AGE AND AFFECT

Early investigations of how affect changes across the life span yielded mixed results. By the mid-1990s, many scholars had completed studies of age and emotion in adulthood, yet the collective body of literature did not draw a consistent picture with regard to either positive or negative affect (Ferri & Filipp, 1995; Malatesta & Kalkos, 1984; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Ryff, 1989; Smith & Baltes, 1993). Some studies found that the frequency of positive and negative affect increases with age, others documented decreases in the frequency of affect with increasing age, and still others reported no association at all. Recently, Kolarz and I attempted to resolve some of these inconsistencies by addressing the question using a large national sample that would yield precise estimates of the relationship between age and affect (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). After analyzing data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey, sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, we concluded that older adults tend to report experiencing more positive affect and less negative affect than younger adults. Additionally, the effect for positive affect was nonlinear—it increased at an accelerating rate. The MIDUS respondents ranged in age from 25 to 74, and it would be risky to extrapolate the findings to adults who are even older. Nonetheless, over this 50-year age range, we documented discernible, but small, changes in the frequency of both positive and negative affect. Regression lines depicting these associations are displayed in Figure 1.

Further, the relationships between age and affect endured after we statistically controlled for a host of variables that are known to influence either positive or negative affect, and thus might have explained away the associations we found. Positive affect was higher for men than for women, for married people than for single people, for extraverts than for introverts, and for people in good physical health than for those in poor health; also, positive affect was inversely related to stress and neuroticism. Negative affect was higher for women than for men, for unmarried people than for married people, for individuals with high scores on measures of neuroticism than for those with low scores, and for people experiencing stress than for those with relatively stress-free lives; negative affect was lower among extraverts than among introverts and among people in good physical health than among those in poor health. Over and above the effects of this wide array of influences, older people reported more positive and less negative affect than those at midlife, who in turn expressed more positive and less negative affect than the youngest members of the sample.

This is an optimistic finding, suggesting that as people move away from the trials and vicissitudes of youth, they may increasingly experience a more pleasant balance of affect, at least up until their mid-70s. Of course, this statement rests upon the assumption that the association is an effect of the aging process and not a cohort effect (i.e., not an effect due to cir-

Copyright © 2001 American Psychological Society
cumstances peculiar to this particular birth cohort). It is also generalizable only to the U.S. population from which the MIDUS sample was drawn. Nevertheless, it does fit with a body of findings collectively known as the paradox of well-being (Filipp, 1996; Staudinger, Fleeson, & Baltes, 1999)—the fact that the documented correlation between objective rigors and subjective happiness is small. The paradox is relevant to research on age and well-being, for despite the cruelties of aging (e.g., worsening physical health, deaths of old friends and relatives), older adults do not report concomitant decreases in the emotional aspects of well-being.

No MIDUS participant was older than 74 at the time of assessment, so it is necessary to look elsewhere for data regarding the level of affect among the oldest old. Recent reports have indicated that positive affect may drop during the oldest years. In the Berlin Aging Study, positive affect declined by as much as half a standard deviation across several age categories ranging from 76-79 to 95-100 (Smith, Fleeson, Geiselman, Settersten, & Kunzman, 1999). The same study also documented a correlation of −.22 between age and positive affect over the age range from 70 to 100 years, in contrast to the association of .30 over the age range of the MIDUS survey (25-74). The decline in positive affect in the Berlin sample prevailed even when many other factors, including nearly all those utilized in the MIDUS study, were statistically controlled (Isaacowitz & Smith, 2000).

Combining the MIDUS and Berlin results suggests that the relationship between positive affect and age is curvilinear, with frequency reports of this emotion rising from young adulthood through midlife before peaking in the earlier years of older adulthood, and then diminishing during the oldest years, when health deficits and other problems become more severe. This educated guess regarding the typical path of positive affect over the adult years is not supported by all the evidence, as one study documented a more consistent decline in positive affect, with no increase in middle, in a sample ranging in age from 19 to 97 (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Nevertheless, the combination of two of the largest samples brought to bear on the question of the relationship between age and affect (MIDUS and Berlin) points toward a curvilinear association between age and positive affect in adulthood. Nonlinearity is likely the root of the confusion that has at times obscured the relationship between age and positive affect.

