Supportive, Aversive, Ambivalent, and Indifferent Partner Evaluations in Midlife and Young-Old Adulthood

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Age group differences in self-reported supportive, aversive, ambivalent, and indifferent partner relations were examined in a large sample of midlife (aged 40–44 at baseline, \( n = 1,719 \)) and older (aged 60–64 at baseline, \( n = 1,675 \)) married and partnered adults assessed on two occasions 4 years apart. Older adults, particularly older men, were more likely to rate their relationship as supportive and less likely to rate their relationship as aversive relative to midlife adults. Midlife adults were more likely to provide ambivalent or indifferent assessments (as opposed to supportive assessments) of their relationship relative to older adults. Results are discussed in the context of possible developmental changes in interpersonal and intimate relations occurring in middle and older adulthood.

Key Words: Ambivalence—Spousal relations—Midlife—Young-old.

CLOSE relations with a social partner can simultaneously be a source of joy and satisfaction as well as anger, frustration, and sadness (Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahal, 2003; Okun & Keith, 1998). Marriage represents a particularly important context for the study of close relations. Interdependencies between partners play a significant role in shaping individuals’ behavior and well-being (McCintock, 1983), and partnered relationships represent a central context for both positive and negative social exchanges (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). The present study aimed to contribute to knowledge about possible age-related changes in the nature of partnered relationships by examining different combinations of self-reported positive and negative relationship experience among midlife and young-old adults.

An individual’s expression of both positive and negative sentiments about the same social partner is captured by the concept of relationship “ambivalence.” Luesscher and Pillemer (1998) defined ambivalence in terms of both the social-structural conflicts and the subjective experience of individuals in terms of contradictory cognitions, emotions, and motivations. The latter definition conforms with recent social psychological approaches and is in keeping with previous studies that have examined ambivalence among married and romantic partners in relation to forgiveness of transgressions (Kachadorian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005) and relationship development (Braiker & Kelley, 1979).

In addition to ambivalence, the present study was also concerned with possible age group differences in other relationship types based on positive and negative relationship evaluations. Following the approach of Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Bloor (2004), we used a typology based on different combinations of positive and negative ratings of relationship experience to examine age group differences in supportive (high positive/low negative), aversive (high negative/low positive), ambivalent (high positive/high negative), and indifferent (low positive/low negative) partner evaluations. Indifferent relations represent an understudied element of close relationship experience and may characterize the day-to-day interactions of older adults in unsupportive long-term relationships who manage tensions by remaining affectively neutral and avoiding escalation of interpersonal conflict (Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1995).

Theoretical Background

Dynamic integration theory (DIT; Labouvie-Vief, 2003; Labouvie-Vief, Diehl, Jain, & Zhang, 2007) provides a theoretical perspective on developmental changes in emotion regulation and cognition that point toward the likelihood of age group differences in the nature of partner relationship evaluations. According to DIT, emotion-related information is processed via two modes. “Affect optimization” refers to relatively automatic regulation processes associated with maximizing positive and minimizing negative emotions. “Affect complexity” refers to effortful, elaborative processes of regulation that promote conceptual complexity and coexistence of both positive and negative emotional states. Optimal functioning involves a dynamic coordination of optimization and complexity, with the activation of each mode dependent on levels of emotional arousal (Labouvie-Vief).

Empirical research indicates that tendencies toward optimization show a linear increase with advancing age, with older adults more likely to dampen negative affect relative to younger and midlife adults. In contrast, complexity appears to peak in midlife, with midlife adults more likely to explore and amplify contradictory aspects of emotional experience relative to both younger adults and those aged around 60 years and older (Labouvie-Vief, 2003; Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002; Labouvie-Vief et al., 2007).

