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Saving the Best for Last: How Adults Treat Social Partners of Different Ages

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Abstract

Older adults report more positive feelings and fewer problems in their relationships than do younger adults. These positive experiences may partially reflect how people treat older adults. Social partners may treat older adults more kindly due to their sense that time remaining to interact with these older adults is limited. Younger ($n = 87$, aged 22 to 35) and older participants ($n = 89$, aged 65 to 77) indicated how positively they would behave (i.e., express affection, proffer respect, send sentimental cards) and what types of conflict strategies they would use in response to hypothetical negative interactions with two close social partners, a younger adult and an older adult. Multilevel models revealed that participants were more avoidant and less confrontational when interacting with older adults than when interacting with younger adults. Time perspective of the relationship partially mediated these age differences. Young and older participants also were more likely to select sentimental cards for older partners than for younger partners. Findings build on socioemotional selectivity theory and the social input model to suggest that social partners facilitate better relationships in late life.

Keywords

Adult development; social network; social support; coping; old age; aging stereotypes; communication

Older adults seem to have an advantage over younger adults in the social world: They get along better with their friends and family. Although individuals vary in their social experiences, studies using a variety of methodologies and diverse populations have documented that most older adults report fewer problems and more positive feelings towards their social partners than do younger adults (Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahl, 2003; Okun & Keith, 1998; Rook, 1984). Theory links changes in social interactions to age-related improvements in emotion regulation, social cognition, and emotion focused goals, as well as to structural

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features of social networks (Antonucci, 2001; Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). But prior research has not considered whether social partners also treat older adults in ways that might enhance older adults' positive views of relationships.

Elsewhere, we have proposed the Social Input Model of age differences in relationships (Fingerman & Pitzer, 2007). This model suggests that social partners may treat older adults in ways that contribute to positive social experiences, beyond older adults' individual motivations, emotion regulation, or structural features of their social networks. The model does not imply that social partners *determine* older adults' upbeat perceptions of relationship qualities. Rather, preferential treatment is an additional component of older adults' social experience that researchers have not investigated. In this study, we considered whether social partners behave with greater positive regard and use less confrontational conflict strategies with older adults.

Responses to Adults of Different Ages

Interpersonal tensions

Theory and research provide indirect support for the contention that social partners treat older adults kindly. Social partners come "prepackaged by age," with younger people more often interacting with younger social partners and older people more often interacting with older social partners (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003). Studies examining age differences in behaviors generally have not considered the age of the social partner, however. Therefore, findings regarding participants' age might also reflect the social partners' ages. For example, studies find that older adults attempt to avoid problems when they are upset and younger adults behave more confrontationally (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005; Blanchard-Fields, Mienaltowski, & Seay, 2007). Yet, behaviors observed in prior studies may reflect the age of the person instigating the tension as well as the age of the person coping with that tension.

Indeed, tensions involve reciprocal processes where each person reacts to the other person. When two older adults experience interpersonal tension, they may be more prone to avoidant behaviors (e.g., doing nothing or trying not to get upset), whereas situations involving two younger adults may be prone to confrontation and conflict escalation (e.g., yelling or quarreling with the other party). The age of each partner contributes to the behavior pattern, but prior studies have conceptualized findings in terms of the person reacting to the situation, rather than considering the age of the social partner as well.

When researchers have had the opportunity to examine social partners of different ages, adults seem to adjust behavioral and emotional responses as a function of the age and maturity of the target. For example, in a study of grandparents' relationships with each of their grandchildren, grandparents reported irritations with their younger grandchildren, but not their older grandchildren. These differences may reflect the fact that younger grandchildren are more demanding and rambunctious than older grandchildren (Fingerman, 1998). Likewise, in families with teenage children, parents may react to the immaturity and poor social skills of the adolescent. Research suggests parents attenuate hostilities in discussions with each other, but they react with greater agitation towards the teenage child (Cui, Conger, & Lorenz, 2005; Kim, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 2001). Thus, individuals of different ages may have general tendencies in their responses to interpersonal tensions, but they also may regulate their behaviors in reaction to characteristics of the social partner, including their age and maturity level.

Expression of positive regard

People may respond differently to older adults not only during interpersonal tensions, but also with regard to expression of positive regard, particularly in close relationships. They may display greater affection and offer more deference when interacting with older social partners than with younger social partners. For example, a study examining holiday cards found that social partners provide sentimental communication to older adults. Adults of all ages reported positive emotion in response to cards that were affectionate in tone (Fingerman & Griffiths, 1999). Yet, older adults received more such holiday cards with messages of fondness and warm regards, whereas younger adults tended to receive cards that were silly and whimsical, such as portraying reindeer drinking cappuccino.

Moreover, expression of positive feelings in relationships may be multifaceted. Individuals may display overt affection for close social partners via physical and verbal gestures, such as hugging the other party or saying, "I love you." Given display rules governing expression of affection in non-romantic ties, however, social partners also may express their regard less directly, by honoring commitments and listening to what the other party has to say. Finally, as in the holiday card study above, social partners may provide tangible displays of affection through cards, messages, or small gifts. This study examined whether social partners express all three forms of positive regard (e.g., affection, personal respect, tangible artifacts) more with older social partners than younger social partners.

