Do We Get Better at Picking Our Battles? Age Group Differences in Descriptions of Behavioral Reactions to Interpersonal Tensions

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Individuals of various ages may react in different ways when they are upset with their social partners. This study examines age group differences in descriptions of behavioral reactions to interpersonal tensions. Participants ages 13 to 99 (84 men, 100 women) described interpersonal tensions that occurred with close and problematic social network members. Descriptions were coded with Rusbult's typology of conflict strategies (voice, loyalty, neglect, exit). Multilevel models revealed that older adults were more likely to report loyalty strategies (e.g., doing nothing) while younger people were more likely to report exit (e.g., yelling) strategies in response to interpersonal problems. These age differences were not accounted for by intensity of distress, relationship quality, contact frequency, or type of social partner. It appears that individuals are better able to regulate their behavioral responses to interpersonal problems as they age.

INTERPERSONAL tensions are the most common and detrimental stressors individuals encounter (Almeida & Horn, 2004; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). People may respond to interpersonal problems in different ways; they may yell and argue or try to listen to the other person's perspective (Gottman, Coan, Carrerre, & Swanson, 1998; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). There is little knowledge, however, of age differences in strategies that individuals use to deal with interpersonal problems. Age differences in such strategies may have implications for health and well-being (Coyne et al., 2001; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996; Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, Cacioppo, & MacCallum, 1997). It is important to understand how people of different ages respond to conflict and the factors that predict variation in conflict strategies to determine how to improve responses to interpersonal tensions, relationship functioning, and individual well-being.

Behaviors people employ in response to interpersonal problems may vary across the lifespan. Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that as people age, they disband relationships that are bothersome, have less contact with irritating social partners, and are better able to regulate negative emotion (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). As an extension of this theory, older people may be more likely to respond to interpersonal problems with constructive strategies that improve relationships and less likely to use destructive strategies that could harm relationships. Indeed, studies examining specific relationships (e.g. spouse, child) and using laboratory designs, vignettes, and questionnaires indicate that older adults may be more appeasing and less aggressive in response to interpersonal problems than younger people (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996; Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, in press; Carstensen, Gottman, Levenson, 1995). However, previous studies may not have elicited the full range of strategies that people of different ages use in response to problems occurring across relationships.

In the present study, participants ranging in age from adolescence to oldest-old provided detailed accounts of in-terpersonal tensions experienced with close and problematic social partners. This method permitted us to examine age group differences in conflict strategies as well as the socioemotional factors underlying those differences.

The study relied on Rusbult's investment model for understanding responses to interpersonal tensions (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). Conflict strategies are defined along two dimensions (Table 1). The active–passive dimension indicates whether an individual confronts or avoids the problem. The constructive–destructive dimension refers to whether the strategy is likely to benefit or harm the relationship. Based on these dimensions, 4 conflict categories arise: exit, neglect, voice, and loyalty. Exit includes active destructive behaviors, such as yelling and hitting. Neglect encompasses passive destructive strategies, such as pretending the social partner does not exist, sulking, or avoiding interactions. Voice involves active constructive behaviors to directly solve the problem, such as discussing the issue. Loyalty includes passive constructive strategies, such as optimistically waiting for things to change. For example, a person may be irritated but chooses not to say anything to avoid upsetting her social partner.

Age Differences in Conflict Strategies

Studies suggest that older adults are more likely to use constructive than destructive strategies, but it is unclear whether older and younger adults differ with regard to whether they prefer active or passive strategies (Carstensen et al., 1995; Fingerman, 1998). Laboratory observations of marital conflict suggest that older people are more likely to use voice strategies, such as affection and discussion, and less likely to use exit strategies, such as belligerence, as compared to younger people (Carstensen et al., 1995; Sillars & Zietlow, 1993). However, Fingerman (1998) found that mothers (mean age 76) were more likely to avoid open discussion (loyalty) about the problem than were their daughters (mean age 44). These laboratory studies may reveal inconsistent results because they examined different

Table 1. Description of Coding Scheme Used to Categorize Conflict Strategies

Strategy	κ	Proportion of Tensions	Origin of Code
Exit (active, destructive)			
Argue	1.00	.02	Data inductive
End relationship	1.00	.02	Rusbult
Leave	1.00	.06	Rusbult
Name calling	1.00	.01	Rusbult
Other direct (e.g., dirty look, give the finger)	.49	.01	Data inductive
Physical aggression	1.00	.01	Rusbult
Yelling	1.00	.07	Rusbult
Voice (active, constructive)			
Listen	.66	.03	Data inductive
Direct solution (e.g., fix problem or comply)	.75	.14	Rusbult
Discuss problem	.78	.22	Rusbult
Talk to someone else about problem	.88	.05	Rusbult
Ask to stop or change behavior	.87	.20	Data inductive
Written contact (e.g., e-mail or letter regarding problem)	1.00	.01	Data inductive
Neglect (passive, destructive)			
Avoid person or situation	.65	.03	Rusbult
Ignore person (pretend person does not exist)	.90	.04	Rusbult
Sulk	1.00	.01	Rusbult
Loyalty (passive, constructive)			
Do nothing (e.g., remain calm and let situation blow over)	.93	.16	Rusbult
Unrelated positive behavior (do nice things not related to problem)	.65	.03	Data inductive
Excluded			
Ask someone to solve problem	1.00	.03	Data inductive
Cry	1.00	.01	Data inductive
Harm another person	.00	.00	Data inductive
Harm an object	.00	.00	Data inductive
Lie to get out of situation	.00	.00	Data inductive
Positive self-improvement behaviors (e.g., exercise)	.66	.03	Data inductive

Note: For the table, $N = 833$.

relationships (i.e., spouses vs children; Carstensen et al., 1995; Fingerman, 1998). Individuals' conflict strategies may vary as a function of frequency of contact, relationship quality, and type of social partner. This study examined age differences in conflict strategies across diverse relationships to examine these factors.

Researchers using vignettes and questionnaires have also found varying age differences in the conflict strategies that people use. Using vignettes, scholars found that older adults reported greater use of loyalty strategies than did younger adults (Blanchard-Fields, Jahnke, & Camp, 1995; Winkeler, Filipp, & Boll, 2000). Our work examining daily interviews revealed older adults were less likely to argue (exit) and more likely to do nothing (loyalty) in response to interpersonal tensions than were younger adults (Birditt et al., in press). A study utilizing a conflict strategy preferences questionnaire, however, found no age differences in nonconfrontation (loyalty, neglect) but did find that older adults report greater use of solution-oriented strategies (voice) and less use of control tactics (exit) than

younger adults (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996). Vignettes and questionnaires may be problematic because they often include a predetermined set of relationships, situations, and behaviors that may not be representative of the interpersonal tensions that people of different age groups experience. Further, researchers have often combined loyalty and neglect into one category, which may mask age differences.

In the present study, we examined detailed accounts of interpersonal tensions and categorized the conflict strategies with codes derived from theory and participants' responses. This method may provide fuller and more varied data regarding the strategies people use to deal with tensions. We expected that older people would be less likely to use destructive (neglect, exit) strategies and more likely to use constructive strategies (loyalty, voice) than younger people. We also considered relationship factors that may account for variations in conflict strategies.

Conflict Strategies as a Function of Socioemotional Factors

According to socioemotional selectivity theory, the intensity of distress individuals experience, frequency of contact, relationship quality, and type of social partner may account for age differences in conflict strategies they employ (Carstensen et al., 1999). For example, older adults may better regulate their distress in response to problems, which in turn may lead them to use different strategies. Lifespan theories and research suggest older adults reappraise events as a means of regulating their responses (Carstensen et al., 1999; Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987; Labouvie-Vief, 2003). When people perceive tensions as more stressful, they are less likely to report constructive strategies (Aldwin, 1991; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Terry, 1994). In a previous study using the present dataset, we found that older adults reported less intense emotional distress in response to interpersonal problems than did younger adults (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003). We hypothesized that reports of the intensity of emotional distress would partially account for age group differences in reports of conflict strategies.

Older adults also report having fewer problematic relationships than younger people (Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahl, 2003; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003). Older adults may report fewer negative social interactions than younger people in part because they have less frequent contact with their social partners than do younger people (Akiyama et al., 2003). Less frequent contact may allow individuals to use constructive strategies rather than destructive strategies because they have time to "cool off" between encounters. We hypothesized that frequency of contact would partially account for age group difference in conflict strategies.

Further, socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that older adults are likely to be more invested in their social ties and may have better quality relations than younger adults (Carstensen et al., 1999). Rusbult and colleagues (1998) found that people who report that they are highly invested in relationships are less likely to report using destructive strategies. We postulated that relationship quality would also partially account for age group differences in conflict strategies.

Carstensen and colleagues (1999) have also suggested that older people selectively reduce contact with acquaintances as a means of avoiding potentially negative interactions. We

considered three relationship types, including friends, family, and acquaintances, because similar categories have been used in previous research (Fingerman, Hay, Birditt, 2004; Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990; Walen & Lachman, 2000), and we expected the types of conflict strategies individuals use to vary across these types of relationships. We predicted type of social partner would help account for age differences in conflict strategies.

METHODS

Participants

As part of a larger study of interpersonal problems in adulthood (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003), 187 (86 men, 101 women) volunteers participated. The sample was reduced to 184 (84 men, 100 women); one 80-year-old man was excluded because he did not recall having any problems with his social partners, and one 43-year-old woman and one 84-year-old man were excluded due to errors in the interview process. Participants aged 13 to 99 years ($M = 45.43$, $SD = 25.68$) were divided across five age groups: 13–16 ($n = 39$), 20–29 ($n = 40$), 40–49 ($n = 33$), 60–69 ($n = 39$), and 80+ ($n = 33$). These age groups reflect theoretically relevant and distinct groups: adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, young–old adulthood, and oldest–old adulthood. There were approximately equal numbers of men and women in each age group.

This sample of convenience was recruited through a variety of sources, including newspaper advertisements, word of mouth, community organizations, and individuals attending football games at a large state university. No more than 3 people from each age and gender group were recruited using a given location. This approach is in keeping with prior studies that have used heterogeneous recruitment sources in obtaining appropriate convenience samples of people across the life-span (Blanchard-Fields, Hertzog, Stein, & Pak, 2001; Chen & Blanchard-Fields, 2000; Hess, Bolstad, Woodburn, & Auman, 1999). More than 90% of the sample was White. Chi square tests revealed a significant difference in marital status among the oldest old; 85% of the men were married while 95% of the women were widowed (χ^2 [2, $n = 33$] = 25.42, $p < .001$).

Two 2×5 (Gender $\times$ Age) analyses of variance were conducted to examine age and gender differences in self-rated health and vocabulary. Vocabulary scores varied by age (F [4, 174] = 19.19, $p < .001$) and gender (F [1, 174] = 17.04, $p < .001$). There also was a gender difference in self-rated health (F [1,174] = 3.92, $p < .05$).

Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually in their homes or at the study site. They completed a demographic questionnaire, followed by diagrams of their social networks, and then described recent problematic situations with members of their networks. Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hr. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Participants received $15 for participating.

Measures

Background information.—Participants reported their age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, health status, and vocabulary.

Participants completed the 5-item general health perceptions subscale from the Medical Outcomes Study–36-Item Short-Form Health Survey (MOS-36; Ware & Sherbourne, 1992). High scores represent positive perceptions of health. Participants also completed the Shipley Living Scale Vocabulary Test (Shipley, 1986) to assess their verbal abilities (Earles, Connor, Smith, & Park, 1997; Park, Hertzog, Kidder, Morrell, & Mayhorn, 1997).

Descriptions of conflict strategies.—Participants reported the conflict strategies they used in response to problems with their close and problematic social partners. First, they completed Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) social network assessment, which is a diagram of three concentric circles; participants placed their social ties in these circles representing varying degrees of psychological closeness (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). In a unique adaptation of this measure, participants also completed the assessment for problematic relationships; participants placed people who irritate them most in the first circle and then placed less irritating people in the second and third circles (Fingerman & Birditt, 2003).

Participants then described the last upsetting situation they had encountered with the three closest and the three most problematic social partners. The interviewer asked, "Think back to a recent time when you were irritated, hurt, or annoyed with _____. Can you tell me a little about what happened and why you were upset?" After the participant described the problem, the interviewer asked, "What did you do about this situation?"

Participants listed from one to six interpersonal problems. Participants who reported fewer than six problems had either listed fewer social partners in their networks or did not recall an upsetting situation with a given social network member. As described elsewhere, oldest–old adults listed fewer problematic social partners than did individuals in other age groups (Fingerman & Birditt, 2003).

Coding of conflict strategies.—Two undergraduate research assistants coded the 833 descriptions of interpersonal tensions with 24 dichotomous codes. Tensions were coded as 0 (does not include the behavior) or 1 (does include the behavior; Table 1). As in prior work (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003), the first author and the assistants developed the codes with deductive and inductive techniques (King, 2004; Strauss, 1987). They began with a list of behaviors that fit into each of the conflict categories defined by Rusbult and colleagues (1998; exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect). Then they met for weekly coding sessions to add and refine the codes. The final coding system included 12 codes derived from Rusbult's theory and 12 data inductive codes.

In order to assess the validity of the remaining data inductive codes, six social relationship researchers categorized the data inductive codes into the conflict categories (exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect). Of these 12 data inductive codes, 6 were excluded because fewer than five of the researchers agreed on the placement of the codes into the larger categories. These behaviors included: harming someone other than the social partner, harming an object, crying, lying to get out of the situation, positive self-improvement (e.g., exercise), and asking someone else to solve the problem.

A total of 7% of the transcripts were coded with behaviors later excluded. In addition, 3% of the tensions could not be

coded due to lack of clarity in the response. Thus, a total of 10% of the data were excluded. We found no age group differences in the likelihood of providing responses excluded from the study.

The codes were not mutually exclusive: With the exception of "do nothing," participants' interpersonal problems could include more than one behavior and thus be coded under more than one code. A total of 16.9% of the transcripts were coded as including more than one behavior. Interrater reliability was assessed with 100 descriptions of interpersonal tensions (12% of the 833 responses). Average kappa values were calculated for each of the conflict strategy categories (exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect), and they ranged from .79 to .93, which are acceptable coefficients of agreement for dichotomous codes (Bakeman, Quera, McArthur, & Robinson, 1997).

We then generated 4 dichotomous conflict strategy variables (exit, voice, loyalty, neglect). Descriptions were coded as 0 if they did not include a behavior that fit in the category or as 1 if they reported a behavior that fit into the category. Of these 4 strategy categories, across the descriptions of interpersonal tensions, each participant reported using an average of 2.24 ($SD =$ .81) categories, and any given description fell under an average of 1.03 ($SD = .42$) categories. Only 9.7% of the transcripts were coded into more than one conflict strategy category.

Correlations were calculated to determine whether the categories were distinct. The correlations between the conflict strategy categories ranged from −.29 to −.01, except the correlation between loyalty and voice, which was −.51. This correlation indicates situations that included voice were less likely to include loyalty. All correlations signify, however, that the constructs were reasonably distinct.

Socioemotional variables.—Participants reported relationship quality, contact frequency, the intensity of distress, and the type of social partner in response to each interpersonal problem. Participants indicated the quality of each relationship from 1 (poor) to 7 (outstanding). Ratings of relationship quality were considered rather than network placement (problematic, close) because relationship quality can be included in analyses of both close and problematic network members. Participants reported the frequency with which they visited with each social partner from 1 (every day) to 6 (less than once a month). This item was reversed so that higher scores indicated more frequent contact. Participants indicated how distressed they were in reaction to each interpersonal problem from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Participants indicated their relation with each network member (e.g., spouse, sister). Ties to family (e.g., spouse, sibling, child, parent, other family), friend, and acquaintance were considered. Acquaintances were people not identified as friends (e.g., coworker, classmate, church member). Each tension was coded as 1 if it included the type of social partner (e.g., family) or as 0 if it did not.

