



# Age Differences in Everyday Rejection Experiences: Frequency, Context, and Reactions

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## Theoretical Background

- Social relations permeate our daily lives and provide us with emotional and instrumental support as well as meaning. Rejection from social bonds may result in negative short-term reactions, such as lower well-being and needs satisfaction (e.g., Löckenhoff, Cook, Anderson, & Zayas, 2013; Luo, Hawkey, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012). These short-term responses may contribute to poor well-being and health problems in the long run (e.g., Adler & Snibbe, 2003; Newsom, Mahan, Rook, & Krause, 2008).
- In the present study, we investigated **adult age differences in everyday rejection experiences**. Lifespan developmental theories (e.g., Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) suggest age differences in the preference for social environments. As a result, we expected that age groups differ both in **general experiences** of rejection (e.g., frequency, context, attribution of the causes, long-term effects) and **specific aspects** of an event (e.g., relationships with the rejectors).

## Method

- Mechanical Turk Sample (online survey)
  - 372 adults (54% females)
  - 18 to 84 years old ( $M = 36.26$ ,  $SD = 15.59$ )
- Participants reported
  - General experiences of rejection in the past month
    - in different contexts (e.g., professional, family, social settings)
    - due to different causes (e.g., one's age, gender, ethnicity)
  - A recent rejection event in detail
    - Negative emotions (6 semantic differential items)
    - Positive attitudes toward the rejector (e.g. warm, loving)

## Overall Frequency, Context, and Effects

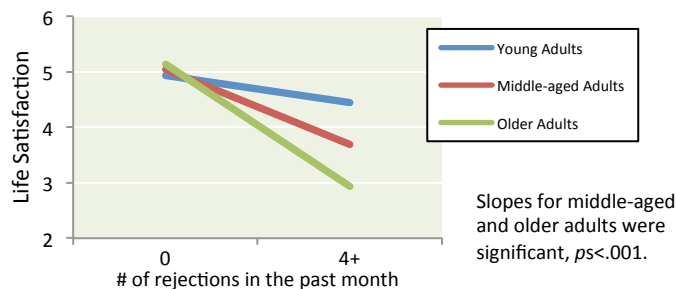
- Overall, 64.2% of the participants reported being rejected at least once in the past month. Rejection took place more often in family than professional settings, and more often with known persons than strangers,  $F=5.59$ ,  $p<.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ .
- Relative to younger adults, **middle-aged and older adults experienced rejection less frequently** ( $r=-.19$ ,  $p<.001$ ), especially in social settings. They also experienced **less rejection attributed to gender and ethnicity** (see Table).

Correlations among Age, the Context of Rejection, and the Attribution of Rejection.

	Age	1	2	3	4	
<b>Setting...</b>	1. Professional	-.14*				
	2. Family	-.08	.07			
	3. With friends	-.21*	.19**	.20**		
	4. With Strangers	-.17*	.25**	.17**	.40**	
<b>Due to...</b>	5. Age	.06	.33**	.24**	.28**	.36**
	6. Gender	-.21**	.24**	.20**	.39**	.37**
	7. Ethnicity	-.25**	.32**	.23**	.31**	.36**
	8. Appearance	-.06	.29**	.36**	.40**	.37**

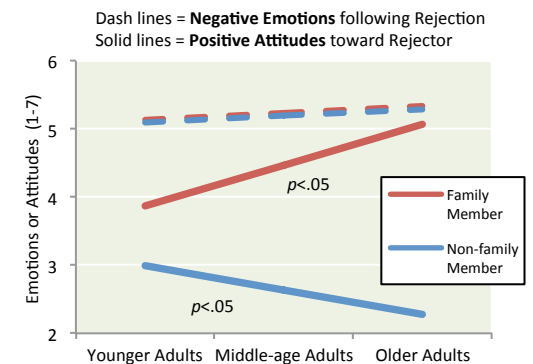
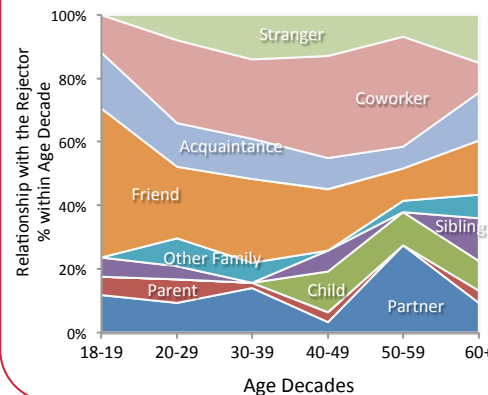
Note. \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ . Correlations coefficients are Spearman's rho.

- Frequent rejection was more detrimental for middle-aged and older adults' life satisfaction ( $\beta=-.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ).



## Reactions to a Specific Rejection Event

- Overall, 85.2% of the participants were able to describe a recent rejection event. Relative to younger adults, **middle-aged and older adults were more likely** to report being rejected by a family member ( $r= -.16$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Individuals of all ages were negatively affected by the rejection event regardless of who the rejector was ( $\beta=.06$ ,  $p=.55$ ), but middle-aged and older adults felt more positive toward the rejector if it was a family member ( $\beta=-.48$ ,  $p<.001$ ).



## Discussion & Conclusion

- In general, rejection is a negative social experience common to individuals of all ages. Consistent with lifespan theories and our expectations, relative to young adults, middle-aged and older adults tended to encounter less rejection in social settings outside the family. Yet when it occurred, rejection lead to negative emotions regardless of age or who the rejector was. Frequent rejection lead to worse long-term well-being in middle-aged and older adults. Interestingly, middle-aged and older adults tended to be more forgiving toward their family members and less forgiving toward non-family members than young adults.
- The results provide insights on social environment and its differential effects on individuals' well-being across the adulthood. Future research may benefit from examining possible coping mechanisms for different age groups.