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Better with age? Exploring age and interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace

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Better with age? Exploring age and interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Workplaces are inherently emotional spaces, where employees often attempt to influence others' feelings. While effective interpersonal emotion regulation benefits relationships and performance, older workers' capabilities in this domain remain poorly understood. Drawing on lifespan development theories, we hypothesize that employees' motivation to regulate others' emotions, their use of adaptive regulation strategies, and their effectiveness at implementing interpersonal emotion regulation are all positively related to age. We further explore the moderating role of two contextual factors: the intensity of workers' own negative emotions and their perceived closeness to the target of regulation. We tested hypotheses using a pre-registered, five-day experience-sampling study with 219 participants who completed surveys twice daily during their working day. Results show that age is positively associated with motivation to regulate others' emotions and perceived implementation effectiveness but is unrelated to strategy use. Exploratory analyses indicate an indirect effect of age on perceived effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation, via motivation. Neither relational closeness nor negative emotion intensity moderates the effects of age. These findings extend lifespan theories to the interpersonal domain, suggesting that ageing is more strongly related to why, rather than how, employees regulate others' emotions, positioning motivation as a critical yet overlooked strength of older workers.

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Interpersonal emotion regulation; age; workplace; older workers; daily diary study

Introduction

Older adults are working longer than ever due to demographic shifts (World Health Organization, 2022) and legislative changes such as rising pension ages (Holman et al., 2020). Problematically, older adults often face negative workplace stereotypes, such as being perceived as resistant to change or less productive than their younger counterparts (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Such stereotypes may lead to inequalities in how older workers are treated, limiting opportunities for their development (Dordoni & Argentero, 2015) and ultimately marginalizing them in the workforce. While research on ageing has often focused on these stereotypes, emerging literature suggests that older workers have important potential strengths in emotional skills (e.g., Doerwald et al., 2016; Scheibe & Moghimi, 2021).

Prior research on the emotional skills of older workers has mainly concentrated on their ability to manage their own feelings, i.e., *intrapersonal* emotion regulation (e.g., Scheibe et al., 2016), an important skill in public-facing roles such as service, retail, or care work. However, older workers may also possess an enhanced ability to manage *other people's feelings* via *interpersonal* emotion

regulation, defined as a deliberate process where one individual (the regulator) aims to influence the emotional state of another (the target; Niven, 2017) – a potential benefit that remains underexplored in research. Effective interpersonal emotion regulation improves wellbeing, relationships, and performance (Troth et al., 2018), and is particularly relevant for service, leadership, and team-based roles (Niven, 2025).

In this paper, we propose that age is a consequential, yet understudied, individual difference that influences interpersonal emotion regulation at work. Drawing on lifespan development theories, notably socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) and the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model (Charles, 2010), we theorize that as people age, their motivation to engage in emotionally meaningful social interactions increases, and their accumulated emotional experience may be associated with greater perceived effectiveness in managing others' feelings, reflected in the selection and implementation of adaptive strategies. We offer a novel perspective on the strengths of older workers, seeking to counteract deficit-based narratives of an ageing workforce by identifying interpersonal

emotion regulation as a domain in which age may confer advantage.

We test our central thesis using a pre-registered five-day diary study with twice-daily surveys completed in situ during workers' daily working lives. This methodology allows us to capture in-the-moment fluctuations in interpersonal emotion regulation motives and behaviours and examine whether and how these processes differ by age. Furthermore, we assess how theoretically relevant contextual features, namely, the intensity of negative emotions experienced by the regulator and the closeness of their relationship with the target, moderate the relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation.

This study contributes to the ageing workforce literature by extending well-established findings on older workers' strengths in *intrapersonal* emotion regulation (e.g., Scheibe et al., 2016) to the less explored domain of *interpersonal* emotion regulation. While recent theoretical work suggests that these age-related advantages may extend to interpersonal emotional regulation (Niven, 2022), empirical work remains scarce. Existing studies focus narrowly on a small set of strategies (Gurera et al., 2022; Jarman & Windsor, 2021), despite theoretical models describing interpersonal emotional regulation as a multi-stage process (Reeck et al., 2016). By adopting multiple indicators of interpersonal emotion regulation that reflect the main stages of the process (motivation, strategy use, and perceived implementation effectiveness), our study offers more comprehensive insight into the relevance of age for why, how, and how well interpersonal emotion regulation is engaged.

By exploring the impact of age, we advance interpersonal emotion regulation research beyond its established effects to consider how individual differences influence this process. We address a critical gap by examining how component stages of the interpersonal emotion regulation process may vary systematically by the regulator's characteristics. While prior research has examined individual differences such as gender (e.g., Parkinson et al., 2016) and personality (e.g., Wickett et al., 2023), age has received limited attention, despite its theoretical relevance in shaping motivational priorities and cognitive-emotional capacities (Niven, 2022; Scheibe & El Khawli, 2025). We therefore extend the range of relevant individual differences by empirically exploring whether age relates to interpersonal emotion regulation.

Finally, by examining the moderating roles of negative emotion intensity and relational closeness, we contribute to calls from interpersonal emotion regulation scholars to account for contextual complexity in understanding when and for whom interpersonal emotion regulation unfolds successfully (Niven, 2025). Rather

than assuming universal age advantages, we explore whether the hypothesized positive relationships between age and adaptive interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes are contingent on the emotional and relational context within which interpersonal emotion regulation occurs. In doing so, we also deepen insight into the theorized age-related strengths of older workers in this domain by investigating whether there are important boundaries to the manifestation of those strengths.

Age and interpersonal emotion regulation

Emotion regulation has traditionally been studied as an intrapersonal process involving the management of one's own emotions (e.g., Gross, 2015; Webb et al., 2012). However, over the past 15 years, scholars have increasingly recognized the social nature of emotion regulation (Niven & López-Pérez, 2025), leading to a growing body of literature on interpersonal emotion regulation. The extrinsic nature of interpersonal emotion regulation is what makes it distinctive, whereby the emotions targeted for influence belong to someone other than the regulator (Niven, 2017).

As a process, interpersonal emotion regulation unfolds over a series of stages, which are articulated in Reeck et al. (2016) social regulatory cycle model. Initially, the regulator evaluates the need for regulation based on the target's current emotion and their own regulatory goals. This stage is driven by the regulator's motivation, which shapes their desire to change the target's feelings. In the next stage, the regulator selects one or more strategies, which are interpersonal behaviours directed towards changing the target's feelings. In the final stage, the regulator implements the regulation, with regulatory attempts varying in effectiveness, as perceived by both the regulator and the target. In the present study, we capture each of these stages of regulation to provide a fuller understanding of how age relates to interpersonal emotion regulation, with a focus on the regulator's perspective on their motivation, strategy use, and their perceptions of implementation effectiveness.

These core aspects of interpersonal emotion regulation may be shaped by age-related changes in motivational priorities and regulatory capacities (Niven, 2022). To explain these age-related dynamics, we integrate two complementary lifespan theories, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) and the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model (Charles, 2010), which together explain how age influences why individuals engage in interpersonal emotion regulation, how they regulate others' emotions, and how effectively they do so in workplace contexts.

Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that age-related changes in time perception influence social motivations (Carstensen et al., 2003). Younger individuals, viewing the future as expansive, prioritize acquiring knowledge and forming new connections, whereas older individuals, perceiving time as limited, focus on emotionally meaningful relationships and positive social interactions (Carstensen et al., 2003). This shift suggests that older workers may have an advantage in interpersonal emotion regulation, particularly in fostering social harmony and emotional well-being in workplace relationships.

While socioemotional selectivity theory focuses on perceptions of the time one has remaining in life, the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model focuses on time already lived and how this provides people with practice and experience across a range of situations, enabling them to build greater expertise and nuance in how they understand and manage emotions (Charles, 2010). Although this expertise and nuance should allow older workers to manage others' emotions more effectively in routine social interactions, the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model adds complexity to our understanding of ageing by acknowledging that ageing brings both advantages *and* limitations. In particular, it explains that age-related changes in physiological and cognitive resources may influence how older workers allocate regulatory effort, particularly in high-intensity or sustained emotional situations, such that emotionally demanding situations may encourage more selective allocation of interpersonal emotion regulation efforts.

The following sections explore how ageing influences workers' motivation to regulate others' emotions, their selection of regulatory strategies, and the effectiveness of their regulatory implementation, while also considering how contextual factors moderate these relationships.

Age and motivation for interpersonal emotion regulation

Motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation refers to one's drive or willingness to invest time, effort and emotional resources in managing others' emotions. Age-related motivational shifts lead older people to prioritize emotional well-being (Carstensen et al., 2003), seeking out interactions that increase positive emotions and avoiding negative interactions (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). This also extends to the workplace, where older employees may become more invested in maintaining positive social

environments and regulating others' emotions to preserve harmony and relational satisfaction.

This motivation appears to manifest in observable behavioural patterns. Older workers more frequently offer emotional and social support to colleagues (Chi et al., 2023; Huffaker & Lai, 2007) and show stronger prosocial tendencies driven by empathy (Beadle et al., 2015), reflecting greater sensitivity to others' emotions. This emotional attunement likely strengthens their motivation to regulate others' emotions in ways that maintain valued relationships.

Consistent with this, older adults prioritize others' needs even when doing so requires personal effort or cost. They exert more effort to help others (Lockwood et al., 2021), act more altruistically towards positively perceived recipients (Rosi et al., 2019) and display greater empathic concern that partly explains their prosocial motivation (Sze et al., 2012). In workplace contexts, this heightened prosocial orientation means that older employees are particularly motivated to regulate colleagues' emotions, often favouring emotionally meaningful goals, such as supporting others, over instrumental aims, such as career advancement (Shavit et al., 2023).

The strengths and vulnerabilities integration model also suggests that as people age, they develop a greater ability to recognize and interpret emotions (Charles, 2010), leading to greater emotional attunement and hence greater motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation, aligning with their social goals. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that age-related shifts in motivation and prosociality contribute to a stronger drive to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation in workplace interactions. We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Age will be positively related to motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace.

Age and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies

Interpersonal emotion regulation strategies vary in the extent to which they engage with the target's emotions, with some requiring more cognitive and emotional investment than others (MacCann et al., 2025; Niven et al., 2009). High-engagement strategies demand greater attentional focus, emotional sensitivity, and direct interaction with the target's emotions. These include cognitive reframing (e.g., helping a colleague view a setback as a learning opportunity),

receptive listening (e.g., actively validating a co-worker's feelings), valuing (e.g., expressing appreciation for a colleague's efforts), and direct action (e.g., assisting a colleague in resolving an issue) (MacCann et al., 2025). In contrast, low-engagement strategies require minimal cognitive and emotional effort, often involving disengagement from the target's emotional experience. These include expressive suppression (e.g., encouraging a colleague to put on a brave face) and downward social comparison (e.g., suggesting that others have it worse to minimize a colleague's concerns) (MacCann et al., 2025).

The empirical link between age and the use of these strategies is unclear. While studies have found cognitive reframing to be commonly used and expressive suppression among the least used strategies across age groups (Gurera et al., 2022; Jarman & Windsor, 2021), few age-related differences have been observed, except that one study reported a negative relationship between age and the high-engagement strategy of direct action (Jarman & Windsor, 2021). However, these findings may not generalize to workplace contexts because prior samples included adults beyond typical working ages and relied on laboratory settings (Gurera et al., 2022; Jarman & Windsor, 2021).

In contrast to the limited empirical evidence, relevant theories suggest that age may influence the use of regulation strategies. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003) posits that older adults' focus on emotionally meaningful goals may predispose them to greater use of high-engagement strategies that provide emotional support, validation, and strengthen workplace relationships (MacCann et al., 2025). Conversely, older workers, focused on preserving close and supportive relationships, may be less inclined to use low-engagement strategies that create emotional distance and disengagement. Further, the prioritization of positive emotional states (Livingstone & Isaacowitz, 2021) and exhibition of greater emotional empathy and concern for others (Beadle & de la Vega, 2019) may also lead older workers to favour interpersonal emotion regulation strategies that attend closely to others' emotional needs, reinforcing the likelihood of high-engagement strategy use. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Age will be (a) positively related to the use of high-engagement interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (i.e., cognitive reframing, direct action, valuing, and receptive listening) and (b) negatively related to the use of low-engagement interpersonal emotion regulation strategies (i.e., expressive suppression and downward social comparison).

Age and interpersonal emotion regulation implementation effectiveness

Age may also be associated with changes in how regulators perceive the effectiveness of their interpersonal emotion regulation attempts. The strengths and vulnerabilities integration model (Charles, 2010) suggests that older adults' accumulated interpersonal knowledge and regulatory experience support more nuanced and context-sensitive emotional interventions. This experience helps them anticipate others' emotional reactions, tailor their approach to the specific relational and emotional context and adjust the timing and intensity of their regulatory efforts (Niven, 2022). Older adults show greater emotional understanding (Blanchard-Fields, 2007) and contextual sensitivity in social situations (Hess et al., 2004), as well as stronger integrative thinking in emotionally complex scenarios (Labouvie-Vief, 2003). All these skills are essential for effective interpersonal emotion regulation and may therefore enhance older workers' perceptions of their effectiveness in this area.

The strengths and vulnerabilities model further emphasizes that age-related changes in cognitive and physiological functioning shape the selective allocation of emotional resources. Older adults increasingly rely on crystallized intelligence (i.e., accumulated social knowledge and experience) to regulate emotions efficiently and strategically (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013). As a result, interpersonal emotion regulation strategies that may appear effortful can often be applied more automatically, reducing the cognitive demands of implementation. This efficiency is likely to be particularly evident among working-aged older adults, for whom accumulated experience may outweigh potential situational constraints. Consequently, older workers may enact emotionally supportive behaviours with minimal effort due to a lifetime of repeated social engagement, reflecting adaptive optimization, again enhancing their perceptions of effective regulatory implementation. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Age will be positively associated with perceived effectiveness in interpersonal emotion regulation implementation.

While the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model suggests a direct effect of age on implementation effectiveness, the hypothesized associations between age and other facets of interpersonal emotion regulation, namely, motivation and strategy use, may also confer benefits for implementation. If older workers are more motivated towards interpersonal emotion regulation, they are likely to expend more effort in their attempts to manage others' feelings and to be more

attentive and responsive during the regulation process. They may also be driven to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation more authentically, because the worker wants to rather than because they feel they have to (e.g., as part of their job role; Niven, 2016). These greater and more authentic efforts could translate into enhanced perceptions of effectiveness in the implementation of interpersonal emotion regulation.

Moreover, older workers' expected patterns of interpersonal emotion regulation strategy use may also link to successful regulation implementation. Research comparing the effects of high-engagement and low-engagement strategies consistently reports that high-engagement strategies are associated with more positive outcomes than low-engagement strategies (e.g., Kunst et al., 2025; Little et al., 2013; MacCann et al., 2025). Thus, if older workers are more likely to use strategies that generate positive outcomes, such as enhanced target affect and well-being or relational satisfaction, and less likely to use strategies that fail to deliver such benefits, this may benefit their perceptions of implementation effectiveness. We therefore set the following exploratory research question:

Exploratory Research Question: Is there an indirect positive effect of age on perceived implementation effectiveness via (a) motivation towards interpersonal emotion regulation or (b) use of interpersonal emotion regulation strategies?

The moderating role of relational closeness and negative emotion intensity

While age has been theorized to influence interpersonal emotion regulation, the effects we propose may depend on situational features of the social interaction. Drawing from life span developmental theories, we propose that two contextually relevant features, the intensity of negative emotion experienced by the regulator and the regulator's closeness to the target, moderate the relationships between age and interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes.

Relational closeness to the target

Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003) suggests that the benefits of ageing for interpersonal emotion regulation may be bounded by closeness, that is, the extent to which a worker feels a sense of closeness in their relationship with the person whose emotions they are regulating. As the theory suggests, individuals increasingly prioritize emotionally meaningful goals and relationships as they age (Carstensen et al., 2003; Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). This motivational shift leads older adults to selectively invest their time

and emotional energy in interactions with close, trusted others, while disengaging from superficial or less emotionally rewarding exchanges (English & Carstensen, 2014). Moreover, they structure their social networks to favour close relationships and tend to disengage from more peripheral ones (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

In workplace contexts, this means that the motivational gains of ageing, which influence older workers' drive to expend effort in regulation and the choice of high-engagement (and avoidance of low-engagement) strategies, and their perceived implementation effectiveness, may be evident only, or at least more apparently, when interacting with individuals they perceive as emotionally close, such as trusted colleagues, supervisors, or subordinates. Conversely, when interacting with distant or unfamiliar others, these emotionally rewarding goals may not be activated, reducing the benefits otherwise expected to be associated with age.

Hypothesis 4: The regulator's relational closeness to the target will moderate the positive relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation motivation, strategy use and perceived implementation effectiveness. Specifically:

H4a. Lower closeness will weaken the positive relationship between age and motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation.

H4b. Lower closeness will weaken the positive relationship between age and the use of high-engagement strategies.

H4c. Lower closeness will weaken the negative relationship between age and the use of low-engagement strategies.

H4d. Lower closeness will weaken the positive relationship between age and perceived implementation effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation.

