Perceptions of Social Transgressions in Adulthood

Laura M. Miller, Susan T. Charles, and Karen L. Fingerman

People may react differently when individuals of different ages commit a social faux pas. Younger (22 to 35 years old) and older (65 to 77 years old) participants read vignettes where age of characters committing social transgressions varied (young vs. old). Participants rated whether the offended person would respond with engagement, confrontational, and avoidant behaviors and how much people would blame or forgive the transgressor. Multilevel models revealed endorsement of avoidant behaviors with older transgressors, confrontational behaviors with younger transgressors, and engagement behaviors with both. Levels of blame and forgiveness mediated this association, with less blame and greater forgiveness of older adults. Discussion focuses on the social input model and why adults may regulate reactions to interpersonal problems with older adults.

Key Words: Adult development—Social network—Communication—Vignettes—Conflict—Transgression—Forgiveness.

Older adults report fewer interpersonal tensions than younger adults (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005). Researchers have described proactive strategies on the part of older adults that minimize relationship tensions and circumvent escalation of problems (Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Charles & Carstensen, 2007). When tensions arise, older adults attempt to avoid confrontations (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004). Although these strategies certainly contribute to fewer social problems with age, how older adults are treated by others also may contribute to decreases in conflicts. If people respond to older adults with less confrontation, these actions may further explain why older adults report fewer problems in their social networks.

Age differences in the treatment of social partners may be particularly salient when a social transgression occurs. In response to social transgressions, research suggests that people are less likely to blame older adults and more likely to forgive them (Allemand, 2008). People also ascribe more benign intentions to older adults when a problem occurs in work or market settings (Erber & Long, 2006; Erber, Szuchman, & Prager, 2001). People may hold different views of social transgressors based on the transgressor’s age, and they may react to social transgressors differently as a result. The current study examined perceived differences in adults’ reactions to younger and older adults who commit social transgressions and the extent to which these reactions are mediated by beliefs about blame and forgiveness.

Behavioral reactions to interpersonal problems

Researchers have identified three predominant categories of social behaviors in response to interpersonal problems: (a) avoidant, (b) confrontational, and (c) engagement behaviors (e.g., Birditt et al., 2005; Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004).

Although different scholars apply different labels to these categories, in general, avoidant behaviors include behaviors that diffuse tension and prevent escalation of the problem, such as accepting what the other person has done. Confrontational behaviors involve active strategies that may harm the relationship, such as yelling. Engagement behaviors are active approaches to solving the problem and include seeking to understand the other party’s views. Studies comparing older and younger adults have established that older adults are more likely to use avoidant behaviors in reaction to social problems, whereas younger adults are more likely to confront a person. Both older and younger adults report similar levels of engagement behaviors (Blanchard-Fields & Beatty, 2005; Blanchard-Fields et al.).

Yet, disagreements do not occur in a vacuum; older adults’ behaviors may reflect both their own preferred behavior as well as that of their social partners. Social partners may react in ways to minimize tension (e.g., avoidance) when they are annoyed with older adults. We draw on the social input model of socioemotional aging, which predicts that older and younger adults evoke different behaviors from social partners (Fingerman & Pitzer, 2007). According to this model, people are more likely to react with kindness and minimize tensions when the person who commits a social transgression is an older adult. Thus, the age of the person transgressing may contribute to observed age differences in avoidant or confrontational behaviors.

Elsewhere, we examined this model by considering adults’ reactions to their closest older and younger social partners. As predicted, adults reported more avoidant and fewer confrontational behaviors with their closest older social partner than their closest younger social partner (Fingerman, Miller, & Charles, 2008). That study, however, was limited to close social partners where the type of relationship was often specific to age group (e.g., a daughter is always younger, mother is always older). Thus, we could not discern whether younger
and older adults react differently to younger and older transgressors generally, or whether differential behaviors reflect specific factors in the relationship. Here, we examined a wide range of relationships.

**Mechanisms explaining why people might treat older and younger adults differently**

Researchers have suggested possible mechanisms to explain less confrontational treatment of older adults. For example, studies find that people use age of the person who commits a bad deed as a factor in determining forgiveness or blame. In one study, people attributed more responsibility and blame toward younger adults than older adults when they committed transgressions at work or in the family (Blanchard-Fields, Baldi, & Stein, 1999). In another study, adults attributed poor behavior at work to different causes for younger and older adults (Erber & Long, 2006). They felt the older adults were simply forgetful or unable to work effectively when they performed poorly, but that the younger adults were not trying. As a result, participants felt less anger and greater sympathy for older adults than for younger adults in this situation (Erber & Long). Similarly, participants in another study thought a store manager should have more sympathy, less anger, and recommend less punishment when the person leaving a store without paying for a hat was an older adult than when that person was a younger adult because they believed the older adult had simply forgotten to pay (Erber et al., 2001). In sum, a small literature suggests that individuals blame younger adults and forgive older adults when they commit a similar transgression. Beliefs about blame and forgiveness may be associated with different behavioral reactions. People may be more likely to confront an individual whom they blame for a social transgression and to avoid confrontation when they have forgiven the other party.

**The current study**

The current study examined reactions to interpersonal problems with social partners of different ages. We included a wide array of social partners and social problems, altering the age of a character committing a social transgression in vignettes. We hypothesized that age of transgressor would play a key role in behaviors individuals endorsed. We predicted that participants would report that characters would react with less confrontation and greater avoidance when an older adult committed an interpersonal transgression than when a younger adult committed the same transgression. We predicted that participants would report that both older and younger characters would react with similar levels of engagement behaviors.

In addition, we hypothesized that perceptions about whether the social partner would forgive or blame the transgressor would mediate associations between age of the transgressor and perceptions of partner’s behavioral reactions (i.e., avoidant or confrontational behaviors). Specifically, participants would infer that social partners would blame older adults less and forgive them more than younger adults for their transgressions, and that this would lead to more avoidance and less confrontation.

We also controlled for potentially confounding factors that may contribute to perceptions and behaviors. Age differences are present in reactions to interpersonal tensions in close relationships (Fingerman et al., 2008), but we wanted to examine whether these differences extended to more peripheral social ties. Therefore, we included close and peripheral relationships in different vignettes. We also controlled for participant’s own age and gender. Prior findings suggest that women are more upset about problems with social partners than men (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003) and these feelings may affect how people respond to situations. Studies have also found age differences in responses, as reviewed earlier. Finally, we considered general age stereotypes. The literature examining aging stereotypes shows that people commonly view older adults as both high in warmth and low in competence (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). Adults’ general beliefs about aging may contribute to their perceptions of how people react to interpersonal problems (Erber et al., 2001).

**Methods**

**Sample**

The sample included 181 participants: young adults aged 22–35 years (n = 89, M = 25.80 years, 52% female) and older adults aged 65–77 years (n = 92, M = 70.35 years, 54% female). We used convenience sampling through word of mouth, community organizations, and fliers on college campuses and in churches and synagogues. Participants were primarily Caucasian (94%). This study was part of a larger study of adults’ reactions to interpersonal problems. Participants completed 1-hour face-to-face interviews in their home or at the research laboratory and received $10 for their time.

All participants resided in the community. The sample was highly educated (66% of young adults and 77% of older adults were college educated). Participants rated their health on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent; Idler & Kasl, 1991). On average, participants rated their health as very good (M = 3.75, SD = 0.90 for young adults; M = 4.05, SD = 0.80 for older adults).

**Procedure**

After providing demographic information, participants read four vignettes describing one person (transgressor) committing a social faux pas toward another person (reactor). Following each vignette, participants indicated the types of behaviors the reactor would likely engage in and rated the degree of blame and forgiveness the reactor would
feel for the transgressor. In assigning vignette conditions, we insured vignettes were equally distributed across participants who varied in age and gender. At least 10 participants in each age by gender group (younger women, younger men, older women, older men) read and responded to four vignettes. After completing the vignettes and answering questions for each one, participants completed the assessment of stereotypes about aging.

**Measures**

**Vignettes of interpersonal transgressions.**—Eight vignettes were used in this study. Each vignette depicted two people involved in an interpersonal conflict: one person clearly committed an action (the transgressor) that upset his or her social partner (the reactor). To limit the interview to 1 hour, each participant read four vignettes (two involving intimate social partners and two between acquaintances). Prior studies with vignettes of comparable length have relied on as few as one vignette (e.g., Chasteen, 2000; Winkeler, Filipp, & Boll, 2000).

Each of the vignettes had two versions, varying only in the characters’ ages. We randomly assigned each participant to one of four conditions. Each condition included four vignettes, one vignette from each of the following transgressor–reactor age combinations: (a) young transgressor–young reactor, (b) young transgressor–older reactor, (c) older transgressor–young reactor, and (d) older transgressor–older reactor. (Due to age constraints in the parent–child relationship, however, some participants did not receive a vignette that portrayed the older reactor, young adult transgressor condition. To retain the parent–child relationship between the characters and the parent as the transgressing character, the vignette portraying the parent–child relationship included middle-aged characters. Participants received a vignette with either a young adult child reacting to a middle-aged parent or a middle-aged child reacting to an older adult parent.) Within each condition, two vignettes portrayed intimate relationships and two vignettes portrayed acquaintance relationships. See Table 1 for an outline of the study design and Appendix A for an example of one vignette permutation.

We developed and validated the vignettes in two pilot studies. We developed 40 vignettes based on reported tensions from a national study of daily stressors and an in-depth study examining tensions with salient network members (Almeida, 2005; Cichy, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2007). In the first pilot study, participants (N = 55 men and women aged 21–89 years) reported whether events in the vignettes applied to different age groups and how upsetting were the situations in each vignette. Prior studies found age differences in behavioral reactions to moderately upsetting events (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005). Based on these pilot data, we selected 8 of 40 vignettes that pilot participants indicated
Dependent variables

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<th>Young Transgressor (M, SD)</th>
<th>Old Transgressor (M, SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant behaviors^a</td>
<td>2.68 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.14 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontational behaviors^b</td>
<td>2.45 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.29 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement behaviors^c</td>
<td>2.94 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.91 (0.71)</td>
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Mediating variables

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Old Transgressor (M, SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Blame transgressor^d</td>
<td>2.85 (0.73)</td>
<td>2.66 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgive transgressor^e</td>
<td>3.20 (0.80)</td>
<td>3.34 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ^a Average of four items rated 1 (very unlikely) to 4 (very likely).

^b Average of two items rated 1 (very unlikely) to 4 (very likely).

^c Average of three items rated 1 (very unlikely) to 4 (very likely).

^d Average of three items rated 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

^e Average of four items rated 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

Beliefs about the conflict situation.—Seven items assessed beliefs about the transgression. Participants rated each item from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). These items generated two subscales (r = −.44). The 3-item subscale assessing blame included the extent to which the reacting character would blame the transgressor for his or her behavior, feel anger toward the transgressor, and wish to change the transgressor’s behavior (α = .61). The 4-item subscale assessing forgiveness included the extent to which the reacting character would forgive the transgressor, feel empathy for the transgressor, feel obligated to treat the transgressor with respect, and seek to protect the transgressor’s feelings (α = .83).

Aging stereotypes.—Participants completed Packer and Chasteen’s (2006) 20-item measure assessing stereotypes of older adults. Participants rated the extent to which 10 traits assessing competence (e.g., competent, skillful; α = .68) and 10 traits assessing warmth (e.g., friendly, warm; α = .72) were descriptive of adults aged 60 years or older on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (highly).

Manipulation Check

Participants also rated how familiar they were with each situation from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Independent t tests revealed no participant age differences in familiarity with the situations. Younger and older participants reported they were a little to somewhat familiar with each situation in their own lives (M = 2.43, SD = 1.21 for young adults; M = 2.66, SD = 1.17 for older adults). We also estimated independent t tests for differences in familiarity with the situation based on transgressor age for each vignette. Of the eight vignettes, participants rated one vignette more familiar if the transgressor was portrayed as a younger adult than when the transgressor was portrayed as an older adult (t(80) = 3.06, p < .01). That vignette involved two acquaintances attending a cocktail party where one insulted the other’s ethnic group. Thus, we controlled for familiarity with the situation in the analyses.

Results

Perceived Reactions to Younger and Older Transgressors

We used multilevel models to test the hypothesis that participants would view social partners as acting to diffuse tension toward older adult transgressors compared to younger adult transgressors. Multilevel models take into account the fact that participants’ responses were not independent across the four scenarios. We estimated multilevel models using SAS PROC Mixed (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998) with lower level units (aspects that vary by vignette) nested within upper level units (participant variables).
Table 3. Mixed Models Predicting Behavioral Strategies from Transgressor Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Confrontational</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE$_B$</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.97***</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>2.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgressor age</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactor age</td>
<td>-0.29***</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness of relationship</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with situation</td>
<td>-0.10***</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant age</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant sex</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyping elderly as warm</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyping elderly as competent</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 log likelihood</td>
<td>1586.30</td>
<td>1679.20</td>
<td>1462.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>42.40***</td>
<td>7.30</td>
<td>17.60*</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>1590.30</td>
<td>1683.20</td>
<td>1484.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

AIC = Akaike Information Criterion.

*The chi-square test is examining model fit between this model (with the addition of 8 parameters, 1 independent variable and 7 control variables) and the unconditional model where the -2 log likelihood values were 1628.70 for avoidant, 1686.50 for confrontational, and 1480.30 for engagement behaviors.

AICs for the unconditional models were 1632.70 for avoidant, 1690.50 for confrontational, and 1484.30 for engagement behaviors.

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

Three models examined the extent to which older and younger adults were treated differently after a transgression. The dependent variables for each of these models were the extent to which people endorsed using behavioral strategies: avoidance (Model 1), confrontation (Model 2), or engagement (Model 3). Transgressor age was the independent variable (0 for young adults and 1 for older adults). Lower level control variables pertaining to the vignettes included reactor age (0 for young adults and 1 for older adults); closeness of relationship (0 for acquaintance and 1 for intimate relationships); and participant’s rating of familiarity with the situation. Upper level control variables varying by participant were participant age (0 for young adults and 1 for older adults), sex (0 for males and 1 for females), and the two subscales for stereotypes of aging.

Results confirmed our hypotheses (see Table 3). The first model indicated that participants endorsed using avoidant behaviors more with older transgressors than with younger transgressors. As shown in the second model, they endorsed using confrontational behaviors less with older transgressors than with younger transgressors. The third model revealed that the transgressor’s age was not significant when predicting engagement behaviors. Furthermore, 8% of the within-person variation in avoidant, 4% in confrontational, and 4% in engagement behaviors was explained by the addition of transgressor age and control variables (for indicators of model fit, see Table 3; Singer & Willet, 2003).

The multilevel models revealed associations between control variables and behavioral strategies. Participants were less likely to endorse avoidant strategies but more likely to endorse confrontational and engagement strategies when the reactor was older and when the participant was more familiar with the situation. Participants were more likely to endorse avoidant strategies when the relationship between the reactor and transgressor was intimate. In addition, participants were more likely to endorse engagement strategies when the participant held stereotypes of elderly people as high in warmth.

We conducted post hoc tests to examine whether particular age combinations drove the overall age differences in the observed findings. We reestimated the multilevel models examining age combinations of characters as a categorical variable: (a) young reactor–young transgressor, (b) older reactor–older transgressor, (c) older reactor–young transgressor, and (d) young reactor–older transgressor (as comparison category). In models not shown here, we found participants’ ratings of behavioral reactions for the young reactor–old transgressor combination differed significantly from ratings of behaviors for the other age combinations. Participants rated reactors as more avoidant (young reactor–young transgressor $B = -0.24$, $SE_B = 0.07$, $p < .001$; old reactor–young transgressor $B = -0.32$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $p < .01$; old reactor–old transgressor $B = -0.42$, $SE_B = 0.07$, $p < .001$) and less confrontational (young reactor–young transgressor $B = 0.35$, $SE_B = 0.07$, $p < .001$; old reactor–young transgressor $B = -0.25$, $SE_B = 0.10$, $p = .01$; old reactor–old transgressor $B = 0.34$, $SE_B = 0.08$, $p < .001$) within the younger reactor–older transgressor combination than all other age combinations. They also rated the reactor as less likely to engage than the reactors in the old reactor–young transgressor ($B = 0.21$, $SE_B = 0.08$, $p = .01$) and old reactor–old transgressor groups ($B = 0.20$, $SE_B = 0.06$, $p < .01$).

We also estimated these models treating each of the other combinations (young–young, old–old, old–young) as the “comparison category.” No other age combination showed a systematic pattern of differences from other age combinations. We then examined interactions among participant age and transgressor and reactor ages; results were not significant.
Explanatory Mechanisms for Perceived Associations of Transgressor Age and Behaviors

To test the second hypothesis, that beliefs about blame and forgiveness would mediate the association between transgressor age and behavioral reactions, we estimated two multilevel mediational models (Kenny et al., 2004). We followed the standard 3 steps to determine mediation (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986; Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). First, the independent variable (transgressor age) and the dependent variable (behavioral strategy) must be associated. Second, the independent variable and the mediating variable (blame or forgiveness) must be associated. Finally, the independent and mediating variables are examined together as predictors of behavioral strategies. If the independent variable is not significantly different from zero in the presence of the mediating variable, complete mediation is evident. Partial mediation is evident when the association is weaker between the independent and dependent variable in the presence of the mediating variable. In addition, we conducted a Sobel test when mediation was evident to determine the significance of the mediating variable (Sobel, 1982).

We previously report the first step for the mediation models (see Table 3). Avoidant and confrontational behaviors were associated with transgressor’s age. Engagement behaviors were not associated with transgressor’s age. We did not explore engagement behaviors further.

### Blame

In step two of the mediation model, we estimated multilevel models with blame as the outcome, examining transgressor age and keeping all control variables. There was a significant effect for transgressor’s age on ratings of blame, \( B = -0.21, SE_B = 0.05, p < .001 \) (model not shown). Next, in step three of the mediation model, we found that whether participants thought social partners would blame transgressors for their wrongdoings completely mediated the association of the transgressor’s age with avoidant behavioral strategies and with confrontational strategies (see Table 4). The Sobel test statistic was 3.90 \((p < .001)\) for avoidant and \(-4.09 (p < .001)\) for confrontational behaviors. Thus, adults’ endorsements of more avoidant and less confrontational behaviors with older transgressors were mediated by their ratings that social partners would be less blaming of older adults than younger adults for poor behavior. The mediation models for blame showed improved model fit over the models presented in Table 3 (for indicators of model fit, see Table 4). The addition of blame accounted for 22% of the within-person variation in avoidant and 27% in confrontational behaviors.

### Forgiveness

In step two of the mediation model, we estimated multilevel models with forgiveness as the outcome, examining transgressor age and keeping all control variables. There was a significant effect for transgressor’s age on ratings of forgiveness, \( B = 0.15, SE_B = 0.05, p < .01 \) (model not shown). In step three of the mediation model, whether participants thought social partners would forgive transgressors for their wrongdoings completely mediated the association of the transgressor’s age with avoidant strategies and partially mediated the association of the transgressor’s age with confrontational strategies (see Table 5). The Sobel test statistic was 2.60 \((p < .025)\) for avoidant and \(-2.87 (p < .01)\) for confrontational behaviors. Thus, adults’ endorsements of more avoidant and less confrontational behaviors with older transgressors were mediated by their ratings that social partners would be more forgiving of older adults than younger adults for poor behavior. The mediation models for forgiveness also showed improved model fit over the models presented in Table 3 (for indicators of model fit, see Table 5). The addition of forgiveness accounted for 8% of the within-person variation in avoidant and 15% in confrontational behaviors.

We also explored whether blame or forgiveness helps explain the post hoc findings regarding differences between the young reactor and older transgressor combination from all other age combinations for avoidant and confrontational

<table>
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Notes: Parameter estimates are fixed effects.

AIC = Akaike Information Criterion.

*Pseudo r-square values represent the proportion of within-person variance accounted for by the mediator, blame.

*The chi-square test is examining model fit between this model (with the addition of one parameter, blame) and the model presented in Table 3.

*p < .025; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
behaviors. Because the young reactor–older transgressor differed from all other age combinations with regard to these behaviors, we created a dummy variable where 1 = young reactor–older transgressor and 0 = other age group combinations. Then, we followed the steps for mediation models already described. In models not shown here, we found that whether participants thought young social partners would blame (avoidant $\chi^2(1) = 103.8$, $p < .001$; confrontational $\chi^2(1) = 205.7$, $p < .001$) or forgive (avoidant $\chi^2(1) = 16.6$, $p < .001$; confrontational $\chi^2(1) = 92.2$, $p < .001$) older transgressors for their wrongdoings partially mediated the association of the young reactor–old transgressor age combination with avoidance ($\chi^2 = 2.4$, $df = 1$, $p = .18$) and with confrontation ($\chi^2 = 11.4$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$) strategies compared to all other reactor–transgressor age combinations. Thus, adults’ endorsements of more avoidant and less confrontational behaviors within the young reactor–old transgressor age combination were mediated by their ratings that the young reactor would be less blaming and more forgiving of older transgressor’s behavior than all other age groups.

**DISCUSSION**

Researchers have sought to explain why older adults report fewer interpersonal problems than do younger adults, suggesting that older adults (a) are surrounded by fewer people who annoy them (Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahl, 2003; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003), (b) select more meaningful social partners (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), (c) minimize negative feelings (Labouvie-Vief, 2003), and (d) avoid confrontation as a means to diffuse tensions when annoyed (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Blanchard-Fields, 2007). The current study focused on yet another factor: receipt of differential treatment by others in conflict situations. Findings revealed that when an older adult as opposed to a younger adult committed a social transgression, participants indicated social partners would use more avoidance and less confrontational tactics. These findings were driven by the actions of younger adults when interacting with older adults. In addition, beliefs about forgiveness and blame mediated these effects.

In real life situations, interpersonal conflict often occurs with similar-aged social partners (e.g., spouses, siblings, friends; Birditt & Fingerman, 2005). The use of vignettes, however, lends itself to the study of mixed-age groups (e.g., young reactor–old transgressor). Post hoc analyses showed that when a young reactor interacted with an older transgressor, participants rated reactors as more avoidant and less confrontational compared to the other age combinations examined (e.g., old reactor–old transgressor). Thus, responses varied according to the combination of reactor and transgressor ages.

**Mechanisms Explaining Why People Might Treat Older and Younger Adults Differently**

Differential treatment by age may stem from a number of factors, including how people appraise the intent of people in interactions. Adults endorsed more avoidant and less confrontational behaviors with older transgressors compared to younger transgressors in part because they believed social partners would be more forgiving and less blaming of older adults’ transgressions.

Reasons for these differential attributions were not examined in the current study. Findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that adults are more forgiving of older adults’ transgressions (Eber et al., 2001) and attribute more responsibility toward younger adults’ transgressions (Blanchard-Fields et al., 1999). Blame and forgiveness were negatively correlated in this study, suggesting that they are interrelated constructs where lack of blame is associated with more forgiveness. Another possibility is that people may believe that older adults deserve respect and deference from younger adults. In addition, people believe that older adults have limited time left in their lives and are thus more forgiving of older adults (Allemand, 2008). Our prior research showed that people regulate their behaviors in conflicts with close social partners based on their perceptions of time remaining with those partners (Fingerman et al., 2008), and additional research shows that forgiveness is more common when people...
perceive others as having a more limited time perspective (Cheng & Yim, 2008). Future research should examine how these dynamics vary according to relationships among people of mixed ages.

Research has shown that Americans hold complex views of elderly people in general, with stereotypes of older adults ranging from weak and debilitated (Hummert, 1994) to warm and friendly (Cuddy et al., 2005). Findings from this study suggest that even negative perceptions of the aging population may yield benefits to older adults in interpersonal situations. Prior studies have shown that age stereotypes can evoke sympathy (e.g., Erber & Long, 2006) and understanding (e.g., believability in forgetful situations; Ryan, Beiman-Copland, Kwong See, Ellis, & Anas, 2002). Future studies should pursue these links further.

Limitations and future directions.—The study relied on vignettes to examine how individuals believed adults would react. The use of vignettes has been instrumental in understanding age differences in social processes (e.g., Blanchard-Fields & Beatty, 2005; Winkeler et al., 2000). Nonetheless, participants may not respond the same way to a hypothetical situation as they would if they were in the situation themselves. Future research should examine whether responses vary if participants rate what they would do as opposed to what someone else would do in the same situation. Furthermore, to avoid participant fatigue, we limited transgressor and reactor ages to younger and older adults. Future research should examine similar situations among middle-aged adults.

Post hoc analyses revealed participants endorsed the use of engagement behaviors more frequently than avoidant and confrontational behaviors. Adults, young and old, seem to “prefer” engagement strategies compared to the use of other problem-solving behaviors (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004). Future research should further examine differences in the frequency of behavioral reactions toward social partners in real life situations.

Due to the complexity of the task, the study included well-educated healthy adults. Other studies have used comparable samples of older adults to complete similar tasks (e.g., Erber et al., 2001). Nonetheless, we note this limitation to the generalizability of the study findings. In addition, participants represented two cohorts of adults (i.e., younger adults aged 22–35 years and older adults aged 65–77 years). Both younger and older adults reported similar patterns of findings, yet it is unclear whether future older adults will garner the same treatment as current cohorts of older adults. The current generation of older adults has been labeled the “greatest generation” (Brokaw, 1998), referring to their strong sense of morality and strengths derived from their experiences during the Great Depression and World War II. Thus, some of the preferential treatment may reflect deference to this particular cohort.

Conclusions.—Despite social losses that accompany old age, older adults report positive experiences in their lives. They report high levels of satisfaction with their social networks and report experiencing even greater levels of positive emotions with their closest social partners than do younger adults (Charles & Piazza, 2007). Almost all prior research has focused on individual characteristics of the older adults to explain these positive experiences with age. The current study, guided by the social input model, suggests another reason why older adults report high levels of social satisfaction: Older adults are treated with kindness by younger adults who forgive their faults and are less likely to confront them when they commit a transgression. These findings suggest that high levels of satisfaction older adults report may represent not only proactive strategies on their part, but the actions of their social partners as well.

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Correspondence
Address correspondence to Dr. Karen Fingerman, Department of Child Development and Family Studies, 1200 West State Street, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907. Email: karenf@purdue.edu

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PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL TRANSGRESSIONS


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APPENDIX A: FULL EXAMPLE OF ONE VIGNETTE PERMUTATION

Version 1 (see Table 1, Condition 3, Vignette 8)—Characters: Christopher 27 years old and Andrew 76 years old

Christopher is 27 years old. He lives next door to 76-year-old Andrew. Andrew is a staunch Republican. Christopher holds liberal political values. There is a grassy area between their houses. Neither knows who owns it. Andrew puts up a conservative political sign on that area. What does Christopher do?

Version 2 (see Table 1, Condition 4, Vignette 8)—Characters: Christopher 78 years old and Andrew 26 years old

Christopher is 78 years old. He lives next door to 26-year-old Andrew. Andrew is a staunch Republican. Christopher holds liberal political values. There is a grassy area between their houses. Neither knows who owns it. Andrew puts up a conservative political sign on that area. What does Christopher do?