

Are There Age-Related Differences in Couples' Support Exchanges?

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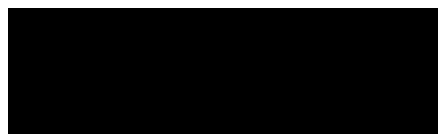


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## Abstract

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Title: Are There Age-Related Differences in Couples' Support Exchanges?

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Social support is a necessary component of living a fulfilling life, and we often rely on our romantic partners as a primary source of support. However, a number of factors can hinder the provider's ability to deliver support in a way that conveys caring and understanding to the recipient. Drawing from theories of aging, which suggest that older adults are more skilled than younger adults in using cognitive and behavioral strategies that promote positive interpersonal interactions, the current study aims to examine whether the emotional wisdom associated with aging may be linked to the quality of couples' support exchanges. Married and newly dating couples ( $N = 282$  couples) of varying ages engaged in two videotaped support discussions and completed post-discussion questionnaires. When examining partners' observed support provision behaviors, no significant age effects emerged. Likewise, age was not a robust predictor of partners' appraisals of their support interactions. However, relationship satisfaction was generally associated with more positive behaviors and appraisals across all ages. These findings suggest that older may not necessarily be wiser within romantic relationships. Rather, the quality of the relationship itself may be a more important context for understanding support behaviors and appraisals.

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## Introduction

Social support is a necessary component of living a fulfilling life. Whether it be in pursuing long term goals or weathering adversity, we turn to our social networks to uplift us in times of need, and often rely on our romantic partners as a primary source of support (Feeney, 2004). Indeed, support from a partner can reduce the harmful effects of stressful situations, as well as promote exploration, self-esteem, overall life satisfaction, and even physiological health (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Chin & Feeney, 2022). However, being a good support provider is no simple task, as skilled support provision requires astute insight into a partner's needs (Gleason et al., 2008; Ryon & Gleason, 2018). That is, the support provider must first recognize that their partner is in need of support in a timely manner. If support is offered too soon, the recipient may become hurt or angry; similar struggles will occur if support comes too late (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Next, the support provider must accurately assess their partner's emotions and needs in order to respond appropriately (Verhofstadt et al., 2008). Stress, impatience, insecurity, and poor communication, among other factors, can inhibit one's ability to analyze the situation at hand (Blickman et al., 2023; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009), thus hindering the provider's ability to deliver support in a way that conveys caring and understanding to the recipient (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). In these instances, support can actually undermine self-esteem and autonomy, as well as unintentionally cause the support recipient to focus on their stressor in a harmful manner (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009).

Given the difficulties of providing effective support, a large body of research has aimed to identify the factors that may be linked to positive support exchanges between partners. To this end, prior work has largely focused on understanding how the personal characteristics of both support providers and recipients may influence the overall effectiveness of support. For instance, support providers' sensitivity (Cutrona et al., 2007) and attachment style (Feeney, 2004) are associated with their ability to optimally match their partner's needs with the correct style of support (i.e., respond to

an emotional need with emotional support or respond to an informational need with informational support; Cutrona et al., 2007). Likewise, self-esteem may complicate the overall effectiveness of support as recipients with lower self-esteem often appraise the support they receive in a more negative light (Marigold et al., 2014). To date, however, research has failed to examine whether the emotional wisdom associated with aging also may be linked to the quality of couples' support exchanges. Theories of aging suggest that older adults are more adept than younger adults in enhancing positivity and reducing negativity within their close relationships due to the increases in socioemotional expertise that come with age (Carstensen, 2021; Charles, 2010). As such, older adults may be more skilled in providing support that is sensitive to their partner's needs and more generous when appraising the support they receive within their relationship (Carstensen & Charles, 2009; Carstensen, 1995). Given these age-related changes in socioemotional expertise, the current study examined whether older and younger couples differ not only in the behaviors they exhibit during their support interactions, but also in their appraisals of those exchanges.

#### Age Differences in Couples' Interpersonal Behaviors and Appraisals

According to socioemotional expertise theory (Charles & Carstensen, 2009), as individuals age, they perceive their time left to live as increasingly limited, which motivates them to prioritize maintaining harmonious relationships more than other goals. To that end, older adults are more likely to engage in cognitive and behavioral strategies that minimize negative emotions and maximize positive emotions within their close relationships. In fact, growing research suggests that accrued life experiences allow individuals to amass a wider array of problem-solving strategies and learn how to use these strategies more effectively (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). In this way, as individuals grow older, they are more likely to gain the skills and expertise necessary for successfully managing their close relationships (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2007; Charles, 2010).



Although the increases in socioemotional expertise that come with age may influence the nature of couples' support exchanges, to date, research identifying age-related differences in couples' behaviors and cognitions has focused almost exclusively on couples' conflict exchanges. This work has shown that when faced with interpersonal tensions, older adults are generally better at de-escalating conflict compared to younger and middle-aged adults (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2009). For instance, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have found that when engaging in problem-solving discussions, older couples often exhibit greater levels of positive nurturing behaviors such as affection, humor, validation, and optimism compared to middle-aged couples (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Carstensen et al., 1995; Verstaen et al., 2020). Older couples are also less likely to engage in destructive behaviors, such as defensiveness, hostility, and whining, relative to middle-aged couples (Carstensen et al., 1995; Verstaen et al., 2020).