RESULTS

Overview of Analysis Strategy

Multilevel models.—We estimated multilevel models using PROC MIXED in SAS because of the hierarchical structure of the data. Multilevel modeling accounts for unequal numbers of lower level units (social network members) nested within upper level units (study participant; Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998). PROC MIXED allows the researcher to develop linear and nonlinear models that include upper and lower level units as independent variables in the same equation. In this study, the upper level variables refer to characteristics of the participant (age group, gender) while the lower level units refer to characteristics of the interpersonal tension (intensity of distress) and the relationship in which the problem occurred (type of social partner, contact frequency, relationship quality). An example model is provided below.

General Mathematical Model

$$CS_{it} = a_0 + a_1 (\text{Age group}_i) + a_2 (\text{Relationship quality}_{it}) + e_i + d_{it}$$

CS_{it} = conflict strategy used by participant $_i$ in response to tension $_t$; a_0 = intercept; Age group$_i$ = age of participant $_i$; Relationship quality$_{it}$ = participant$_i$'s rating of the quality of relationship with that social partner; a_1 = slope for age group; a_2 = slope for relationship quality; e_i = error between participants; d_{it} = error associated with tensions (error within participants).

Independent variables.—We assessed whether conflict strategies varied with age group (upper level) and socioemotional variables (lower level). Age groups were entered as four dummy variables; adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, and young–old adults, with oldest–old adults as the comparison group. The socioemotional variables included frequency of contact, ratings of the intensity of distress, relationship quality, and type of social partner. Frequency of contact, intensity of distress, and relationship quality were grand mean centered. The type of social partner variable included two dummy variables representing family and friend, with acquaintance as the comparison group.

Controls.—We assessed whether gender, health, vocabulary, the number of interpersonal tensions reported (upper level controls), and the number of conflict strategies (lower level control) should be entered as control variables for the following reasons. Gender was considered because women are more distressed by interpersonal problems (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Almeida & Kessler, 1998), and they tend to use demand strategies (voice, exit) whereas men tend to withdraw (neglect) in response to tensions in marital or romantic relationships (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Markman, Silvern, Clements, & Kraft-Hanak, 1993). Vocabulary skills and health may vary by age group (Alwin & McCammon, 2001; Folkman et al., 1986; Zautra, 1996) and account for differences in conflict strategies. Lower vocabulary skills and poor health may lead to less descriptive accounts of interpersonal tensions. The number of interpersonal tensions and conflict strategies were considered because participants who reported a greater number of interpersonal tensions or conflict strategies may have been more likely to report each conflict strategy. We only included control variables that were significantly correlated with the dependent variable in each analysis ($p < .05$); the inclusion of variables not associated with the dependent variable may produce the appearance of significant associations between the independent and dependent variable that do not exist (Rovine, von Eye,

Table 2. Proportion of Tensions Categorized Into Conflict Strategy Categories by Age Group

Age Group	Exit	Voice	Loyalty	Neglect	Excluded
Adolescents ($n = 187$)	.36	.50	.14	.11	.09
Young adults ($n = 203$)	.18	.56	.19	.10	.09
Middle-aged adults ($n = 162$)	.11	.68	.14	.08	.09
Young–old adults ($n = 179$)	.07	.68	.20	.05	.13
Oldest–old adults ($n = 102$)	.09	.48	.33	.07	.12
Total	.17	.59	.19	.09	.10

& Wood, 1988; Weisberg, 1979). The variables were centered on the grand mean before entering them into the models.

Age Group Differences in Conflict strategies

The proportion of tensions categorized into each conflict strategy by age group is presented in Table 2. Descriptions of tensions were most likely to include voice, followed by loyalty, exit, and neglect. We used multilevel models to examine whether individuals from various age groups reported different conflict strategies and whether age group differences were mediated by socioemotional variables. There are three steps involved in testing mediation (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). First, there must be an association between the predictor (age group) and the outcome (conflict strategy). Second, there must be an association between the predictor (age group) and the mediator (socioemotional variables). Lastly, the mediator and predictor are entered together as predictors of the outcome. Complete mediation is evident when the predictor no longer predicts the outcome once the mediator is added to the model. Partial mediation is evident when there is a decrease in the association between the predictor and the outcome once the mediator is added to the model. Although it is not possible to make definite conclusions regarding mediation using variables collected at a single point in time, we used these data to examine preliminary models and make speculations regarding mediation using life span theories (Akiyama et al., 2003; Carstensen et al., 1999; Kenny et al., 1998).

