Younger and Older Adults’ Beliefs About the Experience and Expression of Emotions Across the Life Span

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Objectives. Although theorists acknowledge that beliefs about emotions may play a role in age-related emotion behavior, no research has explored these beliefs. This research examined beliefs about the experience and expression of emotions across the life span, especially across the adult years.

Methods. Younger and older adults rated the extent to which infants, children, adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults were likely to experience and express a range of emotions.

Results. Younger and older adults held similar beliefs about the course of emotions across the life span. Moreover, these beliefs differed across emotion categories. In particular, although older adults were believed to experience and express fewer highly charged, negative emotions, they were expected to be more likely to experience and express positive, low arousal emotions, as well as negative, low arousal emotions. The experience and expression of positive, high arousal emotions were seen as more characteristic of very young age groups as opposed to older age groups.

Discussion. These findings beg questions about if and how beliefs about emotion may affect age-related emotion regulation strategies and other everyday emotion-focused behaviors, as well as social reactions to older adults observed experiencing and expressing particular types of emotions.

Key Words: Age-related beliefs—Emotions—Emotion regulation—Social perceptions.

BACKGROUND

Research regarding aging and emotion has pointed to a reduction in emotionality. For example, research examining age-related differences in the perception of emotion expressions has found that older adults show increased difficulty identifying facial, vocal, and bodily displays of several basic emotions (Ruffman, Henry, Livingstone, & Phillips, 2008). Other work suggests declines in both explicit and implicit emotion recognition in later adulthood (Williams et al., 2009). Focusing on self-reported age differences, Gross et al. (1997) found that older adults generally report fewer negative emotional experiences, greater emotional control, and lesser expressivity than younger adults. A number of intervening factors have been identified as determinants of age-variant emotion effects. In particular, changes in patterns of emotion recognition have been linked to changes in neural substrates (Ruffman et al., 2008), and differences in the experience and expression of emotion have been associated with changes in emotion regulation strategies (Charles & Carstensen, 2007). Although life-span theorists also acknowledge that internalized beliefs about age-related emotion change may contribute to differences in age-related emotion behavior (Gross et al., 1997; Levy, 2009), no research has systematically examined what these beliefs entail. Before any attempt can be made to link age-related beliefs about emotion to behavior, it is necessary to first identify the nature of these beliefs. Such was the aim of this study.

This research drew on the methodology Fabes and Martin (1991) used to examine stereotypes of emotionality. In their study, young adult perceivers judged how frequently targets were expected to feel and express particular emotions from infancy through adulthood. Our work offered a broader perspective by examining the beliefs younger and older adult perceivers hold about the expression and experience of emotions across the life span and into old age. In addition to examining patterns in beliefs about specific emotions, a more fine-grained analysis of particular emotion categories was undertaken. In light of current attention given to emotion valence and intensity in the aging and emotion literature, a circumplex model offered an apt framework for differentiating emotion categories in this research (Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005). To this end, beliefs about emotions were also distinguished by the extent to which emotions reflected positive versus negative affect along with high versus low states of arousal.

METHOD

Research Participants

A total of 267 adults volunteered to participate. Younger adults were 143 college students (54% female participants)
AGED BETWEEN 17 AND 25 YEARS (M AGE = 19.0). OLDER ADULTS WERE 124 COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS FROM LOCAL SENIOR CENTERS (57% FEMALE PARTICIPANTS) AGED BETWEEN 60 AND 92 YEARS (M AGE = 71.0) WHO WERE GIVEN QUESTIONNAIRES TO COMPLETE AND MAIL BACK TO THE EXPERIMENTERS. NEITHER EDUCATIONAL STATUS NOR COGNITIVE STATUS WAS ASSESSED FOR OLDER PARTICIPANTS. NO SURVEYS HAD UNFINISHED OR INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSES. PARTICIPANTS WERE RANDOMLY ASSIGNED TO RATE ONE OF 12 DIFFERENT TARGET GROUPS AND TOLD THAT THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY WAS TO EXAMINE PEOPLE’S PERCEPTIONS OF HOW OTHER PEOPLE FEEL CERTAIN EMOTIONS AND HOW THEY EXPRESS THOSE FEELINGS.