Future Time Perspective and Treatment of Different Aged Social Partners

We also considered possible explanations for social partners' preferential treatment of older adults, particularly social partners' sense of time remaining in the relationship. Social partners may treat older social partners kindly because they realize that opportunities to interact with them in the future are limited. This explanation is derived from socioemotional selectivity theory which posits that individuals adjust their socioemotional repertoire as a function of their own time perspective. When their time horizon is open and boundless (as in young adulthood), individuals focus on novelty and stimulation in relationships; when their time horizon is foreshortened (as in late adulthood), individuals focus on positive emotional experiences in relationships (Carstensen, et al., 1999; Carstensen & Mikels, 2005).

Socioemotional selectivity has defined time perspective as an individual characteristic, but in this study we extend the tenets of socioemotional selectivity to the relationship. We propose that people adjust their behaviors in a specific relationship as a function of their sense of time remaining with that social partner. We further propose that this relationship time perspective will exert effects beyond a person's individual time perspective. Due to their sense of foreshortened time with the older adult, individuals may seek to enhance the older adult's positive experiences and minimize tensions in the relationship, rather than risk ending the relationship on a sour note. They want their final interactions with the social partner to be positive. For example, a young adult may view her own future as expansive, but realize that visits with grandma are numbered and treat grandma accordingly. Evidence supporting this proposition is scant, but a study of elderly mothers and adult daughters suggests that sense of time remaining influenced social partners' reactions to conflicts. When interviewed alone, each daughter described something bothersome about their mother. Later, the parties were observed in a joint discussion of conflicts, and one third of daughters indicated that they had no problems with their mothers. To justify these behaviors, some daughters commented that they wished to avoid conflict with their mothers because they saw time remaining with her as precious (Fingerman, 2001).

Of course, there are other possible variables that may contribute to preferential treatment of older adults. For example, individuals may believe older adults' are less responsible for their

poor behaviors and thus react with forgiveness. In a series of studies, Erber, Szuchman, and Prager (2001) demonstrated that people attribute older adults' poor behaviors at work or in the marketplace to unchangeable weaknesses, such as forgetfulness. Furthermore, Erber's participants were accepting of the older adults' poor behaviors because they felt the older adults were not to blame. Likewise, people may ignore older adults' poor behavior because they believe an older adult is intractable or will not change behaviors engaged in for decades. By contrast, social partners may seek to change young adults' behavior because they are still acquiring adult roles. Thus, when they are upset with a younger adult, they confront him or her for the purpose of socialization (Arnett, 2007). Finally, individuals' behaviors may reflect their stereotypes about older adults in general (Hess, 2006). Both positive and negative stereotypes of older adults have been associated with condescending behaviors (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Pasupathi, Carstensen, & Tsai, 1995). In sum, we examined beliefs about blaming the partner for poor behavior and stereotypes about older adults to understand differences in how individuals react to social partners of different ages.

Finally, we controlled for individual and relationship variables that might influence treatment of different aged social partners. For example, we examined individual factors that may contribute to relationship behaviors, such as participants' own age, gender, and their own future time perspective as well as assessing individuals' comfort expressing their emotions. We also considered relational factors, such as how long participants had known each social partner, positive and negative qualities of the tie, and how they were related.

The Current Study

In sum, our general hypothesis was that individuals would report treating older adults with greater kindness than younger adults by attempting to minimize tensions and conflict and by proffering greater positive regard towards older social partners. To examine these issues, we asked participants to name older and younger close social partners. We also asked them to imagine each partner had behaved poorly in a social context and to indicate their responses to that social transgression. Participants also reported their positive regard towards social partners including: (a) expressing affection (hugging, saying, "I love you"), (b) demonstrating personal respect, or (c) sending tangible artifacts such as sentimental birthday cards.

Given our interest in time perspective, we gave additional attention to this variable. Relational time perspective may be intrinsically linked to the social partner's age. For this reason, we instructed half of the participants to imagine their social partners were moving away. This procedure allowed us to tease apart chronological age of social partner from time in the relationship, using an approach similar to prior studies that have successfully manipulated individual time perspective by asking participants to imagine they are moving (e.g., Fung & Carstensen, 2004). Thus, we considered two forms of time perspective: (a) the individual's own time perspective (most likely associated with their own age), and (b) relational time perspective, or sense that time remaining to interact with the social partner is open or foreclosed.

Specific hypotheses were as follows

Ho1—We anticipated that both younger and older adults would seek to minimize tensions and would report more avoidant (e.g., do nothing) and less confrontational (e.g., yell) behaviors in response to problems with their older social partner than with their younger close social partner. We also considered engagement behaviors, intended to constructively resolve the problem via discussion without confrontation. Prior studies have reported no age differences in the likelihood of engaging in discussion to solve the problem (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004); thus, we included these behaviors for comparison to avoidant and confrontational behaviors.

Ho2—We predicted individuals would express more positive regard for their close older social partners than their younger social partners by reporting greater use of all three positive behaviors (e.g., overt affection, personal respect, sentimental birthday cards) with older social partners.

Ho 3—We hypothesized that differences in behaviors towards older and younger social partners would be partially mediated by perceptions of time remaining in the relationship above and beyond the individual's own sense of time remaining.