To assess whether conflict strategies varied with age group (the first step of mediation), we estimated four multilevel models—one for each type of conflict strategy (exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect) as the dependent variables. Because we used dichotomous dependent variables, we estimated nonlinear multilevel models with binomial error distributions. The independent variable was age group. We controlled for the number of conflict strategies reported in all analyses and for vocabulary with regard to voice, neglect, and exit analyses. Surprisingly, gender was not associated with reports of conflict strategies and was not included in the models. Reports of exit and loyalty strategies varied by age group, but reports of voice and neglect strategies did not. Table 3 includes the unstandardized coefficients and the odds ratios for the independent variables and controls for significant models. These analyses only included comparisons of each age group with the oldest–old. For example, adolescents were 4.48 times more likely to report using exit strategies and 2.78 times less likely to describe loyalty than were oldest–old adults (2.78 was obtained dividing 1.00 by the odds ratio .36 associated with the adolescents). Tukey post hoc comparisons were conducted to examine all possible age group comparisons.

Table 3. Multilevel Models Examining Exit and Loyalty Strategies as a Function of Age Group

	Estimate	SE	df	t	Odds Ratio
Exit					
Intercept	−2.36	.39	269	−6.00***	
Adolescents	1.50	.45	234	3.33***	4.48
Young adults	.73	.45	231	1.62	2.08
Middle-aged adults	.09	.50	227	.17	1.09
Young–old adults	−.35	.53	238	−.66	.70
Oldest–old adults	—	—	—	—	—
Vocabulary	−.02	.03	170	−.74	.98
No. of Strategies	1.38	.17	822	8.27***	3.97
Loyalty					
Intercept	−.76	.22	271	−3.42***	
Adolescents	−1.01	.31	207	−3.22**	.36
Young adults	−.73	.29	205	−2.51**	.48
Middle-aged adults	−1.08	.33	199	−3.33***	.34
Young–old adults	−.64	.30	215	−2.17*	.53
Oldest–old adults	—	—	—	—	—
No. of Strategies	−.46	.18	821	−2.51***	.63

Notes: Tukey tests indicate adolescents reported exit more than middle-aged, young–old, and oldest–old adults. Oldest–old adults reported more loyalty than adolescents and middle-aged adults.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

These findings revealed adolescents were more likely to report exit strategies than middle-aged, young–old, and oldest–old adults. Adolescents and middle-aged people were less likely to describe loyalty than oldest–old adults.

The multilevel models also revealed associations between control variables and conflict strategies. People who reported a greater number of conflict strategies were more likely to report exit and less likely to report loyalty.

Next, to establish the second step of mediation, we estimated multilevel models to examine whether the socioemotional variables (intensity of distress, contact frequency, relationship quality, type of social partner) varied by age group. Table 4 includes the descriptive statistics for the socioemotional variables by age group. We found significant age group differences in reports of the intensity of distress ($F [4, 168] = 3.47$, $p < .01$) and the frequency of contact with social partners ($F [4,187] = 18.20$, $p < .001$). There were no age group differences in relationship quality or type of social partner, and therefore, these variables were not considered further.

