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Selectivity as an Emotion Regulation Strategy: Lessons from Older Adults

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Abstract

Findings based on studies of daily life consistently associate older ages with relatively positive emotional experience, suggesting that older adults may regulate emotions more effectively than younger adults. Findings from laboratory studies are equivocal, however, with mixed evidence for age-related improvements in use of emotion regulatory strategies. In the current paper, we propose that findings may reflect a failure of laboratory-based experiments to capture the regulatory strategies that older people use in their everyday lives. We argue that the advantages older people have are likely due to antecedent emotion regulation as opposed to response-focused strategies. Understanding the regulatory approaches that older people actually use may inform developmental models of emotion regulation throughout adulthood as well as interventions for improving emotional experience across the life span.

Snapshots into the daily lives of older people paint a positive picture of emotional experience. Studies consistently find that aging is associated with improved emotional functioning [1]. Laboratory-based experiments that have attempted to isolate improvements in specific regulatory strategies, however, have failed to generate consistent evidence for age-related improvements in strategy deployment [2]. Rather, although older people appear to be relatively successful regulating emotional experience in day to day life, when emotions are elicited in the laboratory and participants are asked to regulate them, age differences are minimal. There is, however, considerable evidence that older people display selective engagement in social activities and selectively deploy cognitive resources. Below, we overview existing findings about age differences in emotional experience and the effectiveness of specific strategies, such as reappraisal or suppression, along with findings from the adult-developmental literature on selection. We argue that selectivity likely functions as a form of antecedent emotion regulation and that an integration of the literatures on life-span development and affect regulation may reveal potentially fruitful insights into the positive trajectory of emotion regulation across adulthood into old age.

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Emotional Experience across the Life Span

As noted above, there is abundant evidence that older people experience relatively high levels of emotional well-being largely accounted for by decreases in negative affect (note that a handful of studies have also observed increases in positive affective experience) [3–4]. These changes are associated with greater emotional stability and greater emotional complexity in daily life [5–8]. Similar trajectories have been observed across cultures [7, 9–11], suggesting robustness of findings. Although most of the research on emotion and aging is cross-sectional, longitudinal studies observe similar changes *within* individuals suggesting that cohort differences do not account for observed age differences [6, 12–13].

Studies of Emotion Regulation across the Life Span

When asked directly, older people report better control over the experience and display of emotions [14–16] and observational studies suggest that they do indeed achieve desired emotional states better than younger people [4, 17–18]. One possible hypothesis explored early on was that older adults regulate emotions better because they experience them with lesser intensity; that is, perhaps emotions are easier to regulate at advanced ages because they are less intense physiologically. Although age differences in the frequency of negative emotions reliably appear, there is essentially no evidence for age differences in *subjective* intensity of emotions once they are experienced [6]; and although cardiovascular reactivity is somewhat reduced in older adults in the laboratory [11], the autonomic signatures (i.e., the type of autonomic response that occurs such as a change in heart rate or skin conductance) of emotions are highly similar across age groups [11, 19].

The handful of studies to date that have experimentally induced emotions (primarily negative emotions) and manipulated the regulatory strategies participants' deploy in the laboratory, however, have failed to reveal consistent evidence of age-related improvements in the modulation of emotional experience. Some studies show no age differences in the effective suppression of negative experience [20–22], while others suggest age-related improvements in the suppression of negative emotional experience [23–24]. Of note, studies that fail to observe age differences in emotion suppression assess participants' *expression* of negative emotions, not subjective experience of emotions. Findings from studies of reappraisal also are mixed. Some observe age-related improvements while others observe decline in the use of reappraisal which may be accounted for by the type of reappraisal employed (e.g., detached [22]), the type of emotions reappraised (e.g., positive reappraisal of sadness [20]), and whether the goal of reappraisal is to amplify or dampen emotions [25].

One limitation of the laboratory-based experimental approach is that researchers generally induce emotions with films or photographs under controlled settings and instruct participants to deploy designated strategies while effectiveness is observed. The strategies assessed, however, may not be the strategies that older adults use in daily life.