Methods

Participants included 87 young adults (51% female) aged 22 to 35 ($M = 25.60$, $SD = 3.64$ years) and 89 older adults (55% female) aged 65 to 77 ($M = 70.36$, $SD = 3.57$ years). The sample was one of convenience obtained via community groups, fliers, and word of mouth. Participants were informed that it was a study of social problems, or problems people have in their relationships. Our prior research indicates that participants like to be informed when they will be asked about interpersonal problems (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003; Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). Participants completed face to face interviews at the university research space or in their home, according to their preference. Participants received \$10 for completing an interview that lasted approximately one hour.

We estimated 2 (age group) by 2 (gender) ANOVAs to examine whether participants differed on background characteristics. There were no age differences in education level. Older and younger men and women were well-educated; 68% of younger adults had a college degree and 78% of older adults had a college degree. Men were more well-educated than women in both age groups, $F(1, 348) = 10.40$, $p < .01$. Participants provided a self-rating of health from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*; Idler & Kasl, 1991). Older participants reported better health than younger adults did, but participants generally rated their health as very good ($F(1, 348) = 11.79$, $p < .01$; $M = 3.75$, $SD = .90$ for younger adults, $M = 4.06$, $SD = .80$ for older adults).

Research Design

Participants first answered questions about their background characteristics and their own future time perspective. Interviewers then asked participants to name their closest young adult social partner (aged 18 to 35) and their closest older adult social partner (aged 65 or older), not including romantic partner. We excluded romantic partners because displays of affection and rules of engagement around interpersonal problems are distinct in romantic ties. We stratified the sample by age (young adult participants, older adult participants) and gender. Within each age by gender cell, half of the sample answered questions about the younger social partner first, and half of the sample answered questions about the older social partner first. Participants answered the full series of questions about the first social partner before naming and answering questions about the second social partner. Finally, participants completed measures of emotional expressivity and of stereotypes of aging.

Manipulation of time perspective—After they had provided basic information about their first social partner, half of the participants within each age by gender group were randomly assigned to a condition intended to manipulate sense of time remaining with that social partner. We sought to foreshorten sense of time with the social partner without introducing the premise of sickness or death (which might evoke distinct supportive behaviors).

Researchers have successfully foreshortened individuals' sense of time by asking participants to imagine they are about to move to another country where access to current social partners in the U.S. is difficult (Fung & Carstensen, 2004). Drawing on this approach, we asked participants to imagine that the young adult social partner was joining a cultural immersion

program in the Peace Corps where she or he would not be allowed contact with people in the US for three years. We asked participants to imagine that the older adult social partner was moving to a retirement community in Hawaii, where the time change would render communication difficult (all participants lived in the US Eastern time zone). See Appendix A for details. We provided frequent reminders of the manipulation throughout the interview, “Remember, s/he is moving away in a few weeks.”

Responses to interpersonal problems—Our first hypothesis pertained to reactions to interpersonal tensions. To examine responses to relationship problems we asked participants:

Now imagine the following situation: You are talking in a group of people, describing a problem you are having. (Name of social partner) responds by saying something highly critical and slightly insulting about you. You are surprised and hurt by these remarks.

Participants first indicated how typical this situation is of the social partner from 1 (*not at all typical*) to 5 (*very typical*).

Then, participants indicated how likely they would be to engage in 9 behaviors in response to this situation, rated 1 (*very unlikely*) to 4 (*very likely*). These behaviors were based on our theoretical predictions and developed from prior studies, generating 3 subscales (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004; Watson & Blanchard-Fields, 1998). The 4 item subscale for avoidant (or passive) behaviors included items such as: Accept there is nothing you can do and avoid dealing with it, $\alpha = .83$. The 2 item subscale for confrontational behaviors included: Confront the other party, and raise your voice, $\alpha = .60$. The subscale for engagement behaviors included 3 items such as: Calmly discuss the problem and try to find a solution, $\alpha = .77$.

Follow-up questions regarding the interpersonal problem provided control variables for this study. Two questions addressed participants’ perceptions of the social partner’s responsibility for their behaviors: How much the partner could change his/her behavior or how much the participant would blame the partner, rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), $\alpha = .54$. To control for differences in emotional reactions to the problems (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2003), participants rated how upset they’d be about the situation, again rated 1 to 5.

Expression of positive regard—Our second hypothesis pertained to expression of positive regard. Dependent variables included: (a) expression of affection (hugging, saying, “I love you”), (b) demonstrating personal respect, or (c) artifacts such as sentimental birthday cards. A 4 item subscale assessed overt displays of affection (e.g., saying “I love you” and giving a hug), rated 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*), $\alpha = .87$. A 6 item subscale assessed personal respect (e.g., listening to the other person, and honoring a commitment) using the same rating scale, $\alpha = .78$.

To examine tangible artifacts, we used greeting card software to develop two types of cards: sentimental and humorous. In a pilot study, 38 adults aged 23 to 81 rated how sentimental 6 cards were, 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) and indicated their likelihood of sending each card to an older or younger social partner, 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). For this study, we selected two cards rated most sentimental that applied to social partners of different ages. For example, a sentimental card pictured a farm house with a winding road and a message inside, “There’s nothing too good for a person like you. So this comes with my love and with warm wishes, too...Happy Birthday with special love.” We also included two humorous, non-sentimental cards to disentangle card sending in general from sending sentimental cards. Cards were presented in random order across participants. We use a 2 item subscale for sentimental cards, $\alpha = .80$ and a 2 item subscale for humorous cards, $\alpha = .47$. Given the low alpha for humorous cards, we also looked at each card separately, and the pattern of findings was

identical. To assure proximity to birthday did not influence selection of cards, we also asked participants the birth month of each social partner and calculated time to birthday (in months). There were no associations between reports of card sending and proximity to birth month.

