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AGE AND INTERPERSONAL EMOTION REGULATION IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: Many countries have increased their retirement age in response to an aging population. As a result, the workforce now includes a larger proportion of older workers. Despite prevalent stereotypes about older workers' declining abilities, research suggests that older workers may possess distinctive strengths in terms of emotional skills. In this chapter, we examine whether older workers possess strengths in interpersonal emotion regulation, a process that involves managing the emotions of others, a key feature of workplace interactions that can enhance important outcomes, such as wellbeing, relationship quality, and performance.

Approach: Drawing on key theories of aging, we illustrate how cognitive, emotional, and motivational changes shape individuals' ability to regulate others' emotions effectively. We explore whether perceptions of interpersonal emotion regulation ability may be influenced by the regulator's age, thus considering the possibility that age not only shapes workers' regulation of others' feelings, but also how others react to their regulation attempts. Finally, we reflect on whether the age of the recipient of interpersonal emotion regulation and the age congruence of the people involved in a regulation interaction are salient factors in shaping the nature and effects of interpersonal emotion regulation.

Originality/Value: By integrating lifespan developmental theories, age stereotype theories, and research on interpersonal emotion regulation, this chapter extends existing work on interpersonal emotion regulation and highlights age as a meaningful factor. It also offers a holistic perspective on how this process evolves with age, highlighting the complexities of emotional interactions in age-diverse work environments.

KEYWORDS: age, interpersonal emotion regulation, emotion regulation, older workers, socioemotional selectivity, age stereotypes

Introduction

In workplace interactions, individuals frequently attempt to influence the emotions of others, a process known as interpersonal emotion regulation (Troth et al., 2018). When employed effectively, interpersonal emotion regulation can benefit wellbeing, relationships, and performance within organizations (Niven, 2025; Troth et al., 2018). However, many individual factors can shape why, how, and how well interpersonal emotion regulation is engaged. Emerging research has begun to identify age as an important variable shaping the nature and outcomes of interpersonal emotion regulation (Niven, 2022). Aging is associated with changes in cognitive processing, emotional goals, and social motivations, all of which may influence interpersonal emotion regulation and its consequences (Niven, 2022). Moreover, stereotypes associated with aging may also shape how others react to interpersonal emotion regulation (Springstein et al., 2025), with older workers often being subject to negative stereotypes (e.g., regarding their adaptability and cognitive abilities; Finkelstein et al., 2015), despite the potential for strengths in emotional competencies (Doerwald et al., 2016). Although a small number of studies have examined aspects of interpersonal emotion regulation across different age groups (e.g., Gurera et al., 2022), findings remain unclear, with limited integration of lifespan development theories, age stereotype theories, and workplace applications.

This chapter synthesizes theoretical and empirical evidence to explore how age influences interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace. We consider both *actual* age-related changes in interpersonal emotion regulation and *perceived* age-related changes that shape how others react to older and younger workers. In doing so, we highlight both the strengths and limitations of older and younger workers in managing others' emotions, contributing to a more detailed discussion of age-related emotional competencies in organizations.

We begin by providing an overview of the interpersonal emotion regulation process and its significance in the workplace. Despite increasing interest in emotional competencies at work, relatively little is known about how the ability to influence others' emotions varies across the lifespan. To address this gap, we then explain how key lifespan development theories, which predict age-related shifts in motivation, cognition and behavior, account for age-related differences in interpersonal emotion regulation. We then consider how age can shape others' reactions to the use of interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace focusing on the possibility that, along with regulators' age being a relevant factor, targets' age may also be salient, for example, in shaping how regulators engage in interpersonal emotion regulation and how targets react to such attempts. We conclude by identifying key directions for future research for managing emotions in an age-diverse workforce.

Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Interpersonal emotion regulation refers to emotion regulation that occurs in the context of an interaction or relationship, in which a person (or people) outside of the regulatory target are actively involved (Niven, 2017). There are two main forms of interpersonal emotion regulation: intrinsic and extrinsic (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation occurs when a person is trying to manage their own feelings, using others to facilitate the process. Examples of this might be venting about a difficult situation to a coworker or sharing a concern with one's manager in the hope of receiving emotional support. Extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation occurs when a person is trying to manage someone else's feelings; in other words, the target of regulation is someone other than the regulator. Examples of this might be helping a worried coworker to see a situation in a more positive light or a manager providing comfort to a distressed team member. These examples illustrate that intrinsic and extrinsic forms of interpersonal emotion regulation can often be seen as two sides to the same interaction (Niven & López-Pérez, 2025). In this

chapter, we focus on extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation (referred to hereafter simply as interpersonal emotion regulation). Extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation is a unique process because of the external regulatory target (Niven, 2017), and neuroscientific research has evidenced its distinctive neural basis, drawing, for example, on areas of the brain involved in affective and cognitive aspects of empathy (e.g., Hallam et al., 2014).

A helpful model to understand how (extrinsic) interpersonal emotion regulation unfolds is the social regulatory cycle (Reeck et al., 2016), which conceptualizes interpersonal emotion regulation as a dynamic and interactive cycle, involving a sequence of processing stages for both parties involved, i.e., the regulator and the target. This model allows us to articulate the process from both the perspectives of the regulator and the target.

The regulator's viewpoint involves a set of cognitive and emotional processes to influence the emotional experience of another person (the target). This process unfolds in four key stages, beginning with *identification*, where the regulator attempts to infer the target's emotional state based on expressive behavior and contextual cues (Reeck et al., 2016). Since emotions are not directly observable, this stage requires careful interpretation of available information. Once an emotion is identified, the regulator moves to *evaluation*, determining whether intervention is necessary by assessing the discrepancy between the target's current and desired emotional state. This decision is influenced by both altruistic and self-serving motivations (Reeck et al., 2016) and whether regulation serves an immediate or broader purpose. If intervention is considered necessary, the regulator engages in *strategy selection*, weighing factors such as the target's ability to self-regulate, the suitability of available strategies, and the likely response of the target. Finally, the *implementation* stage involves executing the selected strategy, with its effectiveness depending on the regulator's ability to elicit the desired emotional response. If the initial attempt is unsuccessful (e.g.,

based on feedback from the target), there might be a need to reapply the strategy or select a different approach.