Negative emotion intensity

The strengths and vulnerabilities integration model (Charles, 2010) suggests that older adults generally demonstrate strong emotion regulation capacities, rooted in accumulated experience and motivational priorities, but that the expression of these strengths is context-dependent. In particular, situations involving high and sustained emotional arousal may shape how older adults allocate regulatory effort. While such situations can be demanding, older workers often encounter a different mix of socio-emotional stressors, facing fewer unfamiliar challenges but navigating more layered or less controllable interpersonal contexts. In these situations, they may draw on accumulated

experience, motivational priorities, and refined regulatory expertise to allocate emotional resources strategically, prioritizing emotional stability or selective engagement rather than sustained effortful regulation.

This situational vulnerability is especially relevant for interpersonal emotion regulation, where the regulator must not only manage their own emotional response but also attend to and respond to the emotional needs of another person (Niven & López-Pérez, 2025). For example, an older worker experiencing frustration during a heated disagreement with a colleague may prioritize emotional self-regulation or disengagement to prevent escalation, rather than investing in effortful interpersonal emotion regulation.

As a result, high negative emotion intensity may reduce older adults' motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation relative to emotionally stable contexts because emotionally intense situations may be less compatible with their prioritization of emotional stability and meaningful engagement. High emotional demands might also affect strategy selection where older workers may be less inclined to use cognitively or emotionally demanding high-engagement strategies, instead favouring low-effort strategies. Ultimately, this could lead to reduced opportunities to enact regulation smoothly or deliberately, limiting perceived effectiveness despite their accumulated expertise. Hence, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5: The intensity of negative emotions experienced by the regulator will moderate the positive relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation motivation, strategy use and perceived implementation effectiveness. Specifically:

H5a. High negative emotion intensity will weaken the positive relationship between age and motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation.

H5b. High negative emotion intensity will weaken the positive relationship between age and the use of high-engagement strategies.

H5c. High negative emotion intensity will weaken the negative relationship between age and the use of low-engagement strategies.

H5d. High negative emotion intensity will weaken the positive relationship between age and perceived implementation effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation.

Methods

Design and participants

We conducted a five-day experience sampling study with two daily surveys over one work week to capture interpersonal emotion regulation among working adults. Participants were recruited via Prolific, an online crowdsourcing platform frequently used in behavioural science research, known for producing high-quality data (Peer et al., 2017) that enables pre-screening to meet specific study criteria (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Eligible participants were between 18 and 66 years old, fluent in English, held a full-time (9 am–5 pm, Monday to Friday) office-based job involving regular employee interactions, and were currently living and working in the UK or Ireland. Those reporting an ongoing mental health condition were excluded. Participants received £2.50 for completing the baseline survey and £0.45 for each of the twice-daily surveys. To encourage sustained participation, a £2 bonus was provided to those who completed at least 80% of the daily surveys.

Before the start of the work week, a baseline survey assessed participants' demographics and general use of interpersonal emotion regulation strategies at work. During the following week, participants received surveys daily via Prolific at 1 pm and 5 pm, Monday through Friday. Each survey asked participants to report on their most memorable interaction during the relevant time period (covering the 4 hours preceding the survey notification¹), in which a colleague, supervisor, subordinate or customer expressed negative emotions. With reference to that interaction, participants answered questions about their motivation to regulate the interaction partner's emotions, strategies used, perceived effectiveness, negative emotion intensity experienced and perceived closeness with the interaction partner. To prevent participants from reporting no interaction just to save time, they completed an alternative survey of equivalent length on emotional self-regulation at work.

Our primary interest was to examine the influence of age on interpersonal emotion regulation, therefore, we stratified recruitment across three age groups, 18–35, 36–50, and 51–66, to ensure a broad and balanced age range across the sample. However, we analysed age as a continuous variable. Of the 286 individuals who completed the baseline survey, 13 were excluded for failing the attention checks² and another 54 were removed for either completing no daily surveys or reporting no relevant workplace interactions. Our final sample, therefore, consisted of 219 employed adults ranging from 18 to 66 years ($M = 42.41$, $SD = 11.26$). Job tenure in their current role ranged from 1

to 37 years ($M = 7.23$, $SD = 6.80$), and total work experience ranged from 1 to 45 years ($M = 15.18$, $SD = 10.80$). Of the sample, 54% identified as men, 45% as women, and 1% as a third gender. In terms of the employment sector, 56% worked in the private sector, 36% in the public sector, and 8% in the non-profit sector. Participants' job roles were distributed across several levels: entry-level (15%), mid-level (35%), managerial (33%), senior-level (14%), and executive-level (3%). Participants worked across various industries, with education (15%), finance (14%), and health-care (12%) leading, with the remainder comprising sectors such as manufacturing and public services.

On average, participants completed their diaries on 8.5 out of 10 occasions during the week, resulting in a compliance rate of 85%. A little under half of all diary completions pertained to relevant interactions within which interpersonal emotion regulation could have occurred, with a total of 791 relevant interactions reported across the study, averaging 3.6 ($SD = 2.25$, range: 1–10) interactions per participant. This variability was accounted for using multilevel analysis (Maas & Hox, 2004). These interactions were primarily with colleagues (51%), followed by customers/clients (22%), supervisors (12%), and subordinates (12%).

This study was approved by the ethics review board of the authors' university. In accordance with best practice for Open Research, we pre-registered the study hypotheses, design, measures, and planned analyses at https://osf.io/ctp8h/overview?view_only=e8bb03279119453482084c05d7270e0f before collecting data.

Measures

Baseline survey

Regulation of Others' Emotions Scale (ROES). The ROES (MacCann et al., 2025) measures eight extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation strategies: expressive suppression, downward social comparison, humour, distraction, direct action, cognitive reframing, valuing, and receptive listening. Although our study hypotheses pertain specifically to high-engagement and low-engagement strategies, we decided to also capture the two moderate-engagement strategies (humour, distraction) that the scale includes, to allow exploratory investigations into any links with age. Each strategy is measured using 4 items, rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .79 (cognitive reframing) to .92 (valuing). The scale was used at baseline to validate the single-item daily diary measures by

correlating them with the multi-item measures capturing general strategy preferences.