In addition to engaging in more benevolent behavior, older adults also are more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate an increased preference for positive information and an increased ability to regulate their emotions (Charles, 2010). Specifically, research on socioemotional expertise theory has found that older adults tend to more positively recall their personal experiences and devote less of their attention to negative stimuli when it is present in relatively small amounts (Charles, 2010; Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Halfmann et al., 2021). This positivity bias has also been identified in observational studies of couples' conflict interactions. Older adults often interpret their partner's behavior more positively than do objective observers (Henry et al., 2007; Story et al., 2007) and report experiencing less distress after their conflict exchanges than do younger adults (Smith et al., 2009). In sum, then, growing research indicates that older adults not only engage in more benevolent behaviors when discussing conflict with their partner, but also have more benevolent appraisals of those interactions after they occur.

### Implications for Age Differences in Support Exchanges

Although research identifying age-related differences in couples' emotional behaviors and appraisals has focused primarily on conflict exchanges, similar differences may emerge when examining couples' support exchanges. As previously discussed, poorly timed and mismatched support can be detrimental to support recipients (Verhofstadt et al., 2008; Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009; Blickman et al., 2023). Notably, when couples' support exchanges are characterized by unskilled support, those conversations can become tense and conflictual in nature (Shrout et al., 2006; Overall & McNulty, 2017). Conversely, when done skillfully, both support provision and conflict communication are associated with a number of positive outcomes, including greater relationship satisfaction, better mood, and physical health benefits (Gleason et al., 2008; Cutrona et al., 2007; Shrout et al., 2023; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Given these similarities between support and conflict exchanges, we posit that theories of socioemotional expertise may also apply to couples' support exchanges. Specifically, older adults may utilize strategies such as humor and validation to soften difficult topics and be less critical of their partner than younger adults, as well as similar cognitive strategies to maximize positive outcomes, just as they do in conflict exchanges (Carstensen et al., 1995; Verstaen et al., 2020).

However, one study raises questions regarding whether older adults may indeed be inclined to exhibit benevolent behaviors when providing support. In this study, participants were given a picture of a visibly obese girl and a description of childhood obesity symptoms, which included trouble sleeping, low energy, and various other struggles (Apfelbaum, 2010). Participants were then asked to provide advice under the assumption that researchers would send their comments to the girl after the interview. This procedure was designed to be uncomfortable; many people feel socially

awkward when explicitly discussing others' weight, and the researchers predicted that this awkwardness would limit the directness and quality of younger adults' advice compared to older adults (Apfelbaum, 2010). In fact, older adults explicitly referenced weight in much greater numbers than younger adults, and their advice was also considered to be more effective at eliciting change (Apfelbaum, 2010). These findings suggest that older adults may not necessarily feel obligated to steer away from negativity when offering support, as support exchanges are centered on individual concerns rather than sources of interpersonal tensions as in conflict exchanges.

### Overview of Current Study

To examine whether age is associated with couples' behaviors and appraisals during their support exchanges, the current study will utilize data collected from 282 couples who ranged in age from 30 to 88. Two hundred couples were in long-term marriages (i.e., greater than 10 years in length) and the remaining 82 couples were in newer dating relationships (i.e., less than 3 years in length). As part of this study, participants first completed a background questionnaire in which they reported their age, relationship type (i.e., married or dating), and general relationship satisfaction. Next, couples attended a lab session where they engaged in two videotaped social support discussions. After each discussion, participants reported on their perceptions of the discussion.

Using this data, we examined two research questions. First, do older and younger support providers differ in the kinds of behaviors they exhibit when supporting their partner? Based on the previous literature review, we explored two possibilities. On the one hand, given that older adults are more motivated to enhance positivity and reduce negativity within their interpersonal interactions (Carstensen & Charles 2009; Carstensen, 1995), older adults may exhibit more positive nurturing behaviors (e.g., validation, affection) that serve to soften the discussion and fewer critical behaviors compared to younger adults. On the other hand, based on some initial research suggesting that older

adults may be more blunt than younger adults when giving advice (Apfelbaum et al., 2010), it may be that older adults actually offer both more direct advice and direct criticism than do younger adults when providing support.

Second, do older and younger support recipients differ in how they appraise their partners' support behaviors? To examine this question, we compared support recipients' reports of their partner's positive and negative behaviors to the reports of independent observers. Socioemotional expertise theory (Carstensen et al., 2003) suggests that older adults should be more likely than younger adults to exhibit a positivity bias, such that they will appraise their partner's behaviors more positively than do independent observers.

Finally, we also explored the robustness of any significant findings that emerged. Specifically, we examined whether any findings held when adjusting for relationship satisfaction and relationship type (i.e., married vs. dating).

## Methods

### Participants

Couples who were either in dating relationships of three years or less or in marriages of at least ten years were recruited to participate in the Relationship Experiences Across the Lifespan (REAL) Project. These couples were recruited through advertisements placed in the community (e.g., farmers' markets, retirement/senior living centers) and on social networking websites (e.g., Next door neighborhood groups, Facebook). As prior research indicates that older daters tend to be in better health and more socially connected than older individuals who are not married or dating (Brown & Shinohara, 2013), only participants who reported being in average health (i.e., rated their health as the same or better than the health of most people their age; Charles & Carstensen, 2009) and who reported at least moderate levels (e.g., several times a year) of involvement in organized

activities, volunteer activities, and/or time with friends and family were eligible to participate (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). These eligibility requirements were implemented to limit any potential confounding variables between health and age-related processes. Initially, 313 different-sex couples enrolled in the study; however, 18 couples withdrew before completing the background questionnaire and 13 couples withdrew after at least one member completed the background questionnaire but before participating in the lab and daily diary tasks. As the primary variables of interest for the current study were collected as part of the laboratory session, this study utilized data provided by the 282 couples who both provided background information and attended this session.

Overall, 78.2% of participants identified as White, 12.7% as Hispanic/Latinx, 3.8% as African American, 2.1% as Asian American, and 2.7% as other. Data were missing for four (0.7%) participants. When asked about the highest educational degree they had received, 15.1% of participants reported having a high school diploma or GED, 11.9% reported an Associate's/Vocational degree, 39.3% reported a Bachelor's degree, 25.8% reported a Master's degree and 7.8% reported a PhD, MD, or DDS. Data were missing for two (0.4%) participants. Regarding employment, 56.2% indicated they were employed full time, 10.5% were employed part-time, 17.8% were retired, and 15.5% indicated other (e.g., unemployed, disabled and unable to work, or homemaker). The median reported household income was between \$80,000 and \$90,000.

The final sample included 200 married couples (70.9%) and 82 dating couples (29.1%). On average, married participants were 51.5 years old ( $SD = 12.8$ ; Median = 50.0; Range = 30 - 84) and had been married 25.5 years ( $SD = 12.3$ ; Median = 23.0; Range = 10 – 56 years). Shifting to the dating couples, these participants had an average age of 44.5 years ( $SD = 12.7$ ; Median = 41.0; Range = 30 – 88) and reported dating their partner for an average of 12.7 months ( $SD = 9.7$ ;

Median = 9.0 months; Range = 1 month to 36 months). Approximately 4% of participants characterized their relationship as causally dating, 62% as seriously dating, and 34% as cohabiting.

### Procedures

Upon enrolling in the study, each couple member was sent a unique link to complete an online background questionnaire prior to attending a laboratory session. In the lab, couples engaged in three videotaped discussions: one eight-minute conflict discussion and two eight-minute support discussions. All couples engaged in the conflict discussion task first; however, this data is not relevant for the current hypotheses. For the two social support discussions, each couple member was asked to pick a personal issue/goal they wished to discuss. Thus, within each conversation, each couple member had a “role” – either that of the helpee (i.e., the support solicitor) or the helper (i.e., the support provider). The helpee was instructed to discuss their issue/goal with their partner, who was told to respond however they saw fit. The order of the two support discussions was determined through a coin flip. For each discussion, couples were asked to fill out pre- and post-interaction questionnaires. After the lab session, couples were asked to complete a 21-day daily diary survey; however, this data is not relevant to the current hypotheses. Each couple received \$80 for completing the background questionnaire and attending the lab session. They received an additional \$70 for completing the three-week daily diary task.

### Background Questionnaire Measures

#### *Age*

When participants completed the background questionnaire, they indicated their age.

#### *Relationship Type*

Couples were specifically recruited if they were in an established marriage of over ten years or if they were in a newer, dating relationship of less than three years. A dichotomous variable was

created to indicate the relationship status of the couple (0 = married couples; 1 = dating couples).

This variable was included as a covariate in the models.

### *General Relationship Satisfaction*

To assess general relationship quality, participants completed a 10-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007) as part of the background questionnaire. Partners rated items such as "Our marriage is strong" on a seven-point scale (0 = "not at all true" and 6 = "completely true"). One item, however, was assessed on a six-point scale ("In general, how often do you think things between you and your partner are going well?"). Composite scores could range from 0-51, with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .94$  for men;  $\alpha = .93$  for women). This variable was included as a covariate in the models.

### Laboratory Assessment of Support Provision

To assess the behaviors that helpers, or the partner providing support, displayed during couples' support discussions, each support interaction was divided into speaking turns, and each speaking turn received one of six behavioral codes. Starting with the positive codes, a positive nurturing code was given for behaviors that supported the emotional well-being of their partner, such as encouraging the helpee, or person receiving support, to express themselves or validating the helpee's perspective. Helpers received a positive instrumental code for behaviors that assisted with the development of a resolution, such as reappraising the situation, making suggestions for a plan, or asking questions to gain insight into the nature of the problem. Turning to negative codes, direct negative codes were assigned to behaviors that directly criticized, faulted, blamed, or rejected the partner, or demanded that the partner change their behavior. Indirect negative codes were assigned to behaviors like mindreading, hostile questioning, and failing to offer support when asked by the helpee. Off-task codes were assigned to behaviors that focused attention away from the issue, such

as topic shifting and topic avoidance. Off-task codes were also assigned if a participant talked about the lab situation or the study itself. Lastly, neutral codes were given to speaking turns that were unclear, difficult to understand, or exceptionally brief (e.g., yeah, uh-huh, right, ok).

Eight independent observers were trained to code the interactions. Of the 564 videos, 5 could not be coded due to technical difficulties. To assess interrater reliability, randomly selected pairs of observers coded a randomly selected 14% of the interactions. Overall, reliability was adequate to high for the positive (intraclass correlation coefficients = .75 for positive nurturing, and .86 for positive instrumental) and negative codes (intraclass correlation coefficients = .62 for direct negative, and .52 for indirect negative). As reliability for the off-task codes was rather low (intraclass correlation coefficients = .24), these codes were not examined further.

Before using the codes in the analyses, the number of times each code was assigned to each individual was divided by the total number of speaking turns of that individual. In other words, each code was analyzed as a proportion of the individual's total speaking turns to control for variation across individuals in the number of speaking turns.

#### Post-Discussion Assessments

##### *Participants' Perceptions of the Discussion*

To assess how support recipients perceived their partner's support behaviors during the videotaped discussion, participants responded to items which assessed their views of their partner's positive and negative behaviors. Specifically, we asked participants to reflect on how instrumental their partner was in reaching a solution (i.e.: "To what extent did your partner offer you suggestions and/or possible solutions to the problem?" and "To what extent did your partner help you see the issue from a new perspective?"), how nurturing their partner was (i.e.: "How much did your partner provide you with encouragement?" and "How considerate was your partner of your point of



view?"), as well as how hurtful or blaming their partner was (i.e.: "How much did your partner blame/criticize you for the problem?" and "How hurtful was your partner during the discussion?"). Each question was answered on a seven-point scale (1=not at all, 7=very much).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations for the variables of interest are provided in Table 1. On average, men and women in both married and dating relationships exhibited high levels of positive behaviors and low levels of negative behaviors during the conversations. Overall, men exhibited more positive nurturing behaviors than did women,  $t(276) = -3.64, p < .001$ , and women exhibited more positive instrumental behaviors than did men,  $t(276) = 3.03, p = .001$ , in direct contradiction with popular culture narratives. In addition, married women exhibited more direct negative behaviors compared to dating women,  $t(277) = 2.43, p = .016$ . There were no other significant gender and/or relationship type differences in observed behaviors.

Turning to participants' appraisals of their partner's support behaviors, on average, men and women in both married and dating relationships perceived their partner as providing high levels of positive nurturing support and moderate levels of positive instrumental support. Participants also perceived relatively low levels of direct negative behavior from their partner. Overall, however, men perceived their partner as engaging in more direct negative behaviors than did women,  $t(276) = -2.14, p = .033$ . Likewise, married men perceived their partner as engaging in more direct negative behaviors than did dating men  $t(276) = 2.00, p = .047$ . No other significant gender and/or relationship type differences in participants' support appraisals emerged. Finally, participants were generally satisfied within their relationship, and no gender and/or relationship type differences were found.

Correlations among the variables of interest are presented in Table 2. Age was positively associated with general relationship satisfaction for women and marginally associated for men, such that older individuals were more satisfied in their relationships. Notably, age was not significantly associated with any of women's observed behaviors, nor with women's perceptions of their partner's behaviors. However, relationship type was significantly associated with women's direct negative behaviors, such that dating women exhibited more of these behaviors than did married women. For men, age was significantly associated with positive instrumental behaviors, such that older men exhibited more of these behaviors compared did younger men. Age was not significantly associated with any other of men's observed behaviors, nor with men's perceptions of their partner's behavior. Finally, relationship type was not significantly associated with any key variables for men.

#### Does Age Predict Observed Support Provision Behavior?

To examine whether age may be associated with the support provision that partners offered during their social support discussions, partners' age was regressed onto each of the observed positive and negative support behaviors (i.e., positive nurturing, positive instrumental, direct negative, indirect negative). Relationship type (i.e., married or dating) was included as a covariate in all models. Men's and women's data were analyzed in separate regressions to account for the dependency present in dyadic data. Additional analyses were conducted to examine whether any effects of age or relationship type remained significant when adjusting for partners' general relationship satisfaction.

As seen in Table 3, age was not significantly associated with men's positive nurturing or direct negative behaviors. Age was marginally associated with men's positive instrumental and indirect negative behaviors, such that older men tended to exhibit more positive instrumental and fewer indirect negative behaviors. However, these associations were reduced to non-significant when

including general relationship satisfaction in the model, suggesting that some of the age effect may be due to increased general relationship satisfaction among older men. In fact, men who were more satisfied in their relationship were observed to exhibit fewer indirect negative behaviors. Finally, relationship type was not associated with men's observed behavior (see Table 3).

Turning to the results for women, as seen in Table 4, age was not significantly associated with any of women's observed support provision behaviors. Relationship type did predict direct negative behaviors, such that dating women exhibited fewer direct negative behaviors compared to married women. This association remained significant when adjusting for general relationship satisfaction. Moreover, general relationship satisfaction was significantly associated with women's positive nurturing and direct negative behaviors and marginally associated with women's indirect negative behaviors. Thus, women who were happier in their relationship exhibited more positive nurturing, fewer direct negative, and marginally fewer indirect negative behaviors compared to women who were less satisfied in their relationship.

#### Does Age Predict Perceptions of a Partner's Support Behavior?

To examine whether age may be associated with individuals' perceptions of their partner's support provision behavior during the social support discussions, we first regressed partners' age onto their perceptions of their partner's positive nurturing, positive instrumental, and direct negative behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Relationship type was included as a covariate and additional analyses were conducted to examine if effects of age or relationship type held when also adjusting for general relationship satisfaction. As before, men's and women's data were analyzed in separate regressions to account for the dependency present in dyadic data.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted in the methods section, perceptions of a partner's indirect negative behaviors were not assessed in the study.

As seen in Table 5, age was not significantly associated with men's perceptions of their partner's positive nurturing or direct negative behaviors. However, age was associated with men's perceptions of their partner's positive instrumental behaviors, such that older men tended to perceive their partner as exhibiting more positive instrumental behaviors compared to younger men. Notably, though, this association was reduced to non-significant when including general relationship satisfaction in the model. Moreover, general relationship satisfaction was strongly associated with men's perceptions of their partner's positive nurturing, positive instrumental, and direct negative behaviors. Thus, men who were happier in their relationship perceived that their partners exhibited more positive nurturing and positive instrumental behaviors, and fewer direct negative behaviors. Additionally, relationship type was marginally associated with men's perceptions of their partner's direct negative behavior, such that dating men perceived that their partner's exhibited marginally fewer direct negative behaviors compared to married men. This association remained when adjusting for general relationship satisfaction.

Turning to the results for women, as seen in Table 6, age was not significantly associated with women's perceptions of any of their partner's support provision behaviors. Relationship type was also not associated with women's perceptions of their partner's behaviors. However, general relationship satisfaction was significantly associated with women's perceptions of their partner's positive nurturing, positive instrumental, and direct negative behaviors. Thus, women who were happier in their relationship perceived their partner as exhibiting more positive nurturing and positive instrumental behaviors, and fewer direct negative behaviors compared to women who were less satisfied in their relationship.

To more directly examine whether individuals' perceptions of their partner's support provision behaviors may be biased, additional regression analyses were conducted in which the

support recipient's age, the support provider's observed behavior, and the interaction of those two variables were regressed onto the support recipient's perceptions of the support provider's behavior. Again, relationship type was included as a covariate in all models. Finally, men's and women's data were analyzed in separate regressions to account for the dependency present in dyadic data.

Starting with the results for men, as seen in Table 7, women's observed support behavior was positively and significantly associated with men's appraisals of that behavior for all three types of behavior (i.e., positive nurturing, positive instrumental, and direct negative), indicating a degree of accuracy in men's perceptions of their partner's behavior. Age was significantly associated with men's perceptions of their partner's positive instrumental behavior, such that older men perceived more instrumental support from their partner compared to younger men. No other significant age effects emerged. Moreover, and contrary to hypotheses, the interaction between age and observed behavior was not significant in any of the models. No significant effects of relationship type emerged either.

Turning to the results for women, as seen in Table 8, men's observed support behavior was positively and significantly associated with women's appraisals of that behavior for all three types of behavior (i.e., positive nurturing, positive instrumental, and direct negative), indicating a degree of accuracy in women's perceptions of their partner's behavior. No significant age or relationship type effects emerged. Moreover, and again contrary to hypotheses, the interaction between age and observed behavior was not significant in any of the models. Overall, then, evidence did not support the idea that older adults may be more biased in their perceptions of their partner's behavior compared to younger adults.

## Discussion

Though it is often assumed that navigating conflict is the most difficult part of maintaining relationships, providing one's partner with support can be a similarly difficult task (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Based on theories of aging which suggest that older adults may be uniquely equipped to skillfully navigate interpersonal tensions (Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Charles, 2010; Blanchard-Fields, 2007), the current study aimed to determine whether the benefits of aging may also enable older adults to more gracefully traverse support exchanges in their romantic relationships compared to younger adults. To this end, we first explored potential age differences in support providers' observed behaviors. Although socioemotional expertise theory suggests that older adults may exhibit more positive nurturing behaviors and fewer negative behaviors than younger adults (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Verstaen et al., 2020; Carstensen et al., 1995), the only study on age difference in advice giving (Apfelbaum et al., 2010) indicated that older adults may utilize more direct advice and criticism than younger adults when providing support. In support of the former, we found that older men did engage in more positive instrumental and fewer indirect negative behaviors than younger men. However, including general relationship satisfaction in the models reduced these associations to non-significant, suggesting that age-related increases in relationship satisfaction may have produced our initial results rather than age alone. Moreover, we did not find any age-related effects on women's observed behaviors. Instead, women's relationship satisfaction was the most robust predictor of their observed behaviors; women who were happier in their relationships exhibited more positive nurturing behaviors, and fewer direct negative and indirect negative behaviors than women who reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction across ages and relationship types.

Based on socioemotional expertise theory (Charles, 2010; Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Halfmann et al., 2021), we also predicted that older adults may appraise their partner's behaviors more positively than younger adults. When examining simple age differences in appraisals, however, results similarly indicated that relationship satisfaction, rather than age, may be a more robust predictor of men's perceptions of their partner's behavior. Specifically, though older men tended to perceive their partner as exhibiting more positive instrumental behaviors, the inclusion of general relationship satisfaction again reduced this association to non-significant. Men who were more satisfied in their relationship also tended to perceive their partner as engaging in more positive and fewer negative behaviors than younger men. Additionally, women's perceptions of their partner's behaviors further contradicted our hypothesis, as age was not significantly associated with women's perceptions of any of their partner's behaviors. Instead, women who were more satisfied in their relationship, regardless of age, perceived their partner as exhibiting more positive and fewer negative behaviors. Finally, further analyses examining whether individuals' appraisals of their partner's behaviors were positively biased relative to independent observer ratings of those behaviors did not reveal any age-related effects.

Overall, then, results generally failed to support the idea that older may be wiser when it comes to couples' support exchanges. Importantly, these findings contribute to a growing body of research suggesting that romantic relationships may represent a unique relationship domain in older adults' lives. Essentially, studies specifically centered around romantic relationships have not consistently identified significant age-related effects on interpersonal behaviors (e.g., Blickman et al., 2023; Story et al., 2007), despite such effects reliably appearing in studies focused on non-romantic relationships, such as family and friends (Akiyama et al., 2003; Birditt et al., 2020; Walen & Lachman, 2000). For instance, although older adults rate their relationships with friends and family

as less irritating compared to younger adults, older and younger adults do not differ in how irritating they find their romantic partner (Akiyama et al., 2003). In fact, as relationship satisfaction was a consistent predictor of individuals' support behaviors and appraisals, the current findings suggest that perhaps the qualities of the relationship itself may play a stronger role than age in shaping couples' interactions.

Notably, although not a primary goal of the study, results did identify several gender differences in participants' observed behaviors and appraisals. Specifically, we found that women engaged in more positive instrumental, or solution-oriented, behaviors than men, and men engaged in more positive nurturing, or emotion-oriented, behaviors than women. This finding complements other studies which similarly show that stereotypes regarding the support behaviors of men and women are rarely supported when directly observing couples' support exchanges (Neff & Karney, 2005). Thus, popular culture narratives may be misrepresenting the roles that women take on in their relationships, or these narratives have simply fallen behind more recent shifts in relationship dynamics. Lastly, results revealed that overall, men perceived their partners as engaging in more direct negative behaviors, with married men specifically perceiving their wives as more critical, rejecting, and blaming than men in dating relationships.

### Strengths and Limitations

The current study had several notable strengths. First, the study examined a very large sample of couples, thereby enhancing confidence in the reliability of the analyses. Second, the study utilized lab observations of couples' behaviors to assess differences in support provision which eliminated concerns regarding certain biases frequently identified in self-report methodologies. Finally, the sample was comprised of couples in both long-term marriages and newer dating relationships across age groups which allowed us to examine age independent of relationship length.



Despite these strengths, however, the present study must also be examined within the context of its limitations. For instance, the sample utilized in this study differed from the general population in several ways that could potentially limit the generalizability of our findings. Specifically, the majority of the participants were white, college-educated, and many earned an income above that of the median American household. Additionally, the sample included only different-sex couples. To ensure that our findings are not limited to couples of similar demographics, future research must examine age as a potential modifier of support provision in more racially and sexually diverse samples, as well as those of varying education levels and socioeconomic statuses.

### Conclusion

Theories suggest that as we age, our priorities shift and maintaining harmonious relationships becomes paramount. However, attaining this goal is not always easy, and the lack of significant age differences in the current study perhaps suggests that effective support provision can prove challenging at any age. Rather, the quality of the relationship itself may be a more important context for understanding support behaviors and appraisals. Further research must therefore explore which characteristics of romantic relationships may facilitate couples' support exchanges, and which pose risks to navigating these interactions.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Married		Dating		Overall	
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
<u>Men</u>						
Observed Positive Nurturing Behaviors	0.24	0.15	0.25	0.16	0.24	0.15
Observed Positive Instrumental Behaviors	0.47	0.19	0.45	0.18	0.46	0.19
Observed Direct Negative Behaviors	0.03	0.08	0.04	0.11	0.04	0.09
Observed Indirect Negative Behaviors	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.05
Perceptions of Partner Positive Nurturing	6.01	1.12	6.04	1.25	6.02	1.16
Perceptions of Partner Positive Instrumental	5.19	1.20	5.36	1.15	5.24	1.19
Perceptions of Partner Direct Negative	1.64	1.04	1.40	0.86	1.57	1.00
General Relationship Satisfaction	42.73	7.69	42.05	8.03	42.51	7.78
<u>Women</u>						
Observed Positive Nurturing Behaviors	0.20	0.14	0.22	0.14	0.21	0.14
Observed Positive Instrumental Behaviors	0.50	0.18	0.53	0.17	0.51	0.18
Observed Direct Negative Behaviors	0.04	0.10	0.02	0.07	0.04	0.09
Observed Indirect Negative Behaviors	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.06
Perceptions of Partner Positive Nurturing	6.11	0.94	6.06	1.11	6.09	0.99
Perceptions of Partner Positive Instrumental	5.23	1.23	5.12	1.46	5.19	1.30
Perceptions of Partner Direct Negative	1.43	0.88	1.35	0.74	1.41	0.84
General Relationship Satisfaction	42.62	7.35	42.20	6.57	42.50	7.11

*Note:* The means for observed behavior are expressed as a proportion. Scores on perceptions of a partner's behaviors could range from 1 to 7. Scores on relationship satisfaction could range from 0 to 51.



Table 2.

*Within-Partner and Between-Partner Correlations*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	<b>.96**</b>	-.23**	.12*	-.02	.05	.01	-.05	.05	.09	-.02
2. Relationship Type	-.24**	<b>1.0**</b>	-.03	.09	.08	.06	-.15*	-.02	-.04	-.05
3. General Relationship Satisfaction	.11	-.04	<b>.54**</b>	.13*	.02	-.10	-.14*	.28**	.16**	-.26**
4. Positive Nurturing Behavior	-.34	.03	.04	<b>.21**</b>	-.31**	-.22**	-.25**	.11	.06	-.10
5. Positive Instrumental Behavior	.12*	-.06	.11	-.32**	<b>.11</b>	<b>.33**</b>	-.44**	-.05	.03	-.08
6. Indirect Negative Behavior	-.12	.02	.17**	-.22**	-.33**	<b>.20**</b>	.28**	-.07	-.17**	.04
7. Direct Negative Behavior	-.10	.04	-.09	.25**	-.44**	.28**	<b>.10</b>	-.09	-.16**	.04
8. Perception of Partner's Positive Nurturing Behavior	.05	.02	.45**	.11	.11	-.09	-.11	<b>.22**</b>	.49**	-.54**
9. Perception of Partner's Positive Instrumental Behavior	.11	.07	.33**	.07	.12*	-.10	-.10	.53**	<b>.07</b>	-.24**
10. Perception of Partner's Direct Negative Behavior	.05	-.11	-.33**	-.05	-.12	.03	.04	-.66**	-.28**	<b>.17**</b>

*Note:* Behavior variables represent the proportion of behaviors present to overall number of speaking turns. Women's correlations are presented above the diagonal and men's correlations are presented below the diagonal. Relationship type was coded as 0 = married and 1 = dating.

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 3

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, and General Relationship Satisfaction on Observed Behavior in Men*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>Not Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	-0.03	0.001	-0.45	0.654
Relationship Type	0.02	0.021	0.37	0.711
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.11	0.001	1.80	0.073
Relationship Type	-0.03	0.025	-0.44	0.658
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.09	0.000	-1.50	0.135
Relationship Type	0.01	0.012	0.22	0.823
Indirect Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.12	0.000	-1.92	0.056
Relationship Type	-0.01	0.007	-0.12	0.905
<u>Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	-0.03	0.001	-0.53	0.596
Relationship Type	0.02	0.021	0.38	0.701
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.04	0.001	0.71	0.479
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.10	0.001	1.54	0.125
Relationship Type	-0.04	0.025	-0.58	0.564
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.09	0.001	1.54	0.124
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.08	0.000	-1.23	0.218
Relationship Type	0.02	0.012	0.27	0.790
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.08	0.001	-1.35	0.177
Indirect Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.10	0.000	-1.65	0.100
Relationship Type	-0.01	0.007	-0.20	0.840
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.16	0.000	-2.70	0.007