From the target's perspective, interpersonal emotion regulation involves attending to, interpreting, and responding to the regulator's attempts to influence their emotional state. The process begins with emotion elicitation, where external factors, such as the presence and/or actions of the regulator, can serve as triggers (Reeck et al., 2016). These regulatory actions may either initiate or intensify the target's emotional response. Subsequently, the target may or may not recognize the regulator's behavior as a deliberate attempt at regulation. Once recognized, the target engages in appraisal processes, evaluating both their coping resources and the perceived motivation behind the regulator's actions. The final stage involves the target's reactions, which may include authentic or strategic emotional expressions. The target also interprets the regulator's reaction to their emotional expression, which shapes both the perceived effectiveness of the regulation and the nature of future interactions. Viewing interpersonal emotion regulation from the perspective of the regulator and the target in this way highlights that it is a complex, dynamic, multi-stage process shaped by contextual and motivational factors.

Interpersonal Emotion Regulation in the Workplace

Interpersonal emotion regulation is a feature of a wide range of occupational types and across a variety of relationships within the workplace (Groth et al., 2024; Niven, 2025). Within supervisor and subordinate relationships, it can operate in both directions. Supervisors often manage subordinates' emotions through support, recognition, or constructive feedback (Groth et al., 2024). They can also engage in affect-worsening in the form of criticism or negative feedback (Alam & Singh, 2021). Subordinates can also regulate supervisors' emotions (e.g., Pierce, 1999), providing support or positive feedback. Conversely,

affect-worsening interactions may occur when subordinates express negative emotions toward their leaders, potentially due to dissatisfaction or conflict (Groth et al., 2024).

Similarly, interpersonal emotion regulation occurs among coworkers. Employees engage in affect-improving strategies such as offering emotional support, sharing positive experiences, and engaging in collaborative problem-solving (Groth et al., 2024). However, affect-worsening interactions can also arise due to conflicts, competition, or negative social behaviors such as gossip (Gianakos, 2002).

Interpersonal emotion regulation is also prevalent in employee-customer relationships where employees can influence customer satisfaction by fostering positive emotions through empathy, excellent service, and prompt issue resolution (Groth et al., 2024). This is especially evident in frontline roles such as hospitality (e.g, Shulga et al., 2025), healthcare (e.g., Horton et al., 2022), and retail (e.g., Reeck & Onuklu, 2022), where employees have to continuously respond to others' emotional states. In retail, for instance, employees' attempts to regulate customer emotions, such as calming a frustrated shopper, can significantly affect brand evaluations and customer loyalty (Reeck & Onuklu, 2022). Likewise, customers can shape employees' emotional experience, for example, negative interactions (such as customer hostility or ambiguous expectations) can challenge employees' emotional regulation efforts (Rupp & Spencer, 2006).

Effects of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation in the Workplace

Interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace has wide-ranging effects on individuals and organizations, shaping affective experiences, workplace relationships, and job performance (Niven, 2025). Affective outcomes relate to emotional wellbeing, such that successfully improving someone else's emotional state can boost both the target's and the regulator's wellbeing (Niven et al., 2012a; Troth et al., 2018). Conversely, attempts to worsen someone's feelings can negatively affect the regulator (Niven et al., 2012b). Supportive

emotional exchanges among coworkers and supervisors often lead to higher job satisfaction and lower stress levels (Hofmann et al., 2016). Similarly, employees who adeptly manage interpersonal emotions generally experience reduced burnout and emotional exhaustion, suggesting long-term benefits for their wellbeing (Vohra, 2018). Even though regulating others' emotions can be emotionally demanding, receiving positive feedback can reduce the regulator's burden (Martínez-Íñigo et al., 2013).

Interpersonal emotion regulation can also lead to improved workplace relationships, where affect-improving interpersonal emotion regulation can enhance levels of trust, friendship, and quality of exchange of leaders and coworkers with the target (Little et al., 2016; Niven et al., 2012a). Furthermore, strategies such as providing emotional support and empathy can enhance team cohesion and cooperation (Oveis et al., 2020). When team members regulate each other's emotions in a supportive manner, it fosters trust and strengthens relationships within the team (Kazemitabar et al., 2024).

The impact of interpersonal emotion regulation extends to performance outcomes. Employees who feel supported are more likely to remain committed to their organization, boosting productivity and retention (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Effective interpersonal emotion regulation creates an environment where employees feel safe to express their emotions and ideas, leading to increased creativity and problem-solving capabilities (Madrid et al., 2019; Parke et al., 2015). In virtual teams, interpersonal emotion regulation helps to overcome the challenges of remote collaboration and achieving superior performance (Ayoko et al., 2012). Leaders' use of interpersonal emotion regulation to improve team mood can significantly enhance team performance and innovation (Holman & Niven, 2019; Vasquez et al., 2020) while those who induce negative emotions may hinder both (Madrid et al., 2019).

Conclusively, interpersonal emotion regulation is a powerful tool that shapes affective experiences, workplace relationships, and organizational outcomes. It influences daily

interactions at the workplace and has both short-term and long-term implications. However, much of the existing research focuses on interpersonal emotion regulation as a uniform process, overlooking the potential role of individual difference variables such as age. This is a significant oversight, particularly given the increasing age diversity in modern workplaces. As people age, they undergo changes that may affect how they regulate others' emotions and how their efforts are received. In the next section, we explore why age is an important yet under-examined factor in understanding interpersonal emotion regulation at work.