Daily survey

Motivation. Participants reported their motivation to regulate the other person's emotions using a single-item rating from 1 (not very motivated) to 5 (very motivated). Single-item measures are appropriate for clearly defined constructs in diary studies requiring repeated measurement (R. A. Matthews et al., 2022). This item was adapted from prior interpersonal emotion regulation research using experience sampling methods (Tran et al., 2023), supporting its construct validity in this context.

Interpersonal emotion regulation strategies. For each interaction, participants rated the extent to which they used each of eight strategies drawn from the ROES (MacCann et al., 2025) on a 5-point scale. To minimize participant burden while retaining validity, each strategy was measured using the single item with the highest factor loading from the original scale. Each item was validated against its corresponding baseline subscale, showing strong positive correlations (all $ps < .001$) and confirming reliable construct capture in the diary context (See Supplementary Materials Table S1).

Perceived implementation effectiveness. Participants rated the perceived effectiveness of their interpersonal emotion regulation efforts using a single item asking how they believed the emotional state of the interaction partner had changed by the end of the interaction. Participants indicated whether the target's emotions worsened, remained the same, or improved after interaction. This approach is consistent with prior work using similar single-item measures to capture perceived effectiveness (e.g., M. Matthews et al., 2022, Study 3).

Relational closeness. We used the inclusion of others in the self scale (Aron et al., 1992) to assess participants' closeness to their interaction partners. This single-item scale measures how close the regulator feels to a given "other" asking participants to select one of seven diagrams as a representation of their relationship, which vary in the degree of overlap between two circles, one representing the participant and one the interaction partner, ranging from no overlap (representing the lowest possible closeness) to almost total overlap (representing the highest possible closeness).

Emotional intensity. To measure the intensity of negative emotion experienced by the participant, they reported how negative they felt when the target person expressed their emotions with them (similar to Claus et al., 2025), on a scale of 1 (not very negative) to 10 (extremely negative).

Analytic approach

We used multilevel modelling in SPSS Version 29 to test our hypotheses, given the hierarchical structure of the data (observations nested within individuals). Level 1 predictors and moderators (e.g., perceived closeness) were person-mean centred, while the Level 2 predictor (age) was grand-mean centred. Models included random intercepts for participants to account for individual differences in outcome variables, and random slopes for within-person predictors where model convergence permitted. Gender was considered as a potential control variable, but it was not included in any hypothesis-testing analyses because it was not significantly related to any interpersonal emotion regulation variables (see Table 1).

First, we tested the main effects of age on the motivation to regulate others' emotions (H1), use of high-engagement strategies and low-engagement strategies (H2), and perceived implementation effectiveness (H3). Separate mixed linear models were specified for each outcome variable, with age included as a fixed Level 2 predictor. To account for the categorical nature of the perceived effectiveness measure, hypothesis 3 was tested using generalized linear mixed models, while other continuous outcomes were tested using linear mixed models. Outcome variables measured at Level 1 were regressed on age, and residuals were allowed to covary where appropriate. We also conducted multilevel

mediation analyses in Mplus Version 8 to test our exploratory research question about the potential indirect effect of age on perceived implementation effectiveness via motivation and strategy use. The mediation had a 2–1–1 structure, with the predictor (age) at Level 2, and mediator and outcome variables at Level 1.

We next examined the moderating role of relational closeness (H4) and negative emotion intensity (H5) in the relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes. To do so, we decomposed each moderator into within-person (person-mean centred) and between-person (grand-mean centred) components and tested their interactions with age. This modelling approach allowed us to simultaneously estimate the effects of both within- and between-person moderator variation, and to test whether age effects differed depending on fluctuations or stable levels in relational closeness or negative emotion intensity. All models were estimated using restricted maximum likelihood estimation. Fixed effects were evaluated based on 95% confidence intervals, and model fit was assessed using Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC).

Results

Descriptive analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, intra-class correlations (ICCs), and correlations among key variables at the person and event levels. ICCs for continuous variables were computed by fitting unconditional null models (i.e., models without predictors) using the SPSS Mixed Models procedure. For perceived implementation effectiveness, the ICC was estimated using a generalized linear mixed model to account for its ordinal nature,

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, intra-class correlations, and correlations between study variables.

	Mean (SD)	ICC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Person-level	42.41 (11.26)															
1. Age	–		–													
2. Gender				–												
Event-level																
3. Motivation	3.15 (1.15)	.34	.16	–.09	–	.19	.14	.16	.35	.47	.35	.41	.40	.46	.15	.23
4. Expressive suppression	1.34 (.80)	.42	–.11	–.05	.15	–	.56	.34	.31	.24	.30	.21	.07	.14	.14	.22
5. Downward social comparison	1.46 (.93)	.51	–.07	–.32	.13	.73	–	.33	.35	.21	.32	.20	.12	.87	.08	.21
6. Humour	1.95 (1.19)	.41	–.32	–.12	.14	.38	.40	–	.41	.16	.15	.27	.15	.26	.28	.07
7. Distraction	2.44 (1.30)	.41	–.07	–.07	.40	.38	.44	.45	–	.41	.46	.40	.25	.28	.22	.19
8. Direct action	2.50 (1.37)	.42	.05	–.10	.51	.31	.29	.20	.56	–	.39	.34	.45	.22	–.02	.19
9. Cognitive reframing	2.41 (1.31)	.38	.07	–.06	.35	.41	.43	.20	.58	.49	–	.30	.23	.19	.07	.21
10. Valuing	2.72 (1.40)	.46	.04	–.10	.48	.28	.21	.25	.43	.44	.34	–	.34	.28	.21	.10
11. Receptive listening	3.67 (1.33)	.44	.07	.15	.48	.05	.10	.08	.27	.28	.22	.38	–	.22	.12	.18
12. Implementation effectiveness	2.61 (0.53)	.18	.13	–.02	.61	–.02	.00	.14	.21	.37	.18	.30	.29	–	.09	–.11
13. Relational closeness	3.09 (1.58)	.39	–.01	.12	.18	.08	.00	.23	.13	.00	.02	.16	.14	.12	–	.21
14. Negative emotion intensity	4.43 (2.22)	.35	.11	–.09	.20	.31	.26	.10	.28	.27	.37	.23	.15	.01	.13	–