The age-related changes described by DIT provide a framework for considering possible age group differences in the nature of partner relationship evaluations. Specifically,
midlife could be associated with higher levels of partner relationship ambivalence resulting from the acknowledgment and exploration of coexisting positive and negative aspects of relationship experience, in keeping with heightened tendencies toward affect complexity. Alternatively, as individuals move into older adulthood, they may be more likely to dampen negative emotional reactions to relationship experience and emphasize positive exchanges in line with tendencies toward optimization. The results of studies concerned with age differences in social and marital relations are generally in keeping with this proposition, as outlined in the subsequent section.

**Empirical Evidence For Age Differences in Partner Relations**

Studies concerned with age differences in marital satisfaction and interpersonal tensions broadly support the notion that older adulthood is associated with more positive partner relations, whereas middle adulthood is characterized by relatively higher levels of relationship tension. Recent research has reported higher levels of satisfaction and more positive evaluations of partners among older relative to midlife adults (Bookwala & Jacobs, 2004; Henry, Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007; Story et al., 2007).

Several studies also indicate that older adults are less inclined to evaluate close social relations in a negative light relative to younger adults. Older adults have been found to produce less negative evaluations of their partners relative to midlife adults (Henry et al., 2007), whereas studies of interpersonal relations (not marriage specific) have shown that older adults are less likely to describe social tensions (Cichy, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2007) and are better able to regulate behavioral responses to interpersonal tensions (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005). We are aware of just one study that has examined age differences in partner relationship ambivalence. Fingerman, Hay, and Birditt (2004) reported that older adults were more likely to classify relations with their partner as intimate and less likely to classify their relationship as ambivalent relative to midlife and younger adults.

We are not aware of studies that have focused explicitly on age differences in relationship indifference; however, findings from research into long-term marriages point toward older adults being less emotionally responsive to marital conflict relative to midlife adults. Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1994) reported lower levels of physiological arousal during marital interaction among older (aged 60–70) relative to midlife (aged 40–50) long-term married couples. Older adults were also less emotionally reactive in response to discussion of marital problems than midlife couples, suggesting that older couples may manage unsatisfying long-term relationships by maintaining affectively neutral interactions and avoiding sources of potential conflict (Carstensen et al., 1995).

Recent research concerned with age differences in social interactions outside of the context of marriage also points toward a greater preference for older adults to use avoidant and passive emotion regulation strategies characterized by withdrawal in dealing with interpersonal tensions (Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008; Fingerman, Miller, & Charles, 2008). Taken together, the findings point toward a greater likelihood of older adults avoiding rather than confronting sources of interpersonal tension relative to those in midlife. Tendencies toward avoidance of conflict might in turn result in older adults being more likely (relative to midlife adults) to report indifferent as opposed to aversive relations when their partnered relationship represents a potential source of stress.

**The Present Study**

Both the developmental differences in cognition and affect outlined by DIT and empirical evidence concerned with age differences in social and partnered relations over the latter half of the life span point toward the likelihood of age group differences in the extent to which midlife and older adults report supportive, aversive, ambivalent, or indifferent partnered relationships. The present study was concerned with the examination of age group differences in partner relations using data from a large population-based sample of midlife (aged 40–44 years at baseline) and young-old (aged 60–64 years at baseline) adults, assessed at two occasions 4 years apart. Given the relatively short measurement interval and our broad focus on adult development, we were primarily concerned with examining between–age group differences (i.e., midlife vs older adults) in relationship evaluations. However, the availability of longitudinal data also enabled examination of within-person changes in relationship evaluations occurring over the study interval.

Relative to older adulthood, midlife is associated with greater tendencies toward complex evaluations of emotional experience that recognize the coexistence of positive and negative elements (Labouvie-Vief, 2003), which in the partnered relationship context could be reflected in greater tendencies toward ambivalence. Midlife adults are also more likely to assess their partnered relationship in a negative light relative to older adults (Henry et al., 2007). Consequently, we predicted that midlife adults would be more likely to report ambivalent relations relative to older adults (Hypothesis 1) and that midlife adults would be more likely to report aversive relations relative to older adults (Hypothesis 2).

The analyses considered only those individuals who had the same partner at both measurement occasions, which enabled assessment of whether any specific patterns of change in evaluations of the same long-term relationship were more likely to be observed among the midlife or older adults. A particular focus was on possible age group
differences in the movement away from aversive relationship evaluations over time. In light of research indicating that older adults are less emotionally reactive to marital problems (Carstensen et al., 1995) and more likely to use avoidant strategies in dealing with interpersonal tensions (Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008), we predicted that among those reporting an aversive relationship at baseline, older adults would be more likely to rate the same partnered relationship as indifferent and less likely to rate the relationship as aversive or ambivalent at follow-up relative to midlife adults (Hypothesis 3).

We also considered possible gender differences in partner relationship ratings. Women frequently provide more support to their partner than they receive in return (Schwarzer & Gutierrez-Dona, 2005) and as a result may be less likely to view their relationship in a positive light. Women also tend to have broader social networks outside of the family than men, whereas men are more likely to rely on their partner as a primary source of support (Gurung, Taylor, & Seeman, 2003). Men’s reliance on their partner for emotional support is likely to take on greater significance with advancing age, when networks with friends and relatives tend to become smaller (Gurung et al.). In light of these gender differences in both broader network characteristics and the benefits conferred by marriage, we predicted that women would be less likely to report supportive partner relations relative to men (Hypothesis 4). We further expected that given the likelihood of social networks becoming smaller with advancing age, men’s tendencies to report more supportive partner relations relative to women would be stronger in older adulthood than in midlife (Hypothesis 5).

Associations of age group and gender with relationship ratings were conducted after adjustment for relevant covariates. Employment status at baseline was included as a covariate, as work stress is associated with poorer marital relations (e.g., Robinson, Flowers, & Carroll, 2001), and the ages of our participants meant that a substantially greater proportion of the older age group were retired relative to the midlife participants. Education was included as a covariate due to its positive associations with affect complexity (Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002) and social network size (e.g., Ajrouch, Blandon, & Antonucci, 2005). We also controlled for self-rated physical health status due to the negative association between age and functional capacity (e.g., Anstey & Smith, 1999) and the possibility that need for care resulting from poor health can promote interpersonal conflict (Hatchett, Friend, Symister, & Wadhwa, 1997).

**Method**

**Participants**

Data are from the Personality and Total Health (PATH) Through Life Project, a longitudinal, population-based study of three age cohorts. The baseline sample consisted of 7,485 participants comprising groups aged 20–24 (n = 2,404), 40–44 (n = 2,530), and 60–64 (n = 2,551) years recruited from the Australian capital city of Canberra and the neighboring city of Queanbeyan. According to Lachman (2004), although the boundaries of middle adulthood are difficult to define, most surveys report 40 as the modal entry year into midlife and 60 as the modal exit year. In keeping with this definition, participants in the middle and older groups were regarded as representing “midlife” and “young-old” adulthood, respectively. Given our conceptual focus, younger participants were excluded from the current analysis.

Electoral roll information was used to send letters of invitation to participate to randomly selected individuals from the appropriate age ranges. Initial response rates of 64.6% and 58.3% were obtained for the midlife and older cohorts, respectively, with baseline interviews conducted in 2000 and 2001. A subsequent wave of data collection was undertaken 4 years later. Retention rates were 93% and 87%, respectively, for the midlife and older groups.

As the current study was concerned with both age group differences and changes in perceptions of the partnered relationships over time, only participants who indicated being in the same registered marriage or living with the same partner at both measurement occasions were included in the analyses. Participants were included if they reported (a) being married at baseline and in their first and only marriage at follow-up (n = 2,735) or (b) being in a married or partnered relationship at both baseline and follow-up and reporting a length of current relationship at follow-up that exceeded the time between their baseline and follow-up interviews (n = 659). Information on partners’ gender was not available; however, 97.5% of participants identified themselves as heterosexual at baseline. A total of 3,394 partnered individuals were retained for the current analysis, including 1,719 (835 men and 884 women) midlife and 1,675 (971 men and 704 women) older participants. Of those participants who reported being partnered at baseline, 367 were not reinterviewed at follow-up. Relative to those retained in the analysis, those who dropped out were more likely to be in the older age group (63% vs 49%; p < .001) and less likely to be employed (39% vs 47%; p = .002) but did not differ in gender. Those who dropped out also reported lower levels of education (mean [M] = 13.32 years [SD = 3.05] vs M = 14.52 years [SD = 2.54], p < .001) and self-assessed physical health (M = 46.81 [SD = 11.63] vs M = 50.45 [SD = 8.59], p < .001).

Of the subsample included for analysis, less than 1.2% had missing data on any variable, with the exception of years of education (missing 2.5%). Two cases with missing employment status data were excluded. Otherwise, missing data were imputed using maximum likelihood estimation via the SPSS EM algorithm (Schafer & Graham, 2002).
Measure

**Age, time, and control variables.**—Age group was coded as $0 = \text{midlife}$, $1 = \text{older}$ and gender was coded $0 = \text{men}$, $1 = \text{women}$. The within-person variable representing time that was included in longitudinal analyses was coded as $0 = \text{baseline}$, $1 = \text{follow-up}$. Baseline employment status was coded as $0 = \text{not employed full time}$ (employed part time, unemployed, or not in the labor force) and $1 = \text{employed full time}$. Years of education at baseline were derived from items related to completed secondary and tertiary education and current study. Self-rated physical health at baseline was measured using the RAND-12 Physical Health Component score (RAND-12 PHC; Hays, 1998). The RAND-12 PHC provides a total score reflecting levels of disability caused by physical health problems that is standardized to a mean of 50 with an SD of 10 based on U.S. population data. Higher scores indicate better health (Hays).

Supportive, aversive, ambivalent, and indifferent partner relations.—Participants’ experiences of supportive and aversive partner relations were assessed using two separate 5-item scales (one each for supportive and aversive relations) developed by Schuster, Kessler, and Aseltine (1990) that have been used in several large-scale studies of aging and development (e.g., South & Krueger, 2008). Supportive relations items refer to reported frequency of positive exchanges characterized by emotional closeness and partner dependability (e.g., “how much does your partner understand the way you feel about things?”). Aversive relations items reflect reported frequency of relationship tensions and disagreements (e.g., “how much tension is there between you and your partner?”). Responses were provided on 4-point scales ranging from a lot/often through some/sometimes, and a little/rarely to not at all/never. Total scores represented average ratings of the items that contributed to the supportive (baseline $\alpha = 0.88$) and aversive (baseline $\alpha = 0.87$) scales, with possible values ranging from 0 to 3.

Previous studies (e.g., Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006) have derived ambivalence scores by applying Griffin’s Similarity and Intensity of Components formula (described in Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995) to measures of supportive and aversive relations similar to those described above. This process involves subtracting the absolute difference from the mean of the two components. We decided against using this approach for two reasons. First, our measure of supportive relations showed a ceiling effect ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.53$) with 46.9% of participants scoring at maximum (3), whereas aversive relations were more normally distributed by comparison ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.63$). The lesser degree of variability in the supportive relations scale resulted in ambivalence scores based on the Griffin formula being largely driven by the aversive relations component, as reflected in a correlation of $r = .88$ between ambivalence and aversive relations. Second, ambivalence scores based on the Griffin formula do not distinguish individuals who display an indifferent pattern of relations.

In light of these issues, we combined the scale-based measures to create a categorical measure. Supportive and aversive relations were divided into “high” and “low” based on median splits. Combinations of high and low supportive and aversive relations were used to classify participants at baseline and follow-up as reporting supportive (high supportive/low aversive, $n = 1,045$), aversive (high aversive/low supportive, $n = 1,337$), ambivalent (high supportive/high aversive, $n = 547$), or indifferent (low supportive/low aversive, $n = 465$) partner relations.

**Procedure**

After providing written consent, participants took part in a structured interview (usually at their home or the Centre for Mental Health Research) that included a questionnaire completed on a handheld computer and cognitive and physical tests administered by the interviewer. Measures ranged from sociodemographic characteristics through self-reported physical and mental health, substance use, personality, and cognition. The Human Research Ethics Committee of The Australian National University approved the study protocol.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows the proportion of participants classified into supportive, aversive, ambivalent, and indifferent relationship categories by age group and gender at baseline and follow-up. It should be emphasized that our procedure for deriving the relationship classifications (see Method) means that meaningful conclusions about prevalence of different relationship evaluations cannot be made based on these data. However, it is informative to consider differences in the proportions of relationship classifications between groups and over time. Table 1 suggests a greater probability of older men rating their relationship as supportive and a lower probability of older men rating their relationship as aversive relative to the other groups. There is also evidence that older women were less likely to rate their relationship as ambivalent. Significance tests related to age group and gender differences are reported subsequently in the context of adjusted analyses.

**Age Group Differences in Partner Relations**

We used multinomial logistic random coefficient models with a random intercept (e.g., Twisk, 2003) to model associations of age group (the independent variable) with a nominal-dependent variable that distinguished between
supportive (the reference category), aversive, ambivalent, and indifferent partner ratings, adjusting for the relevant covariates. The random coefficients models allowed us to examine both between–age group differences and within–person longitudinal changes in relationship status in the same analytical context. This was achieved by defining a hierarchical data structure with within-person relationship status classifications at baseline and follow-up (Level 1) clustered within individuals (Level 2). The main effect of time in the models represented probability of within-person change in relationship status over the study interval.

The models included main effects of age group (the independent variable of primary interest) and the additional covariates (gender, education, self-rated physical health, and employment status). We also tested the interaction between age group and gender to determine whether any greater tendency among men to rate their relationship as supportive would be more pronounced among older adults relative to those in midlife (Hypothesis 5).

Ambivalent relations.—Results of the multinomial logistic random effects models are shown in Table 2, with exponentiated coefficients (relative risk ratios, RRRs), which are analogous to odds ratios, reflecting the levels of association between predictor variables and relationship group membership relative to the base category of supportive relations. The nonsignificant main effect for time indicated that participants did not systematically change in their likelihood of reporting ambivalent (vs supportive) relations over the study interval. A significant age group effect provided support for Hypothesis 1, that midlife participants would be more likely to report ambivalent relations relative to older adults. A small but significant interaction also emerged in the final model, indicating that the age group difference varied as a function of gender. Specifically, the age difference in ratings of ambivalent relations was more pronounced among men relative to women, with midlife and older men being most and least likely to report ambivalent relations, respectively. To illustrate the nature of the interaction, the model was re-run using dummy variables to represent the different

Table 1. Partner Relationship Classifications by Age Group, Gender, and Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Midlife adults (aged 40–44 at baseline)</th>
<th>Young-old adults (aged 60–64 at baseline)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>190</td>
<td>22.75</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>254</td>
<td>25.63</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>224</td>
<td>25.34</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>221</td>
<td>25.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>406</td>
<td>41.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>391</td>
<td>40.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>166</td>
<td>19.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>151</td>
<td>18.08</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>136</td>
<td>15.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
<td>14.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversive</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>361</td>
<td>43.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>356</td>
<td>42.63</td>
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<td></td>
<td>397</td>
<td>44.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>401</td>
<td>45.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>118</td>
<td>14.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>114</td>
<td>13.65</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
<td>14.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
<td>14.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Longitudinal Associations of Age Group With Partner Relations Controlling for Gender, Employment Status, Education, and Physical Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Ambivalent relations</th>
<th>Aversive relations</th>
<th>Indifferent relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Main effects</td>
<td>Final model</td>
<td>Main effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RRR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>RRR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.81–1.17</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older (60–64)</td>
<td>0.33***</td>
<td>0.24–0.47</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.79–1.45</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.75–1.52</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of education</td>
<td>1.09**</td>
<td>1.03–1.16</td>
<td>1.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAND-PHC</td>
<td>0.97***</td>
<td>0.95–0.98</td>
<td>0.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group × Gender</td>
<td>1.79*</td>
<td>1.01–3.19</td>
<td>3.24***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Supportive relations is the reference category for the outcome variable. CI = confidence interval; PHC = Physical Health Component; RRR = relative risk ratio (analogous to odds ratio).

