Age Similarities in Instrumental Emotion Regulation

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INTRODUCTION

- Regulating emotions is not just about feeling good; emotions have utility for achieving goals (Haines et al., 2016; Tamir, 2009).
- Older adults (OA) tend to be better than or equal to young adults (YA) at regulating into positive moods (Scheibe & Blanchard-Fields, 2009; Shiota & Levenson, 2009).
- Less is known about older adults' ability or willingness to regulate into negative moods when the situation requires this strategy.
- Older adults tend to avoid high-arousal emotions (Keil & Freund, 2009).

Competing Hypotheses

1a) OA avoid High Arousal Negative (HAN): Age x Situation interaction such that YA and OA are equal at utilitarian emotion regulation except for negative high arousal scenarios, where YA are more likely to select HAN solutions than OA.

1b) OA maximize positivity: Age x Situation interaction such that YA = OA for positive situations but YA > OA for negative situations.

METHODS

Participants

- Sixty-one young adults (YA; ages 18-28 years, M = 21 ± 2.5; 62% Female) and 64 older adults (OA; ages 61-86 years, M = 69 ± 5.6; 56% Female) participated in this study.

Materials

- **Emotion Regulation Strategy-Situation Task**
  - Twelve goal-driven situations varying on arousal level and valence (3 situations for each of the emotional categories).
  - Each situation had one emotional strategy which corresponded to one of four emotional options: High Arousal Positive (HAP), High Arousal Negative (HAN), Low Arousal Positive (LAP), and Low Arousal Negative (LAN).
  - Following validation by 12 counseling psychology experts, the situations were programmed into a visual engine on the computer (Ren'Py 6.99.11) to create a more immersive experience (See Figures 1 & 2).

Procedure

- **Emotion Regulation Strategy-Situation Task**:
  - Situations presented in a pseudo-randomized order with one "correct" emotional strategy.
  - Two attempts allotted
- Participants were asked whether the situations were relevant to their life experiences (Yes/No) and the likelihood of encountering the situations in the future from 0-100.

Emotion Regulation Strategy-Situation Task Example

Figure 1: High Arousal Negative (HAN) Situation

Figure 2: High Arousal Negative Situation Choices
Note: Correct answer = "D"

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1a: Not Supported

- A 2(Age Group) x 4 (Situation) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were age differences in strategy-situation match.
  - There was a main effect of Situation, F (2.64, 322.01) = 22.10, $p < .001$, η^2_p = .15. There was no age x situation interaction.
  - Participants were more effective at matching positive emotions to situations (HAP & LAP) than negative emotions (HAN & LAN; see *Figure* 3).

Hypothesis 1b: Not Supported

- No age x situation interaction emerged ($p > .50$)
- However, older adults were significantly more likely than young adults to choose a LAP strategy for a LAN situation, t (122) = 2.90, $p < .05$, d = .52 (see *Figure* 4).
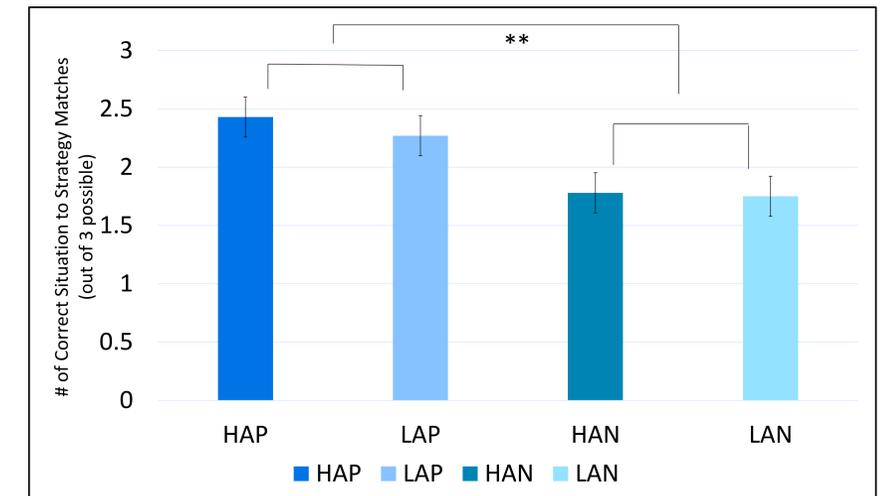
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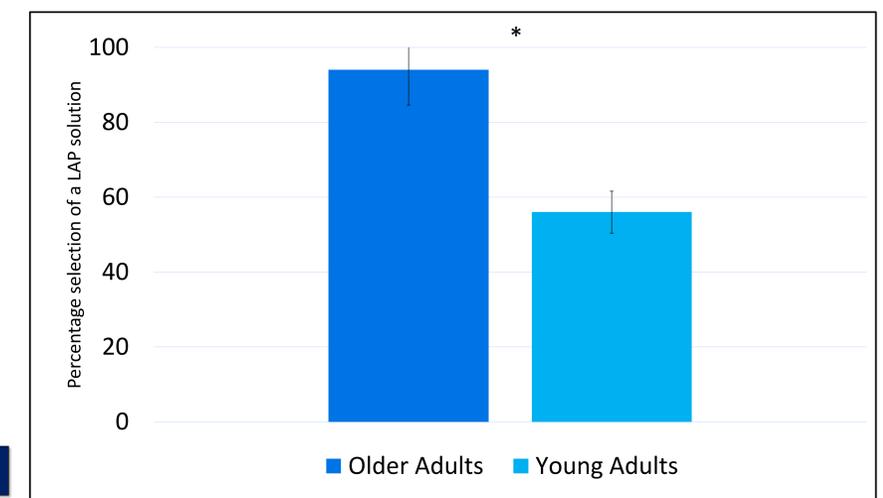

Figure 3: Situation to Strategy Match

Figure 4: Age differences in the use of a LAP strategy for LAN situations

DISCUSSION

- This study provides evidence that OA are as competent as YA in using emotions to solve problems.
- These findings identify important boundary conditions of age-related shifts to maximize positive affect or avoid high arousal: older adults are able and willing to engage with negative and high arousal emotions when those emotions are instrumental for solving a problem.

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