Table 4

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, and General Relationship Satisfaction on Observed Behavior in Women*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>Not Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.00	0.001	0.06	0.952
Relationship Type	0.09	0.019	1.42	0.158
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.07	0.001	1.15	0.252
Relationship Type	0.09	0.025	1.49	0.137
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.09	0.000	-1.48	0.140
Relationship Type	-0.17	0.012	-2.72	0.007
Indirect Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.00	0.000	-0.02	0.988
Relationship Type	-0.06	0.008	-0.94	0.347
<u>Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	-0.02	0.001	-0.24	0.811
Relationship Type	0.09	0.019	1.38	0.170
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.13	0.001	2.13	0.034
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.07	0.001	1.11	0.270
Relationship Type	0.09	0.025	1.48	0.139
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.01	0.002	0.21	0.837
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.07	0.000	-1.16	0.246
Relationship Type	-0.16	0.012	-2.69	0.008
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.13	0.001	-2.23	0.027
Indirect Negative Behavior				
Age	0.01	0.000	0.23	0.816
Relationship Type	-0.06	0.008	-0.91	0.366
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.11	0.001	-1.76	0.079

Table 5

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, and General Relationship Satisfaction on Men's Perceptions of Their Partner's Behavior*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>Not Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.06	0.005	0.92	0.359
Relationship Type	0.03	0.158	0.46	0.644
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.13	0.005	2.16	0.032
Relationship Type	0.10	0.160	1.61	0.109
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	0.03	0.005	0.44	0.662
Relationship Type	-0.10	0.135	-1.69	0.093
<u>Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.00	0.005	0.04	0.971
Relationship Type	0.03	0.142	0.50	0.617
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.45	0.008	8.32	0.000
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.10	0.005	1.62	0.106
Relationship Type	0.10	0.154	1.65	0.099
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.30	0.009	5.26	0.000
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	0.07	0.004	1.20	0.231
Relationship Type	-0.10	0.128	-1.74	0.083
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.35	0.007	-6.04	0.000

Table 6

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, and General Relationship Satisfaction on Women's Perceptions of Their Partner's Behavior*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<u>Not Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.04	0.005	0.70	0.486
Relationship Type	-0.01	0.135	-0.21	0.833
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.08	0.006	1.34	0.181
Relationship Type	-0.02	0.176	-0.31	0.757
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.03	0.004	-0.44	0.659
Relationship Type	-0.05	0.114	-0.84	0.404
<u>Including General Satisfaction</u>				
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.00	0.005	0.07	0.942
Relationship Type	-0.02	0.130	-0.32	0.701
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.28	0.008	4.69	0.000
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.06	0.006	1.00	0.318
Relationship Type	-0.02	0.175	-0.37	0.714
General Relationship Satisfaction	0.15	0.011	2.50	0.014
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	0.01	0.004	0.16	0.875
Relationship Type	-0.05	0.111	-0.77	0.443
General Relationship Satisfaction	-0.26	0.007	-4.43	0.000

Table 7

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, Partner's Observed Behavior, and Interaction Between Age and Partner's Observed Behavior on Men's Perceptions of their Partner's Behavior*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.07	0.005	1.15	0.252
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.25	0.487	4.27	0.000
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	-0.07	0.035	-1.21	0.229
Relationship Type	0.01	0.154	0.18	0.857
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.12	0.005	2.00	0.046
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.19	0.387	3.18	0.002
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	-0.08	0.028	-1.35	0.178
Relationship Type	0.08	0.160	1.24	0.216
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	0.07	0.004	1.18	0.238
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.38	0.637	6.66	0.000
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	0.06	0.066	0.97	0.334
Relationship Type	-0.05	0.128	-0.76	0.446

Table 8

*Effects of Age, Relationship Type, Partner's Observed Behavior, and Interaction Between Age and Partner's Observed Behavior on Women's Perceptions of their Partner's Behavior*

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Positive Nurturing Behavior				
Age	0.05	0.005	0.80	0.425
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.17	0.391	2.83	0.005
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	0.02	0.032	0.38	0.705
Relationship Type	-0.02	0.135	-0.33	0.742
Positive Instrumental Behavior				
Age	0.05	0.006	0.81	0.420
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.23	0.414	3.89	0.000
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	0.07	0.033	1.26	0.210
Relationship Type	-0.02	0.173	-0.34	0.739
Direct Negative Behavior				
Age	-0.01	0.004	-0.20	0.843
Partner's Observed Behavior	0.18	0.610	2.80	0.005
Age X Partner's Observed Behavior	0.06	0.047	0.99	0.326
Relationship Type	-0.05	0.114	-0.84	0.399

### Biography

Corinne Floyd was born on October 11, 2002, in Fort Worth, Texas. She enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 2020 and graduated with a dual degree in May of 2024: a B.S. in Honors in Advanced Human Development and Family Sciences with a minor in African and African Diaspora Studies, and a B.A. in Plan II Honors. During her time as a student, Corinne served as the Equity and Inclusion Director and President of the Senate of College Councils, worked as the Student Coordinator for the Contextualization and Commemoration Initiative, served as the Scrivener of the Friar Society, volunteered as a Research Assistant on the Daily Living Project, and began working on the Relationship Experiences Across the Lifespan (REAL) Project in the fall of 2021. After graduation, Corinne intends to explore her interests in the legal field for a few years prior to attending law school and pursuing a graduate degree in Black Studies or Public Policy.