Note. Correlations below the diagonal represent between-person associations, while those above the diagonal represent within-person associations. Correlations involving *implementation effectiveness* are Spearman's rank correlation coefficients; all other values represent Pearson's *r*. Correlations shown in bold are significant at $p < .05$.

assuming a latent level 1 variance of 3.29 (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). The ICCs ranged from .18 (perceived implementation effectiveness) to .51 (downward social comparison), indicating substantial variance at both the within- and between-person levels, justifying the use of multilevel analysis.

As per Table 1, age was significantly associated with only one interpersonal emotion regulation strategy, humour (moderate engagement), wherein the use of humour for interpersonal emotion regulation was negatively associated with age. Age also showed a significant positive correlation with motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation, but it was not significantly related to other interpersonal emotion regulation measures.

Age and interpersonal emotion regulation

Table 2 summarizes the multilevel models testing age as a predictor of interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes. Age was significantly positively associated with motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation ($B = 0.014$, $SE = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.004, 0.024], $p < .01$), suggesting that older participants were more motivated to regulate others' emotions during workplace interactions, supporting hypothesis 1. However, age was unrelated to the use of low-or high-engagement strategies. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported. Finally, for perceived implementation effectiveness, the generalized linear mixed model revealed a significant positive association with age ($B = 0.019$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = .035$). The calculated odds ratio ($OR = 1.019$, 95% CI [1.001, 1.037]) indicates that for every one-year increase in age, participants were approximately 2% more likely to report a higher category of effectiveness (e.g., moving from indicating that the target's mood "remained the same" to "improved"). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Given the null results for the effect of age on strategy use, we excluded the possibility of an indirect effect of age on implementation effectiveness via strategy use. However, given the significant effect of age on motivation, we conducted an exploratory analysis to examine the possibility of an indirect effect via motivation (see Supplementary Materials Table S2). Here, we found that motivation was significantly positively related to perceived implementation effectiveness ($B = 0.748$, $SE = 0.055$, $p = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.2646, 0.861]). Moreover, the between-person indirect effect of age on perceived implementation effectiveness via motivation was statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.011, $SE = 0.004$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.003, 0.019]). Thus, age showed a significant indirect association with perceived implementation effectiveness via motivation.³

Role of relational closeness and negative emotion intensity

Hypothesis 4 predicted that relational closeness would moderate the positive relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes (motivation, strategy use, and perceived implementation effectiveness). As shown in Table 3, relational closeness was positively associated with motivation and several strategies (humour, distraction, valuing, and receptive listening). However, it did not significantly moderate the relationship between age and any interpersonal emotion regulation outcome. Hypothesis 4 is therefore rejected.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that negative emotion intensity would moderate the positive relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes. As shown in Table 3, negative emotion intensity was positively associated with motivation and the use of all eight strategies, suggesting that the worse people personally feel, the more likely they are to engage in interpersonal

Table 2. Multi-level Estimates for age and interpersonal emotion regulation motivation, strategy and implementation effectiveness.

	Estimates (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Motivation	.014 (.005)	.004, .024	.010
<i>Low Engagement Strategies</i>			
Expressive suppression	-.007 (.004)	-.014, .001	.074
Downward social comparison	-.005 (.005)	-.014, .004	.277
<i>Moderate Engagement Strategies</i>			
Humour	-.029 (.005)	-.039, -.018	<.001
Distraction	-.007 (.006)	-.019, .005	.259
<i>High Engagement Strategies</i>			
Direct action	.005 (.007)	-.008, .018	.429
Cognitive reframing	.004 (.006)	-.008, .016	.556
Valuing	.005 (.007)	-.009, .018	.477
Receptive listening	.007 (.006)	-.006, .020	.296
Implementation effectiveness	.019 (.008)	.001, .036	.035

Note. Level 1 $N = 791$; Level 2 $N = 219$. Values shown in bold are significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3. Multi-level estimates for moderators of relationship age and interpersonal emotion regulation motivation, strategy and implementation effectiveness.

Outcomes	Relational closeness			Age × Relational closeness			Negative emotion intensity			Age × Negative emotion intensity		
	Estimates (SE)	95% CI	p-value	Estimates (SE)	95% CI	p-value	Estimates (SE)	95% CI	p-value	Estimates (SE)	95% CI	p-value
Motivation	.123 (.047)	.031, .214	.009	-.002 (.004)	-.010, .007	.67	.113 (.034)	.046, .180	.001	.000 (.003)	-.006, .006	.92
<i>Low Engagement Strategies</i>												
Expressive suppression	.049 (.035)	-.020, .117	.16	-.003 (.003)	-.009, .004	.41	.127 (.025)	.079, .175	<.001	-.005 (.002)	-.010, -.001	.013
Downward social comparison	.010 (.042)	-.072, .093	.80	.001 (.004)	-.007, .008	.85	.127 (.030)	.069, .186	<.001	-.004 (.003)	-.010, .001	.10
<i>Moderate Engagement Strategies</i>												
Humour	.191 (.047)	.099, .282	<.001	-.003 (.004)	-.012, .005	.42	.074 (.036)	.004, .145	.040	-.003 (.003)	-.010, .003	.30
Distraction	.124 (.055)	.015, .234	.03	.003 (.005)	-.007, .013	.61	.169 (.040)	.089, .249	<.001	-.001 (.004)	-.008, .006	.84
<i>High Engagement Strategies</i>												
Direct action	.003 (.060)	-.115, .121	.97	.008 (.006)	-.002, .019	.12	.159 (.044)	.073, .244	<.001	.004 (.004)	-.004, .012	.30
Cognitive reframing	.030 (.056)	-.081, .141	.59	.002 (.005)	-.008, .012	.72	.216 (.039)	.138, .294	<.001	-.002 (.004)	-.009, .005	.62
Valuing	.174 (.061)	.054, .294	.005	-.007 (.006)	-.018, .004	.20	.156 (.046)	.067, .246	<.001	.001 (.004)	-.007, .009	.77
Receptive listening	.118 (.059)	-.002, .234	.047	.001 (.005)	-.009, .012	.80	.108 (.044)	.023, .194	.014	-.004 (.004)	-.012, .003	.26
Implementation effectiveness	.124 (.082)	-.037, .286	.13	.003 (.008)	-.012, .018	.69	.012 (.061)	-.108, .131	.85	.000 (.005)	-.011, .011	.99