The Relevance of Age

In this chapter, we advance the position that age might be a particularly salient individual difference factor when it comes to interpersonal emotion regulation. Emotional regulation abilities are thought to continue to develop throughout adulthood (Gross, 2015) and individuals' age can shape how they are perceived by others (Freund & Isaacowitz, 2014). The existing research on age and emotion regulation has focused on how older individuals regulate their own emotions, with findings suggesting that aging is associated with improved emotional self-regulation (Scheibe et al., 2016) and greater use of adaptive self-regulation strategies (Urry & Gross, 2010). However, far less attention has been given to interpersonal emotion regulation, despite its critical role in leadership, teamwork, and overall workplace wellbeing (Niven, 2025; Troth et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need to shift focus toward understanding how age influences the ability to regulate others' emotions.

Yet, the literature tends to emphasize age-related deficits more than strengths, which has implications for how age is framed in workplace contexts. Much of the extant literature on aging in the workplace focuses on the challenges associated with older age, such as potential cognitive decline (Salthouse, 2012). Negative stereotypes about older workers also persist, often portraying them as less adaptable or resistant to change (Finkelstein et al., 2015). Such perceptions can contribute to workplace discrimination and exclusion, despite

empirical evidence that older workers, by and large, remain productive and engaged (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Greater recognition of the potential emotional strengths of older workers could therefore help to create a more effective age-diverse workplace.

The need to portray a more balanced perspective on aging and its implications for workforce abilities is especially pronounced in Western contexts, where populations are aging due to increased life expectancy and declining birth rates (World Health Organization, 2022). Consequently, older adults remain in employment for longer, contributing to a multigenerational workforce (Burton et al., 2019). In Europe, for example, work-life expectancy has increased from 32.4 years in 2002 to 35.9 years in 2019 (Eurostat, 2023), while in the UK, people over 50 now comprise more than 30% of the workforce, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, education, and manufacturing (CIPD, 2015).

Legislative and policy changes have also contributed to an aging workforce in the West. In the UK, the state pension age is gradually increasing, set to reach 67 by 2036 and 68 by 2046 (Age UK, 2024). Similarly, in the U.S., the full retirement age for Social Security benefits is increasing to 67 for those born in 1960 or later (Romig, 2023). Furthermore, the abolition of the default retirement age in the UK in 2011 enabled individuals to extend their working lives beyond traditional retirement thresholds (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011).

Although age-related workplace dynamics are not universal (e.g., in many countries across Africa and Asia, the workforce has a greater number of younger people), the changes in population and legislation in Western countries highlight the need to explicitly consider the role of age in the workplace. Traditionally, age has been treated as a peripheral factor, often controlled for rather than explicitly examined in workplace research. However, with an aging workforce and a shrinking pool of younger workers, organizations must adapt their strategies to retain and engage this experienced demographic.

While our focus in this chapter is on workplace settings, many of the theoretical arguments may also extend to other domains of social interaction. However, the workplace provides a particularly useful context for examining the impact of age on interpersonal emotion regulation because it is structured, interdependent, and often includes formal roles and expectations. Moreover, the older adults under consideration in this chapter are typically in mid to later life and still engaged in employment, distinguishing them from the broader population of older adults beyond retirement age. As such, the findings and theoretical arguments offered here are most applicable to working-age individuals and may not generalize beyond these boundaries.

How Age Shapes Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

To understand the significance of age and aging in the workplace in the context of interpersonal emotion regulation, it is essential to explore how individuals change over time. Several theories in lifespan development offer valuable insights into the cognitive, emotional, and motivational shifts that occur with age. These theories can help explain why, with age, there might be changes in why, how, and how well people regulate others' emotions.

Classic Aging Pattern: Dual Component Theory of Intelligence

According to the dual-component theory of intelligence (Cattell, 1963), age influences interpersonal emotion regulation by shifting reliance from fluid intelligence to crystallized intelligence, potentially enhancing older adults' effectiveness in emotionally complex workplace interactions. The theory posits that cognitive functioning is shaped by two interrelated systems. The first is fluid intelligence, which encompasses abstract reasoning, working memory, and the ability to process novel information, and tends to peak in early adulthood before gradually declining (Horn & Cattell, 1967). The second is crystallized intelligence, which reflects accumulated knowledge and expertise, and remains stable or even

improves with age (Craik & Bialystok, 2006). These cognitive changes can shape how individuals regulate others' emotions in the workplace.

Interpersonal emotion regulation involves complex cognitive processes, drawing on both fluid and crystallized intelligence. Rather than functioning independently, fluid and crystallized intelligence interact to influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to others' emotions (Niven, 2022). Fluid intelligence, which facilitates rapid information processing and adaptability, allows individuals to recognize subtle emotional cues and respond flexibly in dynamic social interactions (Niven, 2022). However, as fluid intelligence declines with age, individuals rely more on crystallized intelligence, drawing on accumulated knowledge, social expertise, and learned emotional regulation strategies to manage interpersonal interactions effectively (Niven, 2022; Spreng & Turner, 2019).

Research suggests that older adults, despite reductions in fluid intelligence, demonstrate strengths in analyzing social situations, empathic accuracy, and emotional self-regulation that enhance their ability to regulate others' emotions in workplace settings (Riediger & Blanke, 2020; Sze et al., 2012; Urry & Gross, 2010). This suggests that while younger workers may excel in quickly analyzing and responding to emotional situations, older workers may offer deeper, experience-driven emotional support.