Future time perspective of relationship and alternate explanations for behaviors

—To assess participants' perceptions of time remaining in the relationship, we developed a measure of future time perspective of relationship (FTPR) based on Carstensen and Lang's (1996) 10 item Future Time Perspective Scale. The original scale was designed to assess individuals' sense that their own future is open and filled with possibilities (as opposed to foreshortened and foreclosed of possibility). We modified 7 items from this scale to assess sense of time remaining in a relationship. For example, we adapted the item "Many opportunities await me in the future" to "Many opportunities to spend time with this person await me in the future" and the item "I have a sense that time is running out" to "I have a sense that time together with her/him is running out," $\alpha = .91$.

As mentioned previously, we also considered other variables that might be associated with treatment of social partners. Packer and Chasteen (2006) developed a measure of stereotypes of aging based on evidence that Americans typically categorize traits describing the elderly along two dimensions-- a positive view of older adults as warm and a negative view of older adults as incompetent. Thus, participants indicated the extent to which 10 adjectives conveying competence (e.g., skillful), and 10 items conveying warmth (e.g., friendly) describe adults over age 60 from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*highly*), $\alpha = .68$ and $\alpha = .73$ respectively.

Relationship and participant control variables—Throughout the battery, we obtained additional variables we treated as relationship or participant level control variables. For example, after participants named their closest older or younger social partner, they provided information that we treated as relationship control variables. These control variables included the partner's gender, participant's relationship to the partner (e.g., friend, parent, sibling), how long they had known the social partner in years and how often they have contact with this partner from 1 (*less than every few months*) to 6 (*everyday*). We assessed positive and negative relationship quality, using 4 brief items from the American Changing Lives Survey (Umberson, 1992). Positive feelings included, "How much does he/she make you feel loved and cared for?", "How much does he/she understand you?", $\alpha = .61$. Negative feelings were assessed with, "How much does he/she criticize you?", "How much does he/she make demands on you?", $\alpha = .63$, all items were rated 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*as much as possible*). The low alphas reflect the use of two item subscales.

Two measures served as participant level control variables. To control for individuals' own time perspective, participants completed the original Carstensen and Lang (1996) 10-item Future Time Perspective Scale to measure their view of their *own* future, $\alpha = .89$. They also completed the 17 item Emotional Expressivity scale (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994) to assess the degree to which they outwardly display their emotions. Example items include: I think of myself as emotionally expressive and I keep my feelings to myself (reverse coded), rated 1 (*never true*) to 6 (*always true*), $\alpha = .92$.

Analytic Strategy

Each participant responded to questions about more than one social partner. Thus, to deal with non-independence of responses about social partners, our analytic strategy relied on multilevel models. Relationship level variables pertaining to the social partner were nested within individuals. To test the first hypothesis regarding reactions to interpersonal transgressions, the dependent variables included the three subscales for behavioral reactions (e.g., avoidant, confrontational and engagement behaviors) for each social partner. To test the second

hypothesis regarding expression of positive regard, the dependent variables also involved three subscales (e.g., display affection, personal respect, birthday cards) for each social partner. The key independent variable in these analyses was the relationship level variable, age of social partner.

We considered control variables pertaining to the relationship. First, we examined descriptive characteristics of the social partners (see Table 1); we estimated independent t-tests comparing the younger and older participants and paired t-tests comparing each participant's view of the older and younger social partner on each characteristic. For the most part, characteristics of the older and younger close social partners did not vary by participants' ages. Older participants had known their close social partners longer than younger participants had, $t(174) = -7.62, p < .001$ for younger social partners and $t(174) = -7.97, p < .001$ for older social partners. Participants of all ages nominated friends or siblings when indicating the close social partner of the same age, but nominated a variety of family members (e.g., grandparent or grandchild, parent or child, in-law, niece/nephew, aunt/uncle) when indicating the close social partner outside their age group. We recoded relationship as 1 = family and 0 = non-family and found that participants were more likely to name non-family as a same age social partner, and family for the other age group, paired $t(175) = -11.59, p < .001$. Older participants also rated the quality of relationships with younger social partners as less negative than younger participants did, $t(174) = 3.39, p < .01$. Participants of all ages indicated they would be more upset with a younger social partner than an older social partner who committed a social transgression, paired $t(175) = 3.76, p < .001$. Finally, we considered the blame subscale as a possible alternate explanation for observed age differences in reactions to interpersonal tensions. Younger and older participants did not differ in their attributions of blame of their social partners, but participants of all ages attributed greater blame to a younger social partner than an older social partner (paired $t(175) = 4.91, p < .001$). We controlled for these relationship variables in analyses (e.g., contact, years known the social partner, type of relationship coded as 1 = family and 0 = non-family, quality of relationship, how upset about the situation, and blame of social partner) when estimating models for reactions to social transgressions.

The models also included individual level variables pertaining to the participant. Participant level control variables included: participant age, participant gender, their own future time perspective, emotional expressivity. We also examined individuals' stereotypes of aging.