To test the third step of mediation, we examined whether intensity and frequency of contact accounted for age group differences in reports of exit and loyalty strategies. First, we entered frequency of contact and age group as predictors of the strategies. Exit and loyalty strategies did not vary with contact frequency. Next, we estimated multilevel models with intensity ratings and age group as predictors of exit and loyalty strategies, respectively. Participants appeared to be more likely to describe exit and less likely to describe loyalty strategies when they reported greater distress over the situation (Table 5). To ascertain whether these differences in strategies were evidence of partial mediation, we conducted Sobel tests. Because we treated the age variable as four dummy variables, we conducted four Sobel tests each for exit and loyalty. In addition, due to the binary behavioral reaction outcomes, we standardized the coefficients (Long, 1997; Menard, 2004). The Sobel tests were

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Socioemotional Variables by Age Group

Age Group	Contact M	SD	Range	Intensity M	SD	Range	Quality M	SD	Range	Proportion of Tensions With Each Type of Social Partner Family	Friend
Adolescents	5.24	1.39	1–6	3.47	1.19	1–5	4.12	1.95	1–7	.54	.24
Young adults	4.15	1.66	1–6	3.67	1.10	1–5	4.43	1.88	1–7	.56	.17
Middle-aged adults	4.28	1.92	1–6	3.43	1.06	1–5	4.24	2.10	1–7	.62	.14
Young–old adults	3.59	1.79	1–6	3.27	1.11	1–5	4.24	1.95	1–7	.66	.16
Oldest–old adults	4.31	1.61	1–6	3.07	1.16	1–5	4.21	1.76	1–7	.68	.21
Total sample	4.32	1.77	1–6	3.42	1.14	1–5	4.26	1.94	1–7	.60	.18

Notes: Contact frequency ranged from 1 (less than once a month) to 6 (every day). Intensity ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Relationship category of acquaintance represents remainder of tensions after family and friends are taken into account.

Table 5. Multilevel Model Examining Exit and Loyalty Strategies as a Function of Age Group and Emotional Intensity

Strategy	Estimate	SE	df	t	Odds Ratio
Exit					
Intercept	−2.32	.40	273	−5.84***	—
Adolescents	1.48	.46	236	3.24***	4.39
Young adults	.62	.46	237	1.34	1.86
Middle-aged adults	.02	.51	231	.04	1.02
Young–old adults	−.41	.53	243	−.78	.66
Oldest–old adults	—	—	—	—	—
Intensity	.22	.10	795	2.24*	1.25
Loyalty					
Intercept	−.90	.23	278	−3.89***	—
Adolescents	−.93	.32	215	−2.89**	.39
Young adults	−.55	.30	217	−1.83	.58
Middle-aged adults	−.99	.33	207	−2.99**	.37
Young–old adults	−.60	.30	221	−1.98*	.55
Oldest–old adults	—	—	—	—	—
Intensity	−.36	.08	774	−4.25***	.70

Note: Controls are included but not presented in the interest of space.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

not significant. Thus, emotional intensity did not partially mediate the association between age, exit, and loyalty.

DISCUSSION

Based on findings from this study, older people appear better able to "pick their battles" than younger people. Older adults were more likely to describe loyalty strategies, such as doing nothing or waiting to see if things improve. Younger people, on the other hand, were more likely to report exit tactics, which include yelling and name calling.

This research is consistent with the burgeoning literature suggesting older adults experience improvements in the social and emotional domains of life (Akiyama et al., 2003; Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). It appears that older adults experience fewer interpersonal problems, feel less negative emotion, and are better able to regulate their behavioral reactions to problems in relationships.

Age and Conflict Strategies

These findings contribute to the larger body of research regarding age differences in interpersonal tensions. According to socioemotional selectivity theory, older adults are less likely to use destructive behaviors (neglect, exit) and more likely to use constructive behaviors (loyalty, voice) than are younger people (Carstensen et al., 1999).

In this study, however, older adults were less likely to use *certain* destructive strategies than younger people. Consistent with previous research, younger people were more likely to use exit responses (e.g., arguing, yelling) than older people (Birditt et al., in press; Carstensen et al., 1995). Unexpectedly, we did not find that younger people were also more likely to use neglect than older adults. It is possible that neglect behaviors are not always destructive. Avoiding the person or leaving the situation may be advantageous for relationships if used immediately after a conflict because of extreme anger and the potential to engage in destructive behaviors. These behaviors may be harmful, however, if used over long periods of time.