The integration of both cognitive components highlights that effective interpersonal emotion regulation might not be solely dependent on fluid intelligence but also on the crystallized ability to apply social knowledge and expertise. This distinction is particularly relevant across the lifespan, as both forms of intelligence are shaped by aging. However, while the dual-component framework highlights the importance of multiple cognitive resources in interpersonal emotion regulation, it offers relatively limited insight into how these abilities interact over time.

Selective Optimization with Compensation

The selective optimization with compensation model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Marsiske et al., 1995) helps to bridge a gap in frameworks that distinguish between fluid and crystallized intelligence by articulating how these capacities may interact with age. The model helps to better understand how and why interpersonal emotion regulation changes during adults' working lives. While dual-component theory acknowledges that some cognitive abilities (e.g., processing speed) decline over time, it does not explore how individuals actively compensate for these losses. The selective optimization with compensation model proposes that successful aging involves a process of selecting and optimizing certain life domains, compensating for declines in others, to maintain overall functioning and wellbeing. It emphasizes three key adaptive strategies of successful aging: (a) *selection* involves prioritizing and focusing on specific goals, activities, or domains that are most meaningful and important to the individual, (b) *optimization* refers to the deliberate efforts individuals make to enhance their performance and functioning in chosen areas through practice, skill development, and resource allocation, and (c) *compensation* involves using alternative strategies or resources to balance declines or losses in certain abilities or functions.

When applied to interpersonal emotion regulation, the model suggests that at the *selection* stage, older workers may direct their attention toward meaningful conversations and be more inclined to engage in regulating others' emotions. They may also be better at selecting appropriate strategies for both the target and the context in which emotions are shared. For instance, they might offer a listening ear to a colleague venting about a frustrating project. Moreover, to *optimize* their chosen interpersonal emotion regulation strategies, older workers may be more motivated to engage in social interactions to further develop their interpersonal skills (Scheibe & El Khawli, 2025). By investing more time and effort into

improving these skills, older workers can better meet the emotional needs of others and foster positive emotional experiences. Lastly, *compensation* in interpersonal emotion regulation would be when older workers use strategies that are less emotionally taxing due to a loss in resources and capabilities (Urry & Gross, 2010). They might also consider using similar strategies for the target that have worked well in the past for them when faced with a similar situation (i.e., drawing on their crystallized knowledge). For example, if a coworker has previously calmed down through distraction, they might try the same approach again.

In summary, the selective optimization with compensation model suggests that older workers adapt their regulatory behaviors to fit both their reduced fluid intelligence and their strengths in crystallized intelligence. In this way, interpersonal emotion regulation in later working life may not only be preserved but also enhanced through deliberate and strategic adaptation.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

Prior theories explain age-related changes in interpersonal emotion regulation as stemming from differences in cognitive abilities. However, models of the interpersonal emotion regulation process have also emphasized the significance of motivational factors (e.g., Reeck et al., 2016). Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) advances this perspective by explaining how age-related shifts in motivational priorities influence the ways in which individuals manage others' emotions.

According to socioemotional selectivity theory, as people age, their goals increasingly prioritize emotional satisfaction over information acquisition, which in turn shapes why and how they engage with others emotionally. The theory proposes that chronological age shapes people’s perception of time as either expansive or limited. This temporal perspective influences the selection and prioritization of social goals, guiding individuals’ behaviors and preferences for social partners. In early life, when individuals perceive time as expansive,

they prioritize goals related to knowledge acquisition, focusing on gathering information and developing skills that offer long-term benefits (Carstensen et al., 2003). However, as individuals age and perceive time as increasingly finite, their priorities shift towards emotionally meaningful experiences, emphasizing social interactions that enhance emotional wellbeing (Carstensen & Hershfield, 2021). This shift also influences social preferences, with older adults favoring interactions that foster positive emotions while avoiding those that may introduce negativity (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). Consequently, younger individuals are more likely to engage in social relationships that facilitate learning and future preparedness, whereas older adults prioritize emotionally fulfilling interactions that provide immediate wellbeing (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

These shifts in motivation provide a compelling explanation for why older adults may be particularly driven to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace. As individuals age, they prioritize emotionally meaningful connections and may become more strategic in choosing their target for interpersonal emotion regulation. Research indicates that older adults narrow their social circles to focus on emotionally meaningful ties, making them more likely to regulate emotions within close rather than superficial relationships (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). In the workplace, this selectivity may lead older employees to invest more emotional effort in regulating the emotions of close colleagues while disengaging from less meaningful interactions. Similarly, studies also suggest that older adults are better at recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of their close partners (e.g., Rauers et al., 2013), potentially enhancing their effectiveness in interpersonal emotion regulation. More broadly, older people are more likely to find meaning in social interactions (Nikitin et al., 2024), which might act as a driving force behind their motivation to engage in interpersonal emotion regulation.

Socioemotional selectivity theory further suggests that with age, individuals shift towards employing emotion-focused strategies rather than problem-solving approaches when managing emotions (Carstensen et al., 2003). In the context of interpersonal emotion regulation, this shift suggests that older individuals may apply strategies that focus on emotional engagement and providing emotional support, rather than offering direct solutions (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004), aligning with their broader goal of maximizing emotional wellbeing (Carstensen et al., 1999). As people age, they may prioritize interpersonal emotion regulation strategies that reduce emotional distress (e.g., receptive listening) rather than attempting to directly change the source of negative emotions (e.g., direct action). In contrast, younger adults, who prioritize knowledge-seeking and broader social networks, may be more open to a wider range of regulatory strategies.