Adult Development is Characterized by Selectivity

Most models of adult development are premised on the idea that age-related decline demands the judicious deployment of shrinking resources. Selective optimization with

compensation, for example, developed by Paul and Margret Baltes [26] maintains that in order for people to function optimally as they age, they focus increasingly on circumscribed and valued domains of life. The basic reasoning is that changes in regulatory processes across the life span occur in response to age-related decline [26–28]. The same reasoning has been extended to improvements in emotion regulation [29]. That is, selectivity may be older adults' preferred form of self-regulation because it taxes resources less than response-focused strategies [30].¹ Presumably, with age, people become more adept at selecting situations that demand less response modulation. This may explain why studies that induce emotions find that older adults are less likely to use response-focused strategies that actively dampen emotional experience (e.g., suppression, detached reappraisal), report suppressing emotions less often than younger adults, and show no advantage over younger people in successfully doing so [21–22, 24, 31]. Moreover, when older adults are asked not to think about the emotional aspects of valenced stimuli (i.e., use of detached reappraisal), they perform more poorly than younger adults [22, 25].

Selectivity as a Function of Socioemotional Goals

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) also views selection as a key strategy in successful development [1]. It differs from most models, however, in the premise that decline inevitably underlies selection. Rather, SST maintains that goals are always set in temporal contexts and, because time horizons change systematically with age, goals also change systematically. When people are young, they tend to perceive the future as expansive, prioritize goals related to information seeking, and expend great effort and resources building social networks and increasing stores of knowledge to prepare for uncertain futures. As people grow older and/or perceive constraints on future time, emotionally meaningful goals are prioritized. Goals related to savoring and satisfaction are prioritized over goals related to expanding horizons. According to SST, pursuing goals about emotional meaning is associated with improved emotional experience. Developmental psychologists refer to such processes as selection, yet in the realm of emotion research these same processes can function as antecedent emotion regulation.

Social selectivity

According to SST, because people structure their lives according to their socioemotional goals, social contexts change considerably with age. At older ages, the prioritization of meaningful relationships over exploration leads to a selective narrowing of social networks and a privileging of close social partners over more peripheral social contacts [32–35]. By carefully selecting social partners and activities, the social world becomes more focused on predictably positive contexts. Studies find that compared to younger adults, older adults are better at predicting how a context will make them feel [36–37].

Goals not only shape the construction of social environments, but also how people engage with them. For example, older adults are more likely to avoid situations involving social

¹Unlike Gross' process model which conceptualizes emotion regulation as a response to an anticipated or experienced emotion, selectivity in the developmental literature refers to a broad structuring of emotional life and not necessarily tied to a given anticipated or experienced state.

conflict [38] and experience lower levels of negative affect than younger adults who avoid conflicts [39]. Moreover, when reflecting about conflicts induced in a laboratory setting, older adults later recall them as less negative than younger adults [40]. Finally, daily diary studies find that older adults appraise everyday situations as less stressful [41] and are less likely to engage in situations that are perceived as stressful [42].

Selective Cognitive Processing

In addition to the restructuring of social life, cognitive processing supports socioemotional goals. Many studies have revealed age differences in memory for and attention to emotional information. With age, emotional material is better remembered than neutral information [43] and a robust preference for positive over negative information has been documented [44–45]. The age related preference in cognitive processing, referred to as the *positivity effect*, is evident in the realm of emotional experience. Older people, compared to younger people, tend to positively reappraise negative daily experiences, i.e., they selectively focus on positive aspects of negative events [46–47]. Autobiographical memories of older adults are more positive than the reports obtained at the time the personal events occurred whereas younger adults' memories are more negative than the reports they provided at the time events occurred [48].

Importantly, the positivity effect is strongest in people with the highest levels of executive control, is eliminated during dual-attention tasks, and is not observed in people suffering from dementia [49–51]. Consistent with this motivational model, one recent study found that a preference for positive information is eliminated when older people review positive and negative material prior to making an important decision [52]. That is, when the stakes are high, the positivity effect is eliminated. This malleability of the positivity effect speaks against a presumption that positivity is compensating for underlying cognitive or neural decline.

