



COMMENTARY

This time with feeling: Aging, emotion, motivation, and decision making at work

Joseph A. Mikels*  and Alice F. Stuhlmacher 

DePaul University

*Corresponding author. Email: jmikels@depaul.edu

Motivation and goals are clearly of central importance for successful aging at work as well as for workplace decisions (Kooij et al., 2020). The process model of successful aging at work proposed by Kooij et al. critically considers how the person–environment (P–E) fit for older workers can be optimized through self-regulation. The model draws from theory on goal engagement and goal disengagement as well as how control processes underlie goal attainment, which are primary areas in which emotional processes may play a central role. Specifically, affective and emotional processes are integral parts of motivation and appear to have great utility in understanding adult life-span differences in decision making generally (Mikels et al., 2015) as well as in the workplace more specifically (Brown & Stuhlmacher, 2020). This commentary adds to the roadmap for future organizational research and theory by highlighting age-related motivational and emotional changes related to successful aging at work.

As people age, many opportunities exist for goal engagement and disengagement. In considering how changes in goals influence social and emotional processes, one life-span theory of motivation, socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2006), is worth reviewing. In SST, age-associated changes in future time horizons have implications for motivational priorities and emotional experience. Specifically, the theory proposes that when future time horizons are perceived as expansive, as is typical in youth, individuals prioritize future-oriented goals such as acquiring resources and knowledge as well as the development of extended social networks. As time horizons narrow and one's future time is perceived to be more limited, as is typical in older age, individuals focus on the present moment and prioritize emotionally meaningful goals. This motivational shift is thought to lead to a prioritization of positively valenced and emotionally meaningful experiences in social interactions and beyond. For example, findings indicate that older individuals restructure their social contacts to create close networks of familiar social partners that are conducive to emotionally meaningful and positive interactions. In studies on social partner preferences, older adults have been found to prefer close and familiar social partners over novel social partners (e.g., Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). Also, older adults' social networks are generally smaller and contain relatively more close social partners than those of younger adults (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

These changes in age-related goals relating to social networks are relevant to successful aging in the workplace in several ways. First, organizations can design work and development activities that build meaningful experiences and strong social networks for older workers. For example, individualized coaching would be expected to be particularly effective with older workers because of the relational component and optimizing of the meaningfulness of work. This is consistent with the findings that older clients in executive coaching were more self-reflective, flexible, and less skeptical compared with younger coaching clients (Tamir & Finfer, 2016). Older executives also showed greater improvements in their leader style, technique, and output than their younger

executives. Although there are substantial benefits for quality leader–follower relationships at work for everyone (see Martin et al., 2016), the relational aspects involved with workplace social support and interdependence are expected to have stronger positive outcomes for older workers than their younger counterparts (Truxillo et al., 2012). However, smaller tight-knit social networks that are valued by older workers may also have a negative organizational effect on creativity and problem solving. Thus, social interactions and their emotional considerations could aptly be added to the antecedents in the process model of successful aging at work, specifically with respect to workgroup and job factors. Age-related relational factors likely influence how older workers engage with their individual goals (e.g., career development, job satisfaction, health, and well-being) in the workplace as well as the overarching goals of the organization (e.g., task performance, organizational citizenship, counterproductive behavior).

Not only does life-span research suggest that the social networks of older adults become more selective to positive and meaningful interactions, but studies also indicate that the types of engagement in these interactions change. When developing solutions to hypothetical problems, older adults more often avoid interpersonal conflicts relative to younger adults (see Blanchard-Fields, 2007). Relatedly, research examining exposure and reactivity to interpersonal tensions found that older adults used more avoidant and less confrontational strategies than their younger counterparts, which resulted in more positive affect (for a review see Fingerma n & Charles, 2010). Specifically, older adults are more likely to simply “do nothing,” whereas younger adults are more prone to active confrontation (Birditt & Fingerma n, 2005). However, when avoidant strategies are not an option, older adults tend to actively infuse the conflict with positive affect (Carstensen et al., 1995).

In the workplace, these age-related findings connect to workplace conflict and attitudes. Conflict in general could lead older workers to disengage in workgroups—to the detriment of the team. But older workers could also play another role. A meta-analysis by Ng and Feldman (2010) found age to be negatively related to workplace relationship conflict. When relationship conflict (conflicts relating to values, preference, taste, and interpersonal style) is low, task conflict (conflict on how to do the work) is not as harmful (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Older workers may dampen toxic conflict with an infusion of positive affect. Given that age positively correlates with a variety of affect-laden work attitudes such as job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, intrinsic work motivation, and affective commitment (Ng & Feldman, 2010), older workers may create an emotional contagion that then drives many positive team outcomes (see Bell et al., 2018). Such considerations relating to conflict and affect could enhance the process model of successful aging at work, specifically with respect to the antecedent factors of workgroup and job factors, but also personal factors.