Socioemotional selectivity theory also highlights a motivational shift in cognitive processing with age, whereby older adults exhibit a positivity bias, an increased tendency to attend to and remember positive emotional experiences while downplaying negative ones (Knight et al., 2007; Mather & Carstensen, 2003). This bias shapes how older adults engage in interpersonal emotion regulation by guiding their attention toward positive cues and influencing them to select strategies that enhance emotional wellbeing. Rather than using confrontational or problem-focused approaches, they are more likely to adopt supportive strategies such as offering reassurance or validating others' emotions. This preference for positivity has been linked to greater effectiveness in regulating others' emotions (Charles, 2010), as it promotes the use of strategies that reduce distress and foster emotional balance in social interactions (Reeck et al., 2016).

Overall, the motivational shifts proposed by socioemotional selectivity theory suggest that as people age, their increased focus on emotionally meaningful interactions and positivity bias may enhance their ability to regulate others' emotions more effectively, at least

within closer relationships. Moreover, the preference for emotion-focused strategies could translate to older workers excelling at de-escalating conflicts, providing empathetic support, and fostering a more positive and collaborative environment (Sahi et al., 2023). Older workers' crystallized experience, combined with this age-related shift in motivational priorities, might make them particularly adept at navigating interpersonal interactions and promoting emotional well-being in the workplace.

The Strengths and Vulnerability Integration Model

The strengths and vulnerability integration model (Charles, 2010) is particularly relevant for understanding how age influences interpersonal emotion regulation because it captures both the benefits and limitations of aging in emotional functioning. It posits that aging involves a dynamic interplay of gains and losses across physical, cognitive, and socioemotional domains (Charles, 2010). It highlights how age-related strengths, such as a motivational shift towards emotion-focused goals, accumulated life experience, and refined self-knowledge, help promote emotional well-being, while vulnerabilities, such as physiological decline and prolonged emotional arousal, pose challenges (Charles, 2010). In this way, the model builds on and integrates other key lifespan theories, socioemotional selectivity theory and selective optimization with compensation theory, framing them as mechanisms that enhance emotional regulation in later life.

A key implication of this model is that older adults are generally better at managing emotions in low to moderate arousal situations due to accumulated life experience, refined self-knowledge, and an increased tendency to focus on emotionally meaningful goals. These age-related strengths may enhance interpersonal emotion regulation by enabling older adults to better recognize emotional cues (Abo Foul et al., 2022), anticipate others' emotional reactions (Waring et al., 2019), and select adaptive regulatory strategies (Sardella et al., 2023). Their preference for positive emotional outcomes (Carstensen et al., 2003) and

motivation to maintain emotional balance (Charles, 2010) may also lead them to regulate others' emotions in ways that are empathetic, supportive, and attuned to the needs of close colleagues. Together, these factors suggest that in many workplace contexts, older adults may be especially effective at managing others' emotions and fostering relational wellbeing.

However, the strengths and vulnerability integration model also highlights important boundary conditions. Age-related vulnerabilities, such as reduced physiological flexibility and cognitive decline, can compromise emotional regulation in high-arousal or sustained stress situations (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Opitz et al., 2014). For instance, when older adults are directly involved in emotionally intense encounters, such as workplace conflict or emotionally volatile customer interactions, their ability to regulate others' emotions may be impaired (Murry, 2018). Likewise, highly charged expressions of distress (e.g., yelling, crying) from others may overwhelm their regulatory capacity.

In summary, the strengths and vulnerability integration model provides a detailed view of how aging influences interpersonal emotion regulation: while older adults are often well-equipped to manage others' emotions in stable or familiar contexts, their effectiveness may be limited in high-stress, emotionally intense situations. This pattern highlights the importance of considering both age-related strengths and vulnerabilities when evaluating interpersonal emotion regulation across the lifespan.

Dynamic Integration Theory

Just as the strengths and vulnerability integration model highlights high-intensity emotional situations as a boundary condition for age-related strengths in interpersonal emotion regulation, dynamic integration theory (Labouvie-Vief, 2003) offers a further useful lens for identifying boundary conditions. Unlike other lifespan theories that focus primarily on motivational or emotional changes, dynamic integration theory emphasizes the interaction between cognition and emotion across the lifespan. Specifically, it proposes that cognitive

and emotional processes form an integrated system, which develops greater complexity over time and supports the capacity for emotional regulation.

This complexity is thought to peak in midlife, typically around the age of 50–60 (Labouvie-Vief, 2009), a stage corresponding to many older adults still active in the workforce. During this phase, individuals tend to demonstrate high cognitive-emotional flexibility, allowing them to recognize, differentiate, and integrate positive and negative emotions in complex interpersonal contexts, skills highly relevant to interpersonal emotion regulation. In workplace settings, this might translate into more adaptive regulatory responses and better emotional attunement in emotionally charged situations.

However, this theory also helps explain why interpersonal emotion regulation may decline beyond this stage. As people enter later life stages, especially those continuing to work past traditional retirement age, declines in processing speed, executive functioning, and working memory may compromise the cognitive complexity needed for emotion regulation. In high-arousal or complex social situations, this can manifest in two typical coping styles: self-protective simplification or increased vulnerability (Labouvie-Vief, 2009).
Self-protective simplification involves prioritizing positive affect and avoiding emotionally demanding situations to preserve equilibrium. In contrast, increased vulnerability manifests as heightened emotional reactivity and impaired regulation capabilities due to diminished cognitive resources. Importantly, individual differences such as cognitive capacity, emotional regulation skills, and social support moderate the extent to which older adults experience these adaptive or maladaptive trajectories.

These shifts can shape how older adults regulate others' emotions. When cognitive resources remain relatively intact, older workers may continue to use adaptive, context-sensitive interpersonal emotion regulation strategies. However, for those experiencing age-related cognitive decline, the capacity to manage intense, dynamic

interpersonal interactions may be reduced, especially in fast-paced or high-stakes work environments. Importantly, dynamic integration theory also highlights the role of individual differences in shaping these trajectories. Cognitive reserve, personality traits (e.g., openness, conscientiousness), and available social support can moderate how effectively older adults engage in interpersonal emotion regulation despite cognitive aging.

In summary, dynamic integration theory adds nuance to the view that aging enhances interpersonal emotion regulation by identifying circumstances, particularly those involving cognitive load and emotional intensity, under which this advantage may diminish. This framework reinforces the importance of considering contextual complexity and individual variability when evaluating the impact of age on interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace.

Summary

Across lifespan developmental theories, a coherent picture emerges: although aging brings certain cognitive declines, particularly in fluid intelligence and processing speed, it is also associated with gains in crystallized intelligence, emotional expertise, and motivation that can enhance interpersonal emotion regulation (see Table 1). These patterns help explain why older adults may be more skilled at managing others' emotions in some contexts but face challenges in others.

TABLE 1 HERE

While these theories describe common developmental trajectories, they also highlight critical boundary conditions that can shape how effectively older workers engage in interpersonal emotion regulation. In particular, emotionally intense situations, chronic stress, or high cognitive demands may exceed the compensatory capacities that aging individuals rely on. Conversely, emotionally meaningful relationships, task environments that allow for

relational depth, and opportunities to draw on experience may support effective interpersonal emotion regulation.

This synthesis suggests two important implications for understanding interpersonal emotion regulation from the regulator's perspective. First, age should not be viewed simplistically as either a strength or a limitation in interpersonal emotion regulation. Instead, its influence depends on a complex interplay of factors, including cognitive resources, emotional goals, and social motivation, that vary with both the individual and the context. Second, to meaningfully assess the influence of age on interpersonal emotion regulation, research must move beyond global generalizations and consider how older regulators' capabilities are shaped by specific workplace conditions, such as the emotional intensity of the situation or the closeness of the relationship with the target.

Interpersonal emotion regulation does not occur in isolation; the reaction of the target plays a crucial role in determining its effectiveness (Reeck et al., 2016). While we have so far considered the possibility that age influences interpersonal emotion regulation from the perspective of the regulator, in terms of their motives, behavior and skills, in the next section we consider the possibility that the regulator's age might also shape interpersonal emotion regulation from the perspective of the target, in terms of how others react to interpersonal emotion regulation.

How Age Shapes *Reactions* to Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Several theoretical perspectives suggest that interpersonal emotion regulation attempts may be received more positively when they come from older individuals. One reason for this is that older adults are often viewed as more emotionally stable (Burr et al., 2021), wise (Glück, 2024), and prosocial (Li et al., 2024); qualities that may make them seem more trustworthy and effective in emotionally supportive roles. For instance, social baseline theory (Coan & Maresh, 2014) suggests that the presence of supportive others can reduce the

cognitive load associated with regulating emotions. However, whether someone is experienced as a helpful emotional resource may depend on perceptions of their reliability and competence, qualities often associated with older age (Beadle et al., 2015). In emotionally demanding situations, targets may be more willing to accept regulation from older individuals whom they perceive as emotionally experienced and motivated by care.

This general tendency to view older people as supportive and emotionally attuned is further explained by stereotype embodiment theory (Levy, 2009), which highlights how age-related stereotypes, acquired over the life course, become internalized and shape how people interpret social interactions. When targets interact with an older regulator, stereotypes of older adults as wise may be activated (Lamont et al., 2021), leading targets to react more positively to the regulatory attempts. In contrast, younger regulators may unintentionally trigger stereotypes of inexperience or self-interest (Lamont et al., 2021), prompting skepticism or resistance, particularly if the regulatory attempt is unsolicited or directive. Recent empirical work (Springstein et al., 2025) found that across adulthood, the age of an interaction partner shaped both the likelihood of using intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation strategies and their perceived effectiveness. Older adults were generally seen as more emotionally supportive and effective in co-regulation, reinforcing the idea that age-based expectations shape how regulatory efforts are received.

Social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) offers another lens through which perceptions associated with age influence targets' reactions. As people age, they are more likely to occupy roles associated with caregiving, mentorship, or leadership; roles that carry expectations of emotional guidance and interpersonal responsibility (Doerwald et al., 2015). When older workers engage in interpersonal emotion regulation, their behavior may be interpreted as congruent with these roles, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy and enhancing trust in their motives. In contrast, younger workers, particularly in hierarchical or competitive

workplace contexts, may be perceived as less entitled to offer emotional support, making their attempts seem less authentic or even self-serving (Truxillo et al., 2012). However, these age-based role expectations may themselves be gendered. For example, older women may more readily be associated with caregiving roles, whereas older men in high-status professional positions may not be perceived as emotionally supportive in the same way. In addition, there may be an interaction with gender, such that interpersonal emotion regulation attempts differ based on both the regulator's age and gender, especially in how social roles are attributed and interpreted.

However, not all theoretical perspectives suggest that older age enhances perceptions of regulatory competence. The stereotype content model (Fiske, 2012) suggests that while older adults are often stereotyped as warm, they are also seen as less competent. These dual perceptions can complicate how their regulatory attempts are received. In some contexts, particularly fast-paced or high-stakes environments, older workers' efforts to provide emotional support may be perceived as well-intentioned but ineffective. Conversely, younger workers may benefit from stereotypes of competence but be perceived as lacking warmth, which can make their regulatory efforts seem emotionally distant or insincere. Thus, while age can increase how legitimate and warm someone seems when regulating another person's emotions, it may simultaneously raise doubts about the regulator's efficacy, depending on the situational context and prevailing stereotypes.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that reactions to interpersonal emotion regulation are not solely determined by what the regulator does, but also by how the regulator's age shapes others' perceptions of their motives and skills (see Table 2). These interpretations, often automatic and outside of conscious awareness, could enhance or undermine the success of interpersonal emotion regulation. Yet despite these compelling theoretical insights, empirical research on how the age of the regulator shapes the target's

emotional reactions remains sparse. Such research is necessary to shed light on how age-based perceptions manifest and influence reactions to interpersonal emotion regulation.

TABLE 2 HERE

How Targets' Age Shapes Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

So far, we have considered how a regulator's age shapes why, how, and how well they engage in interpersonal emotion regulation, and how others perceive and respond to their interpersonal emotion regulation efforts. However, the age of the *target* could also play an important role in shaping both how the regulator engages in interpersonal emotion regulation and how the target experiences and reacts to it. Here, we consider both the independent influence of target age and the interplay between regulator and target age, often referred to as age congruence.

From the regulator's perspective, the age of the target may influence the strategies chosen or the approach taken. For instance, an older target may be seen as more emotionally self-sufficient, leading the regulator to offer less directive forms of support. Conversely, a younger target may be viewed as needing more guidance or encouragement, prompting more active regulatory engagement. These decisions may be influenced by age-based stereotypes, assumptions about emotional needs or preferences, and social norms around how to interact with different age groups.

From the target's perspective, age may influence preferences for the regulation strategies that are used towards them or their perceptions of what constitutes appropriate support from others. For example, research has found that older adults tend to prefer others to use emotion-focused strategies, such as positive reappraisal or acceptance (Livingstone & Isaacowitz, 2021), while younger adults may lean more toward problem-focused approaches (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). If a regulator selects a strategy that misaligns with the target's preferences, it could undermine the effectiveness of the regulation attempt.

In addition to considering the age of each individual in isolation, the combination of regulator and target age, reflected in the degree of age congruence or incongruence, may further shape interpersonal emotion regulation outcomes. Age congruence, where the regulator and target are of similar age, may foster mutual understanding due to shared experiences (Ebner et al., 2006). Such shared ground may make regulation attempts feel more intuitive, validating, and less hierarchical, increasing the likelihood of a positive reception. However, even within age-congruent interactions, interpersonal emotion regulation can still be perceived as intrusive or mismatched if the regulator's approach does not align with the target's emotional needs (Niven, 2024).

In contrast, age incongruence can introduce greater complexity. An older regulator may be perceived as more credible or emotionally wise (Bowen et al., 2020), but their approach could be rejected if seen as overly paternalistic (e.g., Zaki, 2020) or outdated. Likewise, a younger regulator might bring adaptive, contemporary strategies to the interaction, but if viewed as inexperienced or lacking empathy, their attempts may be met with resistance (Brose et al., 2015). These perceptions can be particularly sensitive in workplace contexts, where power dynamics and social norms around authority and competence often intersect with age. For example, younger supervisors regulating older subordinates may face emotional resistance or relational strain, due to violations of age-based expectations around leadership and expertise (Kunze & Menges, 2017). Such age-inverse relationships may increase the emotional complexity of interpersonal emotion regulation and challenge both the effectiveness of and reception of regulatory attempts.

Taken together, these insights suggest that both the target's age and the age dynamic between the regulator and the target could have important implications for the success of interpersonal emotion regulation (see Figure 1). However, empirical research in this area is still limited, and many of these propositions remain theoretical. Future studies are needed to

examine how age-related expectations, strategy preferences, and interpersonal perceptions shape emotional dynamics within diverse age dyads.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has explored the multifaceted role of age in shaping interpersonal emotion regulation, considering both the regulator and target perspectives. Drawing on a range of lifespan and social psychological theories, we demonstrated that aging is associated with a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and motivational changes that can enhance or constrain an individual's capacity to engage in effective interpersonal emotion regulation.

A central contribution of this chapter is to extend the existing literature on age and emotion regulation. While prior research on age and emotion regulation has predominantly focused on intrapersonal emotion regulation (e.g., Scheibe et al., 2016), how individuals manage their own emotions, we extend this understanding to the interpersonal domain, recognizing that managing others' emotions is a central feature of workplace life. Given the increasing emphasis on interpersonal emotion regulation in leadership, teamwork, and customer-facing roles (Niven, 2025), our chapter addresses a critical gap by proposing that age is a meaningful, yet underexplored, individual difference in interpersonal emotion regulation.

Our second key contribution is the proposition that age-related changes in cognition, motivation, and emotion regulation ability influence not only why individuals engage in interpersonal emotion regulation but also how and how well they do so. Lifespan theories such as the dual-component model, socioemotional selectivity theory, and selective optimization with compensation highlight that older adults may be especially well-equipped to regulate others' emotions in certain contexts, owing to accumulated life experience, strategic adaptation, and increased motivation to prioritize emotionally meaningful

interactions. At the same time, theories such as the strength and vulnerability integration model and dynamic integration theory offer boundary conditions, showing that these advantages may be reduced in high-stress or emotionally complex situations. By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks, our chapter offers a more nuanced account of how age may enhance or limit interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace.

Our third contribution is a dyadic lens to interpersonal emotion regulation that incorporates the target's perspective. Drawing on social baseline theory, stereotype embodiment theory, and social role theory, we illustrate that the age of the regulator shapes perceptions of their competence, warmth, and intent, which in turn influences the target's reactions to regulatory attempts. Older individuals may benefit from age-based stereotypes that portray them as more emotionally competent or prosocial, though this may be accompanied by assumptions of reduced cognitive capability (Fiske, 2012). In contrast, younger regulators may be perceived as more competent but less trustworthy or sincere. Furthermore, the age of the target and the age composition of the dyad (congruent vs. incongruent) can also shape regulatory dynamics, particularly when norms about authority or emotional credibility are challenged, such as when younger employees regulate older colleagues. This dyadic lens provides new directions for understanding interpersonal emotion regulation, which is critical in hierarchical and intergenerational workplace relationships.