Note. Level 1 $N = 791$; Level 2 $N = 219$. Values shown in bold are significant at $p < .05$.

emotion regulation. However, and contrary to hypothesis 5, we found little evidence of moderation. The only significant interaction was for expressive suppression ($B = -0.005$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = .013$, 95% CI $[-0.010, -0.001]$), indicating that older adults were less likely to use expressive suppression when emotional intensity was high. This effect ran in the opposite direction to predictions: we had expected high emotional intensity to weaken (rather than strengthen) the negative association between age and low-engagement strategies. Overall, the results suggest that negative emotion intensity does not moderate the relationship between age and interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes, leading us to reject hypothesis 5.

Discussion

Drawing on socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003) and the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model (Charles, 2010), the present study examined whether age is associated with why, how, and how well people regulate others' emotions at work, as well as whether these effects depend on the contextual factors of negative emotion intensity and relational closeness. Our findings highlight salient associations between age and core aspects of the interpersonal emotion regulation process and further advance our understanding of

interpersonal emotion regulation by demonstrating that age-related changes in motivation, rather than strategy selection, are the important driver of regulators' perceived implementation effectiveness.

Consistent with theory, age was positively associated with both motivation to regulate others' emotions and perceived implementation effectiveness. While age was not directly associated with the use of specific strategies, pointing to the possibility that strategy choice in professional settings is more strongly shaped by organizational norms and situational demands, there was some limited evidence (through exploratory serial mediation analysis) of age-related motivational changes enhancing the perceived regulatory effectiveness of older workers via greater use of moderate engagement strategies (humour and distraction) and certain high engagement strategies (valuing and receptive listening).

Theoretical implications

The present study advances understanding of ageing and interpersonal emotion regulation in three key ways. First, our findings contribute to the ageing workforce literature by extending the well-documented strengths of older adults in emotion self-regulation (e.g., Doerwald et al., 2016; Scheibe et al., 2016) to the

less-explored interpersonal domain. We show that older workers have advantages in heightened motivation and perceived effectiveness in interpersonal emotion regulation, providing some of the first empirical evidence that age-related emotional advantages extend to social and relational processes at work. In doing so, the findings support theoretical claims (e.g., Niven, 2022) that socioemotional selectivity processes and accumulated emotional experience enhance not only how older adults manage their own emotions but also how they approach others' emotions. This broader perspective challenges deficit-based stereotypes of older workers (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2012) and recognizes them as valuable relational and emotional resources in organizations.

Second, our findings highlight that motivation, rather than strategy choice alone, drives perceived effectiveness in managing others' feelings. While existing interpersonal emotion regulation literature, and the nascent literature on age and interpersonal emotion regulation specifically (e.g., Gurera et al., 2022), focus on interpersonal emotion regulation strategies, our findings reinforce motivation as the driving force behind regulation and its effects. Heightened motivation fosters greater effort, attentional engagement, and persistence, making interpersonal regulatory attempts more likely to be perceived as effective. By identifying motivation as the key mechanism linking age and perceived effectiveness, we extend interpersonal emotion regulation theory beyond simple behavioural execution, highlighting how internal goals are linked to the regulatory process.

Our findings refine the understanding of the relationship between motivation and strategy use. Although older workers did not systematically use more high-engagement strategies than younger workers, our serial mediation revealed a more complex motivational pathway. Age-related motivation prompts older workers to use moderate engagement strategies (humour and distraction) and a few high engagement strategies (receptive listening and valuing), which, in turn, are associated with greater perceived effectiveness. This implies that the motivational shifts associated with age direct older workers towards using strategies that align more closely with their emotional goals and foster social harmony. This refines socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003), suggesting that age-related goals translate into effectiveness via the targeted, motivationally driven selection of specific strategies rather than broad shifts in repertoire. Older workers' heightened intentionality when using strategies such as listening or valuing may thus lead to a greater sense of regulatory success.

Third, our findings highlight the importance of contextual influences in interpersonal emotion regulation.

Contrary to the prediction of the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003), relational closeness did not moderate age effects, suggesting that older workers' enhanced motivation extends broadly across workplace interactions and relationships. However, relational closeness exerted strong direct effects, increasing motivation and the use of moderate engagement strategies (e.g., humour and distraction) and some high engagement strategies (e.g., valuing and receptive listening). This aligns with broader literature showing that, regardless of age, closer relationships are associated with more effortful and supportive interpersonal emotion regulation (Niven et al., 2012). It further supports evidence that interpersonal emotion regulation is shaped by relational context rather than stable characteristics alone (Naughton et al., 2024), showing that while age may drive the willingness to regulate, closeness influences the strategy choices.

Similarly, negative emotion intensity did not generally moderate age effects but had a robust direct effect, heightening both motivation and strategy use. Intense negative situations may prompt employees to invest more effort and use a broader range of regulatory strategies. These findings, though they seem inconsistent with the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model's prediction of age-related vulnerabilities under high arousal (Charles, 2010), may reflect the resilience of working-aged older adults. Their accumulated expertise likely enables optimal responses to intense situations through selective resource allocation rather than the cognitive-physiological vulnerability observed in much older populations. Specifically, these vulnerabilities might manifest not as a failure to regulate, but as an avoidance of less effective behaviours. This is evidenced by older workers' reduced use of expressive suppression in high-intensity contexts. By disengaging from this less adaptive strategy when social demands are high, older workers demonstrate a behavioural pattern that aligns with the theoretical prioritization of emotional stability. These findings tentatively suggest that contextual demands may trigger selective resource allocation in older workers, offering deeper insight into the factors influencing interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace.

Practical implications

Our findings offer actionable insights for organizations seeking to capitalize on the strengths of an ageing workforce. Rather than viewing age primarily in terms of experience or tenure, organizations can recognize older employees as important relational resources whose motivational strengths support interpersonal

emotion regulation. First, older employees may possess a valuable psychological readiness for roles that require sustained social-emotional engagement, such as mentoring and onboarding programmes, team facilitation, conflict resolution, and client-facing roles. In these contexts, where success often depends less on technical ability than on the willingness to invest emotional effort, older workers' heightened motivation to regulate others' emotions and their stronger sense of effectiveness in doing so may provide a meaningful asset. This motivational drive suggests that older workers are well-positioned to approach these responsibilities, in a way that supports team functioning and relational outcomes.

Second, as older employees' motivational strengths persist across varying levels of closeness and emotional intensity, organizations can consider these qualities when assigning workers to diverse, cross-functional, and high-pressure settings involving frequent negotiation. Such practices may be useful in addressing a current organizational challenge of maintaining effective collaboration and emotional functioning in increasingly age-diverse and socially complex workplaces. Designing career pathways that value emotional and interpersonal contributions can help retain and engage older talent while supporting collaboration in multigenerational teams.

Third, organizations must create conditions that support interpersonal emotion regulation across the workforce. Because relational closeness fosters more engaging and supportive regulatory strategies, organizations should promote high-quality workplace relationships through mentoring schemes, team-based structures, and supportive leadership practices. Furthermore, as emotionally intense situations trigger increased strategy use across all ages, organizations should invest in training that develops emotion regulation skills for challenging interactions. Such initiatives are most effective when they leverage the motivational strengths older employees bring to emotionally demanding roles.

Ultimately, older workers' motivational advantages are an under-recognized resource. By designing roles and development opportunities that capitalize on these strengths, organizations can counteract age-related stereotypes and build more resilient, collaborative, and emotionally competent workplaces.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, self-reports in the experience sampling method introduce potential for retrospective bias (Stone et al., 2023) and common method variance (Gabriel et al.,

2019). Although experience sampling captures ecologically valid within-person processes, our fixed schedule may not always have coincided with when regulation occurred, and responses may have been shaped by current mood or subjective interpretation. While person-mean centring and repeated measurement helped mitigate these issues, future studies could employ event-contingent sampling protocols to assess interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes immediately following emotional workplace interactions, increasing temporal precision.

Second, our study relied solely on regulators' self-reports of perceived effectiveness and closeness, rather than corroborating these with the perceptions of the target of regulation. This limits the conclusions we can draw about actual changes in the target's emotional state or mutual closeness. Future dyadic designs, where both the regulator and target report on the same interaction, could yield more robust insights into how interpersonal emotion regulation unfolds in the work context and whether age influences its effectiveness, as recognized by targets of regulation.

Third, while we drew on socioemotional selectivity theory to explore how perceived closeness shapes motivation and strategy selection, we did not directly examine the role of the specific social target (e.g., colleague, subordinate, supervisor). Interpersonal dynamics and power relationships likely influence the type and effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation, and these effects may differ across age ranges. Future studies could more explicitly incorporate target identity to understand how older and younger employees adapt regulation strategies across diverse workplace relationships.

Finally, the emotional demands assessed may not have been sufficiently intense or prolonged to elicit the vulnerabilities proposed by the strengths and vulnerabilities integration model. The limited interactions observed between age and emotional intensity suggest that the model's vulnerability component may only emerge under more extreme or chronic stress conditions. Future research might investigate interpersonal emotion regulation during acute workplace crises (e.g., conflict) or longer-term pressures (e.g., burnout) to better test these theoretical boundaries.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that age is a meaningful demographic factor influencing motivation and perceived effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation during negative workplace interactions. Older workers tend to be more motivated to regulate others' emotions and to

hold greater perceptions of their effectiveness when implementing interpersonal emotion regulation. Thus, standing in contrast to popularized views that age is detrimental to workplace effectiveness, organizations may be able to harness the strengths of older workers in roles that require emotional engagement with others.

Notes

1. The relevant period at 1 pm diary entries pertained to the period since they began their working day, while the relevant period at 5 pm entries pertained to the period since they last completed the diary, meaning that for both daily entries, the period covered approximately 4 hours. There was no chance of overlap in the time periods.
2. We included two attention-check questions in the baseline survey that asked the participants to select a specific response (e.g., "To ensure you are paying attention, please select 'Disagree'"). Only participants who answered both correctly were invited to the daily diary study.
3. Given that motivation was positively associated with use of all interpersonal emotion regulation strategies and that many of the strategies were positively associated with perceived implementation effectiveness, we conducted exploratory serial mediation analyses, testing the effect of age on perceived implementation effectiveness via motivation and then regulation strategies (each strategy tested in a separate model). The results, displayed in Supplementary Materials Table S3, provided limited evidence for serial mediation; although four of the eight strategies (humour, distraction, receptive listening, and valuing) showed significant paths, the estimates were exceptionally small, with confidence intervals bounding close to zero.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/efyb8/overview?view_only=46fd8de0703c4ad895f792fa8aa60cb0

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