Preliminary analyses allowed us to exclude the following variables from the models. We examined possible order effects for answering questions about the younger or older social partner first on the dependent variables. Paired t-tests were not significant and therefore, we did not control for order effects in the analyses. We asked participants to rate the typicality of the situation where they imagined their social partner had offended them. T-tests comparing ratings of typicality by age group of participant and with the older and the younger social partner were not significant; therefore we did not consider typicality of situation further.

Finally, to test the third hypothesis regarding future time perspective of relationship in mediation models, we used a standard three step procedure with multilevel models including the variables already described (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). The first step involves showing an association between the independent variable (social partner's age) and the outcome (reactions to transgressions, expression of positive regard). The second step involves establishing an association between the independent variable (social partner's age) and the potential mediating variable (FTPR). The final step involves showing that when both the mediator (FTPR) and the independent variable (social partner age) are entered in the equation together as predictors of the outcomes (reactions to transgressions and positive behaviors), the association of the independent variable (social partner age) and the

dependent variable is diminished (partial mediation) or rendered not significantly different from zero (complete mediation).

Prior to estimating the mediation models, however, we established whether the manipulation condition (where participants imagined that the social partner was relocating) resulted in foreshortened time perspective in the relationship. The means and standard deviations for future time remaining with the social partners were as follows: (a) No manipulation with younger partner $M = 5.12$, $SE = .14$, (b) Manipulation with younger partner $M = 4.47$, $SE = .14$, (c) No manipulation with older partner $M = 4.02$, $SE = .14$, (d) Manipulation with older partner $M = 2.82$, $SE = .14$. A repeated measures analysis of variance examined ratings of future time perspective of the relationship (FTPR) across the manipulation and non-manipulation conditions. The overall analysis was significant, $F(1,172) = 47.99$, $p < .001$, $MSE = 1.72$, $\eta^2 = .29$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD test indicated that participants in the manipulation condition rated future time with both younger and older social partners as more limited compared to participants in the non-manipulation group. Because the manipulation successfully varied time perspective for both younger and older social partners, we were able to examine the effects of both social partner age and FTPR in the analyses.

Results

Differences in Treatment of Social Partners of Different Ages

Our first hypothesis was that participants would seek to minimize tensions with older adults by reporting more avoidant behaviors and fewer confrontational behaviors with older social partners than younger social partners; we predicted no differences in engagement to solve the problem. Results of models testing this hypothesis are presented in Table 2. As expected, participants indicated they would be more avoidant and would be less confrontational with older social partners. Surprisingly, there was also a significant age of social partner effect on engagement behaviors. Participants were less likely to endorse engagement behaviors for older social partners than for younger social partners.

Hypothesis 2 pertained to expression of positive regard; we expected participants to treat older social partners with greater affection, more personal respect, and to be more likely to send them sentimental birthday cards. We also examined the likelihood of sending humorous cards to assure that the sentimental nature of the cards and not cards per se, accounted for findings.

Table 3 contains findings regarding positive treatment of social partners. Contrary to expectations, age of social partner was not significantly associated with displays of affection or personal respect. Participant age was significant for personal respect, however; older participants reported they would engage in personal respect behaviors regardless of social partner age.

Age of social partner was significant only in the model for sending sentimental cards. Participants were more likely to endorse sending sentimental cards to older social partners than to younger social partners. Participant age was also significant in these equations, with older participants more likely to report that they would send sentimental cards, regardless of the age of the social partner. In a model not presented in the table, we also found a significant effect of age of social partner on sending humorous cards. In this case, however, participants were more likely to endorse sending humorous cards to younger social partners, $B = -.35$, $SE_B = .87$. Age of participant was not significant in the model examining sending humorous cards. Thus, the effect of social partner age was on the type of card, not on sending a birthday card per se.

Future Time Perspective and Age Differences in Behaviors

Then, we examined whether future time perspective of relationship (FTPR) partially mediated differences in positive treatment of social partners of different ages. We first considered behavioral reactions to interpersonal transgressions. We presented the first step for mediation in table 2, with age of social partner significantly associated with all three subscales for behavioral reactions. The second step involved establishing an association between future time perspective of relationship and age of social partner; the model is not shown here, but this association was significant, $B = -1.38$, $SE_B = .15$. Finally, the models also controlled for possible alternate explanations for age differences by examining participants' stereotypes and whether participants blame the social partner for their poor behavior.

The mediation models for reactions to interpersonal transgressions are presented in Table 4. As can be seen, the models revealed significant partial mediation of future time perspective of relationship on all three behavior subscales for interpersonal transgression in the expected pattern. Future time perspective of relationship was negatively associated with use of avoidant behaviors; participants were more likely to use avoidant behaviors when they viewed the future of the relationship as foreshortened. They were more likely to report use of confrontational and engagement behaviors when they viewed time in the relationship as open. In all three models, the parameter estimate for age of social partner was lower in the models including future time perspective of relationship than in the initial models presented in Table 2. We also conducted a Sobel test to determine the significance of the mediating variable (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004; Sobel, 1982). The Sobel test statistic was 2.56 ($p < .05$) for avoidant, -2.26 ($p < .05$) for confrontational behaviors, and -2.26 ($p < .05$) for constructive engagement. Note as well that models controlled for individual future time perspective, so the effect of time perspective of relationship was above and beyond the individual's view of his or her own future.