In addition to differing on the emotional aspects of interactions and relationships, older and younger adults also differ in their attention to and memory for positive relative to negative material. Across numerous psychological domains, a robust information-processing bias toward negative material has been observed among younger adults (for a review see Baumeister et al., 2001). This negativity bias, though, does not appear to extend across the entire life span (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Mikels et al., 2014). Instead, information processing appears to shift with advanced age toward positive material, a pattern termed *the age-related positivity effect* (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Carstensen et al., 2006). The positivity effect has been observed across a wide range of studies examining age differences in attentional deployment, working memory, and long-term memory, as well as autobiographical memory and false memory (for a review see Mikels & Young, 2018). These findings are highly consistent as shown in a meta-analysis indicating that the positivity effect is indeed reliable and robust (Reed et al., 2014). Interestingly, higher appraisals of perceived self-control by older adults have been shown to predict more positive emotional responses relative to those of their younger counterparts (Young & Mikels, 2019). Given such findings, appraisals of self-control may be especially important for older workers.

In the workplace, there is an affective layer to cognitively demanding tasks such as evaluating others in selection and performance appraisal contexts. If older workers attend less to negative behavior or information, cognitive models would suggest that the positivity effect may be problematic in what evaluation information gets stored and recalled. But findings show that when older adults are directed to focus on *all* material (including the negative), the positivity effect is no longer present (see Reed et al., 2014). Thus, work processes could be designed to require explicit consideration of both positive and negative information. This would benefit older workers but also encourage better information processing for all, with the benefit that such considerations at the organizational and job level would improve the person–environment (P–E) fit for older workers. Also, organizational processes could strive for structures that optimize appraisals of self-control for older workers. These considerations would entail an elaboration of the process model of successful aging at work to include interactions of workgroup factors with personal factors.

Considering the significant declines in deliberative cognitive abilities as one grows older, maintaining P–E fit is essential for successful aging in the workplace. Research has focused on how decision making is negatively affected in later life. For instance, older adults prefer decision rules that are less cognitively demanding, seek less information prior to making decisions, and prefer fewer options across many decision domains (for a review see Mikels et al., 2015). Importantly, though, affective processes may assuage the negative effects of declining deliberative abilities. Research has shown that emotional and intuitive processes benefit the decision making of older adults (e.g., Mikels et al., 2010; Queen & Hess, 2010; Strough et al., 2008). The positivity effect has also been shown to further influence older adults in decision contexts, in that older relative to younger adults found positive health-related pamphlets to be more informative than negative pamphlets, and they also better remembered the positive versus negative messages (Shamaskin et al., 2010). Other work suggests that incidental positive affect may be harmful to the decision making of older versus younger adults, leading to more nonoptimal choices (Mikels et al., 2013) and reduced information search (von Helversen & Mata, 2012). Thus, this is yet another area where the emotional aspects of aging at work need to be accommodated to maintain and enhance both decision quality and motivation.

In short, we encourage the study of successful aging at work to continue at this time—but with feeling. Emotions are central to motivation and achieving one's goals, and possibly even more so for older workers. The role of socioemotional factors in successful aging at work is inherently connected to antecedents of successful aging at work (e.g., organizational, workgroup, job, and personal factors) as well as related behavioral processes (e.g., goal engagement, goal disengagement, and control processes). Thus, we contend that affective processes are important in the quest to understand the motivational, decision-making, and person–environment processes in successful aging generally, but importantly, also as related to the workplace.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323–373.
- Bell, S. T., Brown, S. G., Colaneri, A., & Outland, N. (2018). Team composition and the ABCs of teamwork. *American Psychologist*, 73, 349–362.
- Birditt, K. S., & Fingerman, K. L. (2005). Do we get better at picking our battles? Age group differences in descriptions of behavioral reactions to interpersonal tensions. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 60B(3), 121–128.
- Blanchard-Fields, F. (2007). Everyday problem solving and emotion: An adult developmental perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16, 26–31.
- Brown, S. G., & Stuhlmacher, A. F. (2020). Affect and workplace judgment and decision-making. In L. Yang, R. Cropanzano, C. Daus, & V. Martínez-Tur (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of workplace affect* (pp. 174–184). Cambridge University Press.
- Carstensen, L. L. (2006). The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science*, 312, 1913–1915.