Measures

Paralleling Fabes and Martin (1991), adults’ beliefs about the experience and expression of basic and non-basic emotions were assessed using a questionnaire and 7-point rating scales. Basic emotions included six positive and negative emotions (fear, sadness, anger, surprise, love, and happiness as described by Shaver, Swartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987). Non-basic emotions consisted of 19 positive and negative emotions (joy, shock, pride, sympathy, concern, regret, worry, hate, loneliness, jealousy, frustration, resentment, guilt, admiration, embarrassment, depression, anxiety, distress, and sorrow as described by Shaver et al., 1987). To assess beliefs about the experience (expression) of these emotions, participants indicated the frequency with which one target group experienced (expressed) the emotions on scales with the endpoints labeled as (1) almost never and (7) very often, and the midpoint labeled as (4) sometimes.

Participants first completed ratings regarding beliefs about the experience of all emotions, and then completed ratings regarding beliefs about the expression of emotions for the same target group. Participants only rated one target group to reduce demands for making age comparative judgments, which exaggerate estimates of age-related differences about behavior (Kogan, 1979). The target groups were identified with a label on the questionnaire as either infant boys (girls), child boys (girls), adolescent boys (girls), young adult (women), middle-aged adult (women), or older adult (women) and a description of the chronological age parameters was written underneath the group label (younger than 2 years, between 3 and 10 years old, between 13 and 16 years old, between 18 and 25 years old, between 45 and 55 years old, and older than 60 years old). The adult ages reflected parameters commonly used to distinguish adult age groups in life-span research.

Results

Analytic Strategy

Ratings of experience and expression were highly correlated (all ps < .001); therefore, all emotion rating scores were consolidated by averaging across these ratings. Analyses were then conducted on basic emotion rating scores, as well as composite scores of basic and non-basic emotions grouped and averaged according to circumplex emotion categories: positive, low arousal emotions (e.g., pride, concern, sympathy, admiration); negative, low arousal emotions (e.g., sadness, loneliness, sorrow, regret); positive, high arousal emotions (e.g., surprise, happiness, joy, love); and negative, high arousal emotions (e.g., hate, fear, jealousy, anger). Separate 6 (target age) × 2 (target gender) × 2 (participant age) × 2 (participant gender) analyses of variance conducted on the emotion scores revealed significant main effects for target age (see Figures 1 and 2). Trend analyses were performed to elucidate the observed patterns across age groups. Linear trends showed general increases or decreases across age groups; quadratic trends indicated a change in direction at some juncture across age groups; cubic trends reflected two age-related changes in the direction of the trend. For brevity, only main age effects are discussed. Moreover, with only one exception, no qualifying gender and age interactions were observed, possibly reflecting reduced power for these secondary comparisons (ps ranged from .06 to .96 with the vast majority <.50). A significant interaction of target age and gender for ratings of love was found, F(5, 219) = 3.42, p < .005, reflecting higher ratings for women from childhood through old age.

Basic Emotions

Significant main effects emerged for target age regarding beliefs about the basic emotions of happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, anger, and love, Fs(5, 219) = 12.28, 9.23, 3.66, 6.85, 2.79, and 10.49, respectively, all ps < .01. Significant linear trends for surprise and happiness, Fs(1, 261) = 37.82 and 43.98, respectively, ps < .001, indicated that the experience and expression of these emotions were believed to decrease in frequency from infancy into old age. On the other hand, significant quadratic trends for sadness and fear, as well as for love, Fs(1, 261) = 10.35, 12.98, 26.46, respectively, ps < .01, indicated that these emotions were believed to decrease in frequency from infancy to young adulthood and then to increase across the adult years. A significant quadratic trend for anger, F(1, 261) = 8.97, p < .003, revealed that this emotion was believed to increase from infancy to adolescence and then to decrease across the adult years.

Positive (Negative) and High Arousal (Low Arousal) Emotions

A significant main effect for target age found for beliefs about positive, low arousal emotions, F(5, 219) = 22.74, p < .001, and a cubic trend, F(1, 261) = 20.30, p < .001, indicated that these emotions were believed to increase from infancy to adolescence, and following a slight decrease in young adulthood continue to increase across the adult years. A significant main effect for age, F(5, 219) = 15.54, p < .001, elucidated by a linear trend, F(1, 261) = 66.17,
A significant main effect for positive, high arousal emotions, $F(5, 219) = 16.58$, $p < .001$, and a linear trend, $F(1, 261) = 49.25$, $p < .001$, revealed that these emotions were believed to sharply
decrease from infancy onward and level off across the adult years. A significant main effect for negative, high arousal emotions, $F(5, 219) = 6.19, p < .001$, and a quadratic trend, $F(1, 261) = 15.28, p < .01$, showed that the experience and expression of these emotions were believed to increase to a high point during adolescence and then to drop and subside across the adult years.

**Discussion**

Strong evidence was found for systematic, yet differential, beliefs about emotions across the life span and across the adult years. In particular, across the adult years, basic emotions such as sadness, fear, and love were believed to be more frequently experienced and expressed, whereas anger, surprise, and happiness were believed to decrease in frequency. Consistent with these basic trends, on a more general level, older adults were expected to experience and express fewer highly charged, negative emotions such as hate, jealousy, and frustration. Moreover, the experience and expression of highly arousing positive emotions such as joy and surprise were seen as most characteristic of the very young adult. On the other hand, with advancing age, adults were expected to be more likely to experience and express both positive, low arousal emotions such as concern and sympathy, as well as negative, low arousal emotions such as sadness and loneliness.

Beliefs about the reduction in the experience and expression of strong arousing emotions across the adult years is consistent with empirical observations of greater emotion regulation, and begs the question of potential relationships between these beliefs and the development of regulation strategies (Charles & Carstensen, 2007). Given research and theory suggesting that beliefs about aging internalized at younger life stages become self-views that guide behaviors when individuals reach older ages (Levy, 2009), it would be instructive to explore if and how adults’ emotion beliefs may mediate or moderate the development of particular emotion regulation strategies with advancing age. Considerable research has also shown that older adults evaluate and handle everyday situations, which vary in emotional intensity in distinctly different ways from younger individuals (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). Thus, it would also be valuable to examine how emotion beliefs influence the ways in which older adults manage everyday problem-solving which involves emotional matters.

Having documented systematic beliefs about how aging adults are expected to experience and express emotions, it would also be interesting to examine how the social-emotional behavior of older adults is evaluated in comparison to that of younger adults. Drawing on social-psychological attributional frameworks, one might speculate that particular emotional behavior of older adults is taken less seriously (because it is expected) or attributed to different causes (intrinsic rather than situational) than the emotional behavior of younger adults. Such attributions can have far-reaching implications for how displays of emotion by older adults are interpreted by others in a variety of settings such as in interpersonal, intergenerational, and medical or clinical contexts. For example, if sadness and fear are believed to be typical at older ages, practitioners may fail to consider or overlook serious external contributing factors in older adults who display such emotions.

Several limitations of the present study warrant further attention. Although only one significant gender effect was observed, it would nevertheless be useful to explore in more depth beliefs about the experience and expression of emotions in older adult men versus older adult women. To this end, it may be useful to look more closely at beliefs regarding specific emotions, such as anger, which have been implicated in gender differences in young adulthood. Limitations in details about research participants beg questions about qualities, which might differentiate adults on the basis of their emotion beliefs. As such, future work might consider the extent to which emotion beliefs may vary as a function of younger and older adults’ broader age attitudes and knowledge, as well as their cross-age contact. Finally, future research should explore beliefs about other emotions such as disgust, which has garnered recent attention in the aging and emotion literature.

**References**


