, social partners may be sensitive to one another’s emotional states (Van Kleef, 2009). Depressed individuals tend to evoke negative reactions from social partners and angry individuals elicit competitive feelings from others. Similarly, older adults’ higher levels of affective well-being (Charles & Carstensen, in press) evoke positive responses from social partners. The possibility of emotion contagion contributing to age differences in socioemotional experiences has not been tested.

Emotion regulation of a social partner also may serve as a form of emotion regulation for oneself. Individuals may avoid confrontations with some older social partners to avoid upsetting themselves. For example, middle-aged daughters reported that they did not tell their mothers what bothered them because they found confronting their mothers aversive (Fingerman, 2003). Thus, avoidant behaviors may be self-protective as well as protective of the social partner.

Additional factors also may contribute to observed age differences. To date, studies supporting the social-input model have used American samples. In cultures with different values for conflict avoidance or greater respect for elders, such as Asia, age differences may vary from those observed in studies of American samples. Likewise, cohort differences may play a role in the reserved behaviors of today’s older adults; younger cohorts may place less emphasis on conflict avoidance. Finally, differential survival may contribute to observed age differences. For example, individuals who score high on neuroticism (i.e., who might report interpersonal difficulties) are at risk for earlier mortality and may not survive into old age (Charles & Carstensen, in press).

In sum, human emotions are communicated to others via facial, bodily, and verbal expression. Psychologists have studied emotion regulation in adulthood as a phenomenon independent from the actions of others. Studies reporting that older adults behave in ways that minimize tensions in their relationships have confounded age of participant with age of social partner. Careful examination of older adults’ relationship experiences suggests that input from social partners contributes to positive socioemotional experiences and confirms the well-known idiom: It takes two to tango.

Recommended Reading

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