With regard to control variables, as can be seen, blaming the social partner also was a significant predictor of all three behavioral reactions to interpersonal transgressions. Stereotypes of aging and how upset participants would be about the situation were not associated with the reported behaviors.

Findings regarding expression of positive regard- display of affection, personal respect, and sending sentimental cards- did not meet criteria for test of mediation. Social partner's age was not associated with displays of affection or personal respect and these variables were not considered further. There was a significant association between sentimental cards and social partner's age (step 1) and between future time perspective of relationship and social partner's age (step 2), but there was not a significant association for future time perspective of relationship in models predicting sending sentimental cards. We do not present this model here.

Discussion

The Social Input Model suggests that people treat older and younger adults differently during social interactions. According to this model, people seek to maximize positive emotional experiences with older social partners. Thus, they are more likely to avoid arguments and confrontation with older adults and to treat them with greater affection. Findings from the current study are consistent with this view, but primarily with regard to reactions to interpersonal stresses rather than expression of greater affection. Participants indicated that they would be less confrontational with older social partners who committed social transgressions than they would be with younger social partners who committed the same transgression. Furthermore, the time perspective of the relationship partially explained these age differences; participants used more avoidant and less confrontational behaviors in reaction to interpersonal tensions when they viewed time remaining in the relationship as limited. By

contrast, as we will discuss, display of positive regard seemed to reflect age of the participant more than age of social partner.

Treatment of Older and Younger Social Partners

Findings in this study provide insights into what is known about relationships in late life. In general, older adults classify fewer relationships as solely problematic or even as mixed (combining feelings of closeness and annoyance), and instead consider most of their relationships solely positive in nature (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). Social partners may contribute to these positive views of relationships. Both younger and older participants reported that they would avoid discussing a social problem with their older social partner, but would confront their younger social partner.

We do not mean to imply that older adults are passive recipients of social input or that avoidant behaviors are inherently beneficial to relationships. Avoidant behaviors may evoke negative consequences if people continue to harbor bad feelings that are never expressed. Nonetheless, by avoiding conflicts, social partners circumvent problems with older adults and the altercation does not escalate at that time. And, from the perspective of the older adult, the interaction was less negative. Although older adults may remain sensitive to problems in their relationships, they may receive less negative feedback even when they commit social transgressions.

These findings also are important in light of recent evidence that some older adults are prone to commit social faux pas when they experience declines in executive functioning and loss of social control (von Hippel, 2007). Thus, mean age differences in positive relationship qualities may partially reflect the fact that people may not confront older social partners even when they make such gaffs. Indeed, our findings also suggested that people are less likely to blame older adults and are consistent with Erber's findings that people attribute older adults' poor behaviors to cognitive declines and unavoidable age deficits (Erber, Szuchman, & Prager, 2004).

Surprisingly, people did not report more positive treatment towards older adults as assessed by ratings of displays of affection and respect towards their social partner. In retrospect, the lack of age difference in display of positive regard is consistent with prior research on emotion. Negative experiences tend to have a more potent effect on well-being than positive experiences (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), and age differences for negative emotional experiences with social partners are more pronounced than age differences in positive emotional experiences (Charles & Piazza, 2007). Thus, social partners may be more concerned with minimizing negative experiences for older adults than enhancing their positive experiences.

Likewise, the lack of significant differences in expression of affection and personal respect for older and younger social partners may reflect methodological issues. Participants reported their general behaviors for expressing affection and personal respect, but indicated their reactions to a specific negative transgression. Notably, the one situation where we observed partner age effects for positive regard (i.e., birthday cards), we provided participants with a specific situation. Therefore, in a specific context for affection (e.g., when they say, "Goodbye"), participants might distinguish display of fondness for younger and older social partners.

We also note that the places where we did observe age differences in expression of positive regard reflect cultural standards and norms more than age-associated changes in behaviors. As mentioned, participants did report that they were more likely to send sentimental cards to older adults, whereas they were more likely to send humorous cards to younger participants. Perhaps cultural influences have shaped the types of positive emotions expressed in our closest relationships, with humor more commonly expressed with younger adults and sentimentality more often expressed with older adults. Further, age of *participant* was associated with both

sending sentimental cards and reporting personal respect behaviors. In comparison to younger participants, older participants were more likely to endorse these behaviors, regardless of the social partner's age. Prior cohorts may have been raised to place higher priority on honoring commitments with social partners than were younger cohorts. Thus, we suspect these participant age effects may reflect cultural norms they also may have espoused when they were younger.

Future Time Perspective and Factors Accounting for Differences in Treatment of Social Partners

We also considered possible explanations for why people treat older and younger social partners differently. Findings from this study provide an innovative extension of socioemotional selectivity theory by considering future time perspective of the relationship. People simultaneously hold different time perspectives, for themselves as well as for their relationships with others. Individual time perspective has been linked to motivations and behaviors (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999). Current findings suggest that individuals may view each social relationship with a unique time perspective that influences their social motivation and behaviors in that relationship. In this study, participants appeared to espouse "carpe diem" when time with a social partner was foreclosed, attempting to avoid problems in the limited time remaining, even if their own time perspective was expansive.