Less confusion surrounds the association between age and negative affect. Many investigators have reported declines in negative affect over wide age ranges (e.g., Isaacowitz & Smith, 2000; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Rossi & Rossi, 1991). However, at least one study reported no relationship between age and negative affect among the oldest old (Smith et al., 1999). Thus, it is possible that negative emotion may steadily decrease through adulthood, but then the decline may taper off in the oldest years.
Again, this is a generally opti- 

mistic message, and it resonates with 

one of the most significant lessons of 

late-20th-century gerontology, 

namely, that gains as well as losses 

characterize the human aging pro- 

cess (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Yet this 

very upbeat portrait may not char- 

acterize the very oldest members of 

the population. Further, it is per- 

haps simplistic to state that people 

get happier as they age (Isaacowitz & 

Smith, 2000). Expressing a more 

subtle view, Carstensen, Pasupathi, 

Mayr, and Nesselroade (2000) have 

suggested that older adults and oth- 

ers who are reaching end points in 

life may experience mixed and com- 

p lex emotions. They use the term 

"poignancy" to describe the simul- 

taneous experience of positive and 

negative affect, as well as the ca- 

pacity of older adults (and others 

facing endings) to feel emotions in 

a more complex manner than 

younger adults. Other researchers 

have offered similar arguments, 

stating that well-being, especially 
among older adults, adds up to 

more than a maximization of posi- 

tive and a maximization of negative 

effect (Ryff, 1989). Ultimately, the 

story of emotion and age may fo- 
cus on greater complexity of affect 
in later life, and less on simple ups 

and downs in the frequency of pos- 

itive and negative emotion.

MODERATORS OF THE 

AGE-AFFECT RELATIONSHIP

Adult emotional development is 

cumbers in other ways as well, for 
certain combinations of variables 

are associated with heightened or 
diminished levels of affect (Mrocz- 

ek & Kolarz, 1998). Such interac- 
tion, or moderator, effects provide 
another piece of the age-affect 

story. For example, the analysis of 
positive affect in the MIDUS study 
showed an interaction between age 

and extraversion, but only 

among men. Specifically, the asso- 
ciation between age and positive 
affect was weaker among extra- 

verted men and stronger among introverted men. Men who were 

extraverted tended to have high 

positive affect, regardless of their 

age. Age made more of a difference in predicting positive affect among 

introverted men; Older intro- 

verted men reported higher posi-

tive affect than younger intro-

verted men. Essentially, the effect 
of age was magnified if a man was 
an introvert, but was lessened if he 

was an extravert.

The analysis of negative affect in 

the MIDUS sample showed an 

interaction between age and mar-

riage, again only for men (Mroczek 

& Kolarz, 1998). Among married 

men, there was a steep decline in 

negative affect from age 25 to age 74. Unmarried men, in contrast, re-

ported high negative affect across 

the full age range. Basically, young 

men, married or not, admitted high 

levels of negative affect. However, 

middle and older men (especially 

the latter) reported much less nega-

tive affect if they were married. This 

could be a cohort effect, but it could 

also indicate that one of the benefits 
of marriage for men is that it helps 

to diminish negative emotion once 
middle and older age arrive.

Earlier, I noted that the effects of 

age on the frequency of positive 

and negative affect are small. How- 

ever, regardless of the size of these 

effects, age also appears with other 

variables in determining 

the frequency of emotion.

CONCLUSION

Several research questions in the 

area of adult emotion require an- 
swers. First, although most studies 

have reported a decline in negative 
affect (with perhaps an upturn in 

very late life), many investigators 

are in disagreement about the tra- 

jectory of positive affect. It is clear 

that future research must resolve 

this issue by studying people across 
a broad range of ages, from the 

youngest adults to the oldest old. 

Second, and more important, re- 

search needs to ascertain whether 

these age differences in affect are 
due to aging or cohort effects. To 

fully answer this question, investi- 
gators will need to conduct longitudi-

dinal studies, and in particular, lon-

gitudinal studies that also contain 
a broad cross-section of age cohorts. 

Such studies (cross-sectional de-

signs) would make it possible to 

tease apart how much change in af-

fect is due to cohort influences, 

and how much is due to the effects of 

aging regardless of cohort member-

ship.

Fortunately, there are thoughtful 

theories of life-span emotional de- 

velopment that can guide investigators 

in answering these questions (e.g., 

Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Carstensen et 

al., 1999; Labouvie-Vief & DeVoe, 

1991). As a result of these theories 

and the empirical studies discussed 
in this article, psychologists now 
have a stronger grasp than ever be- 

for on the issues surrounding the 

relationship between age and emo-

tion over the adult portion of the life 

span. The coming years will bring an 

even firmer understanding.

Recommended Reading

Carstensen, L.L., Isaacowitz, D.M., 

& Tsuk-Charles, S. (1999). (See Ref- 

erences)

Filipp, M. (1990). (See Reference)

Labouvie-Vief, G., & DeVoe, M. 

(1991). (See References)

Mroczek, D.K., & Kolarz, C.M. 

(1998). (See References)

Smith, J., Fowles, W., Guelman, 

B., Settersten, R.A., & Kurzman, 

U. (1999). (See References)

Acknowledgments—The author ac-

knowledges the support of the John D. 

and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow- 

ship Program in Hospital and Health 

Care Research and the National Insti-

tute on Aging (RO3-AG16654).

Copyright © 2001 American Psychological Society
Note

1. Address correspondence to Dan Mroczek, Fordham University, Department of Psychology, Doug Hall, Bronx, NY 10458-5198; e-mail: mroczek@fordham.edu.

References


Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd.