Age Differences in Emotional Variability: The Role of Context

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Aim of the Study
Prominent theories of developmental regulation have suggested that individuals become more selective in allocating their resources as they become older and experience an increasing number of losses in various life domains and realms of functioning (SOC; Baltes, 1997; SET; Hess, 2014).

Given such age-related increases in selectivity, we predicted that older adults’ emotional reactions would be more dependent on contextual features, such as the self-relevance of emotion-evoking stimuli, than younger adults’ emotional reactions. However, age differences in the variability of emotions in response to the same type of stimuli (i.e., to stimuli of similar self-relevance) may be nonsignificant.

Predictions:
1) Cross-context variability → Age-related increase
2) Within-context variability → Age-related stability

Method
Sample:
61 young adults (52% female; \(M_{\text{Age}} = 29.25\) years, \(SD = 5.81\), Range = 19 – 36 years)
65 older adults (48% female; \(M_{\text{Age}} = 65.29\) years, \(SD = 5.31\), Range = 59 – 79 years)

Stimuli:
20 picture stimuli, equally divided across 4 categories (resembling different contexts):
- Loneliness (young adults, sadness): Male and female young protagonists being lonely and gloomy.
- Care dependency (older adults, sadness): Male and female older protagonists in need of care for even small tasks.
- Harassment (young adults, anger): Male and female young protagonists suffering from invasive or violent behavior.
- Disparagement (older adults, anger): Male and female older protagonists being treated disrespectful.

Stimuli presented for 5 s each, randomized order.

Dependent variables:
For each picture, participants were asked how they felt while looking at it (using single items):
- Anger
- Sadness

Scale: 1 (very slightly or not at all) – 5 (extremely)

Results
Anger variability: Stronger emotional variability in older than in young adults, but exclusively across different contexts

Sadness variability: No age differences for any type of variability

Conclusions
The predicted higher cross-context variability of emotional reactions in older adults, as compared with younger adults, was evident for anger, but not sadness reactions.

This pattern of findings is consistent with the discrete emotion theory to affective aging (DEA; Kunzmann et al., 2014) suggesting that sadness is a negative emotion that becomes increasingly salient and adaptive in old age, whereas anger becomes increasingly rare and dysfunctional.

Seen in this light, older adults may have been especially selective and sensitive to contextual features in terms of anger because this emotion has a high probability of being maladaptive in old age.

References