Yet, like most human behaviors, reactions to interpersonal tensions seem to be multidetermined. Variability in behaviors did not *solely* reflect time remaining with each partner. Participant's ratings of how much they hold the social partner responsible for poor behavior also were associated with their reactions to social transgressions and were unrelated to the future time perspective of the relationship. Rather, beliefs about blame or changeability of the other party may reflect time passed. An individual might avoid conflicts with Uncle Charlie because he has behaved that way for 50 years, and you cannot blame him for his behavior.

General stereotypes of the elderly were not associated with reported behaviors towards close older social partners in the current study. This finding is not surprising in light of recent research suggesting stereotypes are situation specific and not global belief systems (Smith & Semin, 2007). As such, people may hold opinions and behaviors for older adults in general, but may treat their close social partners in a different way.

Limitations and Future Research

This study introduces many questions for future research. First, the current study asked only about non-romantic partners. The findings may generalize to marriage; studies of marital couples also have documented age differences in use of avoidant behaviors and confrontational behaviors in discussions of conflict consistent with the present study (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Nonetheless, by precluding romantic ties, the study may have failed to capture married individuals' closest social ties. Moreover, future studies should ask about less close social partners to determine whether behavior towards the full array of older and younger social partners varies or whether preferential treatment is limited to close older social partners.

The limited sample precludes generalizability of the findings. The sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of race, education, cultural background, and particularly in terms of excellent health. Although this sample allowed for comparisons of different aged participants' views of social partners, it is not clear whether these findings represent the general population of younger and older adults in the U.S. Ethnic groups that espouse greater respect and value for the elderly might show even more preferential treatment towards older social partners. A parallel pattern may be true regarding preferential treatment of older adults who are in poor

health. Studies that include oldest old adults (i.e., adults over age 85; Birditt & Fingerman, 2005) reveal age differences in social behaviors that are more pronounced than those observed in this study. Thus, social partners may show even greater favoritism towards older adults who are frail or in poor health.

Further, the study was cross-sectional in design, and findings might be constrained to current cohorts of older adults. Previously, we noted that social partners' behaviors may be reciprocal; social partners may treat older adults kindly when they commit transgressions because the older adults themselves tend to be nonconfrontational. Yet, older adults in the current generation were raised to be less confrontational than younger cohorts and these patterns could change in future cohorts of older adults.

Finally, we note limitations in the use of a hypothetical interpersonal conflict. Participants deemed these situations to be somewhat less typical of their older social partners than of their younger social partners; this difference may partially account for age differences in reported behaviors. Nonetheless, a few observational studies have documented that individuals seek to avoid discussing problems with close older social partners (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Fingerman, 2001; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003; Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999), supporting findings from the current self-reports using hypothetical situations.

We also note the limitations of examining mean differences in behaviors. Not all older adults behave with avoidance in situations involving interpersonal tensions, and not all social partners respond kindly to their elderly social partners. Further, some individuals experience generally high quality relationships in young adulthood, and it would be difficult to detect positive changes as they grow old as a result. Future studies might consider individual variables associated with reactions to interpersonal problems. For example, personality traits such as neuroticism have been linked to different patterns of negative emotion in late life (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). Likewise, personality may play a role in whether social partner's treatment affects the older adult's perception of the relationship.

In sum, social partners may attempt to minimize older adults' exposure to interpersonal tensions. Thus, social input may partially account for older adults' reports of fewer interpersonal problems in late life. In addition, this deferential treatment is partially explained by people's sense that time in the relationship is growing shorter. When individuals are concerned that each encounter with a social partner could be the last one, they are on their best behavior, even when the social partner commits a social transgression. Older adults may report that they have better relationships than younger adults do because they select optimal relationships, regulate emotions within those relationships, have older social partners, and are treated well, thus maximizing beneficial features of their ties.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Manipulations of Time Remaining with Social Partners

For the younger adult, the interviewer read the following:

Here's the situation. Imagine that (Name of young adult)_____has joined a special branch of the Peace Corps that emphasizes cultural experiences. The program is an immersion program to foster understanding of the culture and its people. In a few weeks, he/she will be leaving for a remote rural village in a developing country. He/she will have no visits or phone calls with friends or family for the 3 years of the program. He/she won't be able to be in touch with you for the foreseeable future.

Keep this situation in mind for the rest of the questions.

For the older adult, the interviewer read the following:

Here's the situation. Imagine that (Name of older adult)_____plans to move to a retirement community in Hawaii in 3 weeks. He/she will not be able to travel to visit you, will have little access to a computer and the time change will make it difficult for him/her to call you. Thus, you will have little contact with this older person once he/she moves to the retirement community in three weeks.

Keep this situation in mind for the rest of the questions.