Finally, our chapter contributes to the broader interpersonal emotion regulation literature by calling for greater attention to individual differences, particularly age, which has received far less empirical attention than personality or gender. While existing studies have explored personality traits that influence interpersonal emotion regulation (Niven et al., 2024; see also Hughes et al., 2020), our work broadens the lens to consider how aging as a dynamic, developmental process shapes emotion regulation in social interactions. This contributes to a more holistic view of emotional functioning in organizations, one that

recognizes the impact of demographic trends and generational diversity on emotion regulation processes.

Taken together, our chapter highlights the need to move beyond treating age as a control variable or demographic descriptor in workplace studies. Instead, we argue for recognizing age as a theoretically and practically meaningful factor in shaping how people regulate others' emotions and react to interpersonal emotion regulation attempts at work. By integrating lifespan and social psychological theory with the study of interpersonal emotion regulation, we offer a framework that can guide future empirical research, inform workplace practice, and advance our understanding of emotional dynamics in increasingly age-diverse workplaces.

Future Research

Despite the growing interest in interpersonal emotion regulation, the role of age remains under-examined in empirical research. Several directions for future inquiry emerge from this synthesis. First, future research should test whether and how age shapes interpersonal emotion regulation from the regulator's perspective. That is, researchers could empirically test our theoretically derived assertions that a regulator's age might shape why, how, and how well they regulate others' emotions at work. Such research could also incorporate the moderating variables we have identified as potentially relevant, most notably, relational closeness (between the regulator and target), which should influence the extent to which older workers feel more motivated toward interpersonal emotion regulation, and emotional intensity, which might serve as a boundary condition limiting the expected older-worker advantage in the ability to manage others' feelings.

An ideal method to study such questions would be a prospective study conducted over the career span, allowing researchers to isolate the effects of age (e.g., as opposed to generational differences). However, the time and resources required for this type of research

(e.g., recruiting a sufficient sample size to protect against attrition and conducting multiple follow-ups over many years) make it rarely practical. As an alternative, researchers could sample workers across a wide age range and study their interpersonal emotion regulation in the workplace. Diary methods may be particularly useful here, as they allow researchers to examine interpersonal emotion regulation attempts shortly after they occur, reducing retrospective recall bias and enabling the study of contextual moderators (e.g., relational closeness, emotional intensity) that could shape interpersonal emotion regulation and its effects.

Second, research is needed to examine how regulators' age influences targets' reactions to interpersonal emotion regulation. Diary methods may again be helpful here, although they may need to rely on the targets' estimates of regulators' ages, which may not always be accurate. Moreover, given other factors that could affect targets' responses to interpersonal emotion regulation, which could not easily be controlled, such designs may limit the confidence with which conclusions about age effects can be drawn. A different approach that might be beneficial is to use a controlled experimental design, in which regulator age can be manipulated, to isolate the effects of regulator age from other confounding factors (e.g., regulator gender, the relationship with the target).

Third, the age of the target may also shape interpersonal emotion regulation processes and outcomes, although this has received little empirical attention. Targets of different ages may differ in the types of support they find helpful, in their willingness to accept regulation, or in how they interpret others' motives. This could be incorporated within experimental designs as described above by varying not only regulator age but also recruiting targets from distinct age brackets. This would further allow researchers to explore the salience of age congruence versus incongruence. For instance, studies might examine whether younger workers are more receptive to regulation from similarly aged peers, or whether older workers

perceive support from younger managers as patronizing. These dynamics are particularly relevant in age-inverse workplace relationships, such as when younger supervisors manage older subordinates, a scenario is shown to involve emotional and performance challenges (Kunze & Menges, 2017).

Another promising design, particularly for studying interpersonal emotion regulation from both the regulator and target perspectives simultaneously, is video-cued recall using age-diverse dyads. In this approach, a dyad is video recorded during a scheduled interaction in which interpersonal emotion regulation is likely to occur (e.g., this method has been used with romantic couples discussing emotionally significant topics; Parkinson et al., 2016). Each member of the dyad then independently watches the recording, which is paused at regular intervals so participants can rate salient aspects of the interaction (e.g., how they and their partner were feeling, motivation to regulate, regulation strategies used). While resource-intensive, this approach combines ecological validity with a degree of experimental control and allows researchers to examine both perspectives on interpersonal emotion regulation. As such, it offers rich opportunities to advance our understanding of how age shapes this complex, dynamic, interpersonal process.

Future research should explore whether the age-related mechanisms identified in this chapter are specific to interpersonal emotion regulation or reflect broader changes in social functioning with age. While cognitive, motivational, and emotional shifts influence a range of social skills, interpersonal emotion regulation places unique demands on individuals, including real-time emotional monitoring, empathic accuracy, and strategic engagement with others' feelings. Comparative research examining age effects on interpersonal emotion regulation alongside other social competencies would help clarify the distinctiveness of these age-related patterns.

Finally, future studies must carefully distinguish between age and confounding variables such as job tenure. Although older employees may have more organizational experience, age and tenure are conceptually and empirically distinct. Chronological age may proxy various underlying mechanisms (e.g., cognitive capacity, emotional motivation), and researchers should aim to unpack these mechanisms to clarify how they uniquely influence interpersonal emotion regulation. This calls for more multi-method, multi-level designs that isolate the role of age while accounting for individual, relational, and contextual variables.

Conclusion

Age constitutes a salient individual difference that shapes both the enactment of and the reception of interpersonal emotion regulation. Rather than serving as a mere demographic descriptor, age is a meaningful factor that influences cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social processes connected to why, how, and how well interpersonal emotion regulation is enacted and how it is received by others. A more explicit focus on age can enrich our theoretical understanding of interpersonal emotion regulation and inform practical efforts to enhance emotional functioning in contemporary, multigenerational workplaces.

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