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
indifferent relations.—As shown in Table 2, a significant Age Group × Gender interaction emerged in the prediction of indifferent (vs supportive) relations as illustrated in Figure 1. The pattern of results is similar to those evident in the prediction of ambivalent and aversive relations, with older adults less likely to report indifferent (relative to supportive) relations, with the lowest overall likelihood among older men.

A final model tested Hypothesis 3, that older adults who rated their relationship as aversive at baseline would be more likely to rate their relationship as indifferent and less likely to rate the relationship as aversive or ambivalent at follow-up relative to midlife adults. To test the hypothesis, we selected just those participants who reported an aversive relationship at baseline and ran a cross-sectional multinomial logistic regression analysis at follow-up, controlling for the same covariates shown in Table 2, and specifying aversive relations at follow-up as the reference category for the outcome variable. Results of the model did not reveal significant age group effects when contrasting aversive relations with supportive (RRR = 1.27, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.77–2.07) and ambivalent (RRR = 0.88, 95% CI = 0.58–1.34) relations. There was a trend toward a greater tendency among older adults who rated their relationship as aversive at baseline to subsequently rate the relationship as indifferent at follow-up (RRR = 1.49, 95% CI = 1.00–2.24, p = .052).

**Discussion**

This study was concerned with age group differences in ratings of partner relationship characteristics in midlife and older adulthood. The findings are consistent with research that shows older adults have a greater tendency to maximize positive and minimize negative aspects of interpersonal experience (e.g., Birditt et al., 2005; Carstensen, 2006) relative to midlife adults and indicate that such inclinations are apparent in the specific context of partnered relations. An important additional contribution arises from our study being the first that we are aware of to investigate age group differences in the nature of “indifferent” partner relations in middle and young-old adulthood. The study of relationship indifference merits additional research attention in light of the possibility that avoidance of conflict becomes an increasingly important strategy for managing interpersonal tensions with advancing age (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1995).

**Age Group Differences in Supportive and Aversive Partner Evaluations**

Our finding that older adults were less likely to report aversive (relative to supportive) partner relations compared with midlife adults was in keeping with predictions (Hypothesis 2). The association of older age with an increasing motivation toward maximizing emotionally meaningful and positive interpersonal relations is consistent with life-span
developmental theory (Carstensen, 2006; Labouvie-Vief, 2003) and the findings of numerous studies concerned with marital satisfaction (e.g., Bookwala & Jacobs, 2004; Story et al., 2007).

Our results also provided partial support for Hypothesis 4, that women would be less likely to report supportive relations, and support for Hypothesis 5, as associations of age group with aversive relations varied as a function of gender, with older men less likely to be classified as having aversive partner relations relative to older women. A number of studies report that marriage confers greater mental and physical health benefits to men than women, possibly as a result of inequalities in the division of household labor or the tendency for women to provide more emotional support to their partner than they receive in return (Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006). Our findings suggest a particular importance of partners as a source of emotional support for men in older adulthood, when broader networks of friends and family are likely to become smaller (e.g., Gurung et al., 2003). Alternatively, for older women lifelong tendencies toward having more intimate relations across different interpersonal domains (Antonucci et al., 2002; Schwarzer & Gutierrez-Dona, 2005) may result in lower relative motivation toward amplifying positive aspects of partnered relationship experience. It is also possible that our findings represent a cohort effect, with differences in exposure to socialization processes resulting in inequities in the division of household labor, and an associated reduction in positivity among women being more evident among the older relative to the midlife participants.