Table 1
 Characteristics of Different Aged Social Partners by Participants' Age

Characteristics of Social Partners	Younger Participants (<i>n</i> = 87)		Older Participants (<i>n</i> = 89)	
	Younger Social Partner	Older Social Partner	Younger Social Partner	Older Social Partner
Age	25.74 (3.88)	74.43 (8.18)	28.12 (6.50)	72.82 (6.60)
Proportion female	0.54	0.66	0.57	0.55
Frequency of contact ^a	4.63 (1.15)	3.12 (1.28)	3.60 (1.19)	3.81 (1.24)
Years known partner	12.24 (8.58)	22.25 (7.48)	23.13 (10.29)	41.70 (21.55)
Proportion of partners who are family members ^b	0.28	0.86	0.78	0.34
Positive quality ^c	8.26 (1.39)	7.74 (1.68)	7.64 (1.91)	8.30 (1.14)
Negative quality ^c	3.91 (2.02)	2.67 (1.49)	2.89 (1.97)	2.72 (1.79)
How upset about the situation ^d	3.00 (1.02)	2.84 (1.06)	2.97 (1.02)	2.56 (0.97)
Blame the partner ^e	3.04 (0.86)	2.64 (0.89)	2.88 (0.97)	2.53 (0.90)

^aFrequency of contact rated from 1 (*less often than every few months*) to 6 (*everyday*).

^bProportion of partners family related coded 1 = *family*, 0 = *friend*.

^cAverage of two items rated 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*as much as possible*)

^dRated 1 (*not at all upset*) to 5 (*very upset*)

^eAverage of 2 items rated as 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Table 2
Multilevel Models Predicting Responses to Interpersonal Transgressions from Social Partner's Age

Predictors	Avoidant		Confrontational		Engagement	
	B	SE _B	B	SE _B	B	SE _B
Intercept						
Age of Target	4.35 ***	0.56	0.48	0.52	1.19 *	0.52
	0.35 ***	0.08	-0.45 ***	0.08	-0.32 ***	0.08
<u>Relationship Controls</u>						
Frequency of Contact	-0.10 **	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.03
Years known	-0.00	0.00	0.01 **	0.00	0.00	0.00
Family member	0.17	0.09	-0.37 ***	0.08	-0.13	0.08
Positive Quality	-0.11 ***	0.03	0.07 *	0.02	0.13 ***	0.02
Negative Quality	-0.00	0.02	0.10 ***	0.02	-0.01	0.02
How upset about the situation	-0.02	0.05	0.08	0.05	-0.05	0.05
Blame the partner	-0.14 *	0.06	0.22 ***	0.05	0.19 **	0.05
<u>Participant Controls</u>						
Age of Participant	-0.25	0.13	-0.04	0.12	0.24	0.12
Gender	0.26 *	0.10	-0.20 *	0.10	-0.04	0.10
Individual Future Time	-0.07	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.09	0.05
Emotional Expressivity	-0.16 *	0.06	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.05
Warmth Stereotype	0.03	0.07	-0.11	0.07	-0.02	0.07
Competence Stereotype	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.07	-0.06	0.07

Note. Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Multilevel Models Predicting Positive Behaviors from Social Partner's Age

Predictor	Display Affection		Personal Respect		Sentimental Cards	
	B	SE _B	B	SE _B	B	SE _B
Intercept						
Age of Target	0.64	0.47	2.34 ***	0.32	0.42	0.82
	-0.11	0.08	0.00	0.05	0.48 ***	0.13
<u>Relationship Controls</u>						
Frequency of Contact	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.02	-0.07	0.05
Years known	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
Family member	0.48 ***	0.08	0.20 ***	0.05	0.64 ***	0.13
Positive Quality	0.30 ***	0.03	0.16 ***	0.02	0.12 *	0.04
Negative Quality	-0.01	0.02	-0.05 **	0.01	-0.05	0.03
<u>Participant Controls</u>						
Age of Participant	0.13	0.12	0.26 **	0.08	0.75 ***	0.21
Gender	0.41 ***	0.09	0.25 ***	0.06	0.73 ***	0.15
Individual Future Time	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.08
Emotional Expressivity	0.07	0.05	-0.01	0.03	0.13	0.09
Warmth Stereotype	0.03	0.06	0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.11
Competence Stereotype	-0.00	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.11

Note. Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Mediation Models Predicting Responses to Interpersonal Transgressions from Social Partner's Age and Future Time Perspective of Relationship

Predictors	Avoidant		Confrontational		Engagement	
	B	SE _B	B	SE _B	B	SE _B
Intercept	4.37 ***	0.56	0.46	0.52	1.16 *	0.51
Age of Target	0.25 *	0.09	-0.35 ***	0.09	-0.23 *	0.09
Future Time of Relationship	-0.08 *	0.03	0.07 *	0.03	0.07 *	0.03
<u>Relationship Controls</u>						
Frequency of Contact	-0.09 *	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.03
Years known	-0.00	0.00	0.01 **	0.00	0.00	0.00
Family member	0.14	0.09	-0.34 ***	0.08	-0.10	0.08
Positive Quality	-0.10 **	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.12 ***	0.03
Negative Quality	-0.00	0.02	0.10 ***	0.02	-0.01	0.02
How upset about the situation	-0.03	0.05	0.09	0.05	-0.04	0.05
Blame the partner	-0.13 *	0.06	0.22 ***	0.05	0.18 **	0.05
<u>Participant Controls</u>						
Age of Participant	-0.23	0.13	-0.06	0.12	0.22	0.12
Gender	0.27 *	0.10	-0.21 *	0.10	-0.05	0.09
Individual Future Time	-0.04	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.05
Emotional Expressivity	-0.16 *	0.06	0.08	0.05	0.09	0.05
Warmth Stereotype	0.04	0.07	-0.11	0.07	-0.02	0.07
Competence Stereotype	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.07	-0.06	0.07

Note. Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.