Further, we found that older adults are more likely to use *certain* constructive strategies than younger adults. As expected, older adults were more likely to describe loyalty strategies (e.g., doing nothing) than younger people (Fingerman, 1998). In particular, adolescents and middle-aged adults were less likely than oldest–old adults to describe loyalty. Young adults and oldest–old adults may have been equally likely to use loyalty because many of the young adults were enrolled in college or may have been employed in low-status jobs, which may encourage the use of loyalty. Further, there were no age group differences in active constructive (voice) strategies, such as discussion. It is possible that individuals in all age groups usually respond to conflict with active constructive strategies. But, whether people also use active destructive strategies (e.g., yelling) or passive constructive strategies (e.g., doing nothing) varies with age group.

Overall, detailed reports of interpersonal tensions proved fruitful because they allowed us to differentiate when individuals of different ages used active and passive behaviors. When avoiding a problem may have benefited the relationship, older adults were more likely to report such tactics than were younger adults. When confronting the problem may have harmed the relationship, older people were less likely to use those behaviors than younger adults.

Socioemotional Factors that Account for Age Group Differences

We also examined factors that may account for age group differences in reports of conflict strategies: intensity of distress over the problem, frequency of contact with the social partner, quality of relationship, and type of social partner. Although older people rated tensions as less distressing than did younger people, the intensity of distress did not account for age group differences in responses to problems. This is inconsistent with lifespan theories, which suggest that as people age, they become better able to regulate their emotional appraisals of events, which leads to differences in behaviors (Carstensen

et al., 1999; Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, & Hobart, 1987). However, when individuals rated interpersonal problems as more distressing, they were more likely to report exit behaviors and less likely to report loyalty strategies. Because this study was cross sectional, we cannot exclude the possibility that using destructive strategies causes intense distress. Indeed, interpersonal conflict associated with later psychological distress (Bolger et al., 1989).

In addition, although younger people generally reported more frequent contact with social network members than did older adults, frequency of contact did not explain variation in conflict strategies. Akiyama and colleagues (2003) found that contact partially accounted for age group differences in reports of negative relations. Older people may be exposed to fewer negative interactions but how they *deal* with the negative interactions that they do experience varies because of factors such as the ability to regulate emotional and behavioral responses.

Somewhat surprisingly, conflict strategies did not vary by gender. Previous research suggests that women tend to use demand strategies (exit, voice) while men tend to withdraw (neglect) in response to interpersonal problems (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Markman et al., 1993). Gender differences may vary depending on the interpersonal context (type of relationship, relationship quality). For example, even within the marital relationship, husbands and wives use different conflict strategies depending on whether the argument concerns a problem the wife or the husband desires to resolve (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). The variety of relationships discussed may contribute to the dearth of gender differences in this study.

Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be addressed in future research. Socially desirable responding may bias self-report data. However, researchers have found significant correlations between husband and wife reports of conflict strategies and laboratory assessments of conflict behaviors and self-reports of behavior (Birditt & Forgays, in press; Rusbult et al., 1998). Retrospective reports are potentially problematic because older adults tend to remember the past more positively than younger adults (Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003; Mather & Johnson, 2000). The use of daily reports may reduce memory errors in future studies. In addition, causal conclusions regarding developmental changes are only speculative. Older cohorts may be less likely to use exit strategies because they value politeness to a greater extent or they are less reactive to stress because they experienced the great depression and WWII during their younger years (Elder, 1999). In addition, it is possible that the social contexts from which participants were recruited accounted for age differences in responses to interpersonal problems.

Further, our results may reflect selective survival because the use of destructive strategies may be associated with higher mortality rates. Hostile behaviors in marital interactions predict increased activity in the immune and endocrine systems, which may be harmful over the long term (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996). Yet, longitudinal personality research suggests that people become more conscientious and agreeable with age (Helson, Kwan, John, & Jones, 2002).

Overall, older people are more likely to report loyalty strategies (doing nothing) and less likely to report exit strategies (yelling) than younger people. These variations do not appear to be due to emotional reactivity or the social context. Older people may be better able to regulate their behavioral reactions to interpersonal problems than young adults. Future studies should examine associations between conflict strategies and well-being using a variety of methods, including laboratory observation, longitudinal, and daily report designs.

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