- Carstensen, L. L., Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1995). Emotional behavior in long-term marriage. *Psychology and Aging*, *10*(1), 140–149.
- Carstensen, L. L., & Mikels, J. A. (2005). At the intersection of emotion and cognition: Aging and the positivity effect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *14*(3), 117–121.
- Carstensen, L. L., Mikels, J. A., & Mather, M. (2006). Aging and the intersection of cognition, motivation and emotion. In J. Birren & K. W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of aging*, (6th edition, pp. 343–362). Academic Press.
- De Dreu, C. K., & Weingart, L. R. (2003). Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *88*, 741–749.
- Fingerman, K. L., & Charles, S. T. (2010). It takes two to tango: Why older people have the best relationships. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *19*(3), 172–176.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Carstensen, L. L. (1990). Choosing social partners: How old age and anticipated endings make people more selective. *Psychology and Aging*, *5*(3), 335–347.
- Kooij, D., Zacher, H., Wang, M., & Heckhausen, J. (2020). Successful aging at work: A process model to guide future research and practice. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *13*(3), 345–365.
- Lang, F. R., & Carstensen, L. L. (2002). Time counts: Future time perspective, goals, and social relationships. *Psychology and Aging*, *17*(1), 125–139.
- Martin, R., Guillaume, Y., Thomas, G., Lee, A., & Epitropaki, O. (2016). Leader–member exchange (LMX) and performance: A meta-analytic review. *Personnel Psychology*, *69*(1), 67–121.
- Mikels, J. A., Cheung, E., Cone, J., & Gilovich, T. (2013). The dark side of intuition: Aging and increases in nonoptimal intuitive decisions. *Emotion*, *13*(2), 189–195.
- Mikels, J. A., Loeckenhoff, C. E., Maglio, S. J., Goldstein, M. K., Garber, A., & Carstensen, L. (2010). Following your heart or your head: Focusing on emotions versus information differentially influences the decisions of younger and older adults. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, *16*(1), 87–95.
- Mikels, J. A., Reed, A. E., Hardy, L. N., & Loeckenhoff, C. E. (2014). Positive emotions across the adult life span. In M. M. Tugade, M. N. Shiota, & L. D. Kirby (Eds.), *Handbook of positive emotions* (pp. 256–272). Guilford Press.
- Mikels, J. A., Shuster, M. M., & Thai, S. T. (2015). Aging, emotion, & decision making. In T. Hess, J. Strough, & C. E. Loeckenhoff (Eds.), *Aging and decision making: Empirical and applied perspectives* (pp. 169–188). Elsevier Academic Press.
- Mikels, J. A., & Young, N. A. (2018). New directions in theories of emotion and aging. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of psychology* (December 2018 ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190681852.001.0001/acref-9780190681852-e-339>
- Ng, T. W., & Feldman, D. C. (2010). The relationships of age with job attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, *63*, 677–718.
- Queen, T. L., & Hess, T. M. (2010). Age differences in the effects of conscious and unconscious thought in decision making. *Psychology and Aging*, *25*(2), 251–261.
- Reed, A. E., Chan, L., & Mikels, J. A. (2014). Meta-analysis of the age-related positivity effect: Age differences in preferences for positive over negative information. *Psychology and Aging*, *29*(1), 1–15.
- Shamaskin, A. M., Mikels, J. A., & Reed, A. E. (2010). Getting the message across: Age differences in the positive and negative framing of health care messages. *Psychology and Aging*, *25*(3), 746–751.
- Strough, J., Mehta, C. M., McFall, J. P., & Schuller, K. L. (2008). Are older adults less subject to the sunk-cost fallacy than younger adults? *Psychological Science*, *19*(7), 650–652.
- Tamir, L. M., & Finfer, L. A. (2016). Executive coaching: The age factor. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *68*, 313–325.
- Truxillo, D. M., Cadiz, D. M., Rineer, J. R., Zaniboni, S., & Fraccaroli, F. (2012). A lifespan perspective on job design: Fitting the job and the worker to promote job satisfaction, engagement, and performance. *Organizational Psychology Review*, *2*(4), 340–360.
- von Helversen, B., & Mata, R. (2012). Losing a dime with a satisfied mind: Positive affect predicts less search in sequential decision making. *Psychology and Aging*, *27*(4), 825–839.
- Young, N. A., & Mikels, J. A. (2019). Paths to positivity: The relationship of age differences in appraisals of control to emotional experience. *Cognition and Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.depaul.edu/10.1080/02699931.2019.1697647>

Cite this article: Mikels, J.A. and Stuhlmacher, A.F. (2020). This time with feeling: Aging, emotion, motivation, and decision making at work. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *13*, 395–398. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.65>