Age Group Differences in Ambivalent and Indifferent Partner Relations

The results provided support for Hypothesis 1, that midlife adults would be more likely to report ambivalent (as opposed to supportive) relations relative to older adults. This finding is in keeping with DIT, which highlights a particular capacity for complexity of cognition and affect in midlife. It is also consistent with Fingerman et al. (2004), who reported more ambivalent partner relations among midlife adults relative to older adults.

However, the results also produced an unanticipated association of age group with indifferent partner relations, with midlife adults also more likely to report indifferent (as opposed to supportive) relations relative to their older counterparts. Taken together, the findings point more strongly toward greater relative tendencies among older adults (and particularly older men) to rate their relationships as supportive than any particular tendency in midlife toward ambivalence in partner evaluations. Although studies conducted by Labouvie-Vief and colleagues (e.g., LabouvieVief & Medler, 2002) have reported evidence for a reduction in affect complexity after age 60, an older sample of partnered individuals (e.g., aged 75 and older) more likely to be subject to the cognitive losses believed to underlie reduced affective complexity (Labouvie-Vief & Medler) may be needed to adequately investigate subtle age-related changes in ambivalent partner relationship evaluations.

Finally, some support was provided for Hypothesis 3, that among those reporting aversive relations at baseline, older adults would be more likely to rate their relationship as indifferent, and less likely to rate their relationship as aversive or ambivalent at follow-up relative to midlife adults. The findings are generally in keeping with research indicating that older adults are more inclined to withdraw from conflict relative to younger adults (Coats & Blanchard-Fields, 2008) and that older married couples are more likely to avoid interactions that risk escalation of negative affect relative to their midlife counterparts (Carstensen et al., 1995). Examination of the conditions under which avoidance of relationship tensions represents an adaptive means of managing stress in both discretionary (e.g., friends and relatives) and nondiscretionary (e.g., immediate family) interpersonal relations in the context of aging represents a promising area for future research.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although our longitudinal design provided the advantage of assessing within-person changes in partner relations, the absence of a long-term follow-up assessment meant that the extent to which the age group differences observed represented developmental differences or cohort effects could not be determined. The results may also have been influenced by selection bias, as participants retained in the analyses were partnered at both measurement occasions. It is possible that those in the sample who rated their relationship as aversive or ambivalent at baseline may have been more likely to be excluded from the analysis due to separation from their partner before follow-up. It was also the case that partnered individuals at baseline who did not participate at follow-up were older and in poorer health than those retained for analysis, which may have been an additional source of bias.

Additional studies are needed to investigate the extent to which relationship evaluations predict mental health and well-being outcomes, and the extent to which our findings generalize to other (non-Australian) populations. Although we focused on developmental differences in the characteristics of partner relations, it is important to recognize that age is inherently confounded with relationship duration, and that time in relationship could also be related to changes in the nature of relationship evaluations. It is also important to emphasize that the results reported here pertain specifically to partner relations and that the age group differences observed may not be generalizable to other close interpersonal relations such as those with siblings, children, or friends. Finally, we took a nonstandard approach to generating ambivalence classifications (see Method), and the measures...
used to evaluate the nature of supportive and aversive partner relations showed restricted levels of variability. More sensitive measures may allow for more accurate classification of participants into relationship types.

Despite these limitations, our findings shed important new light on the nature of partner relations in midlife and young-old adulthood. The most compelling finding was the greater tendency for older adults (especially older men) to maximize positive and dampen negative evaluations of their partnered relationship relative to their midlife counterparts. Longitudinal studies with longer-term follow-up assessments will provide an important means for directly examining associations of motivational and social–cognitive characteristics with relationship evaluations and determining the extent to which different types of partner relationship evaluations have broader implications for well-being over the life course.

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