Limitations of selectivity

Naturalistic studies of older adults highlight the utility of selection as a form of emotion regulation. Of course, there are important limitations to this approach –that is, selectivity is not always a viable option for optimizing emotional experience. Susan Charles has articulated a theoretical framework referred to as Strength and Vulnerability Integration (SAVI) which illuminates circumstances under which older adults may be at a disadvantage in regulating emotional experience because selectivity simply is not possible [53]. SAVI acknowledges the positive profile of emotional experience in the literature yet maintains that when negative situations are unavoidable, such as when people are faced with uncontrollable and inescapable stressors (e.g., caregiving or coping with chronic health limitations), advantages in emotional regulation disappear [39]. In other words, because older adults favor selectivity, under circumstances in which selectivity is impracticable, older adults no longer show an emotional advantage over younger adults.

In a similar vein, selectivity cannot fully compensate for age-related physiological changes that may reduce recovery from stress. Reduced elasticity of the vasculature, attenuated autonomic nervous system regulation, and weakening of the heart (e.g. less contractile

strength, lower stroke volume) may impair responsiveness to and recovery from physiologically arousing emotional states. For example, although age differences are not observed in subjective distress, heart rate increases are smaller and recovery takes longer in older compared to younger adults [54].

Finally, although social selectivity appears to mostly benefit emotional experience, at the extremes people may suffer from social isolation and loneliness. Lang and Carstensen observed, for example, that although individuals embedded within nuclear families report strong social support even when networks grow very small, people without nuclear families who have fewer than three close relationships are in relatively poor mental health [34]. In addition, several studies suggest that reduced social stimulation is associated with worse cognitive and physical health outcomes [55–56], although it is unclear whether or not this is a result of being overly selective or having too few options to begin with.

Leveraging Selectivity to Understand Emotion Regulation in Daily Life

Taken together, studies of aging and emotion demonstrate that the ways that people regulate their emotions are influenced by socioemotional goals. Integrating socioemotional goals into models of emotion regulation across the life span raises questions about how we conceptualize and operationalize emotion regulation and emotional experience. The strong tradition in research on emotion regulation has been to elicit discrete emotions in the laboratory and direct or simply observe responses. There are clear strengths to this an approach (i.e., identifying and testing specific, targeted strategies by which people may employ selectivity such as attending more to certain stimuli over others), yet it is unlikely to illuminate how people regulate emotions in daily life (e.g., people may be selective by choosing to engage in or avoid certain social situations). Progress may be made by incorporating findings from naturalistic observations and developing experimental approaches that better characterize the broader contexts and patterns surrounding emotional experience.

We agree with Consedine and Magai's [57] position that a deep understanding of emotional changes with age will require consideration of the social functions of affective states. In order to do so, laboratory studies of emotion will improve when informed by findings from observational studies of how people structure their social worlds in daily life. In addition, laboratory studies of specific emotion regulation strategies will benefit by identifying strategies that engender selectivity in daily life as well as uncovering emotional stimuli infused with meaning and of the most relevance to older adults' lives. In doing so, studies of emotion regulation may better address the importance of social context [58], and thereby enhance the ecological validity of laboratory studies and potentially resolve mixed findings of age differences in emotion regulation produced so far.

Selectivity has long been viewed as a core process in human development. From childhood forward, selective investments are demanded for successful social development [59]. Studies examining the daily lives of older adults show that selectivity is essential to successful emotion regulation. If people are good at it, they do not need to suppress, detach from, or up/down regulate their emotions. Thus, although selectivity may have long-term costs, it is

arguably the most effective emotion regulatory strategy, at least in the short-term. Research that explicitly addresses the regulatory approaches that people use in everyday life can inform investigations about how emotions change throughout adulthood and affective science more generally. By identifying and understanding the deployment of effective strategies outside of the laboratory, we can build powerful tools for enhancing the effectiveness of emotion regulation across the life span.

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Highlights

- Studies of daily life show improved emotional functioning as people age.
- Lab studies show mixed evidence for age-related improvements in emotion regulation.
- Older people use selectivity to structure social life and deploy cognitive resources.
- Selectivity is an effective antecedent emotion regulation strategy for older adults.
- Studies of selectivity in daily life can elucidate changes in emotion with age.