

Perceived Differences in Everyday Competence Between
Young-Adult, Middle-Aged and Young-Old Males

Most studies comparing behavioral variables across the adult life course utilize measures developed for the young to determine whether older groups differ. It may be argued that such an approach is inherently biased because a young-adult reference group will be at that life stage when physical vigor will be greatest and environmental constraints are at a minimum. Behaviors and situations may therefore be sampled which may no longer be possible or societally sanctioned at later life stages. By contrast, measures developed for the assessment of the elderly, should not be biased against young adults, as virtually all behaviors and behavioral contexts occurring for the community-dwelling young-old are also within the behavior repertory and are societally sanctioned for young adults.

The present study reports on age differences in the perception of relative competence in dealing with common everyday situations, using an instrument developed for work with the elderly. Scheidt and Schaie (1978) developed a taxonomy of competence-requiring situations of daily living for community dwelling older adults. Descriptions of situations were ordered within a set of dimensions of situational attributes gathered from the social-psychological literatures. Over 300 situations were scaled on these dimensions, and four reliable attribute dimensions were identified: social-nonsocial, active-passive, common-uncommon, and supportive-depriving. A Q-sort instrument was next developed and validated which contains eighty prototypic situations, five for each of the sixteen possible attribute classes. All of the situations are within the environmental contexts of younger adults, even though younger adults may have additional contexts not readily available for the elderly.

Most cross-sectional studies of age differences among adults are flawed because it is impossible or no effort has been made to match age groups on socio-economic status, educational and vocational experiences, and availability of comparable health care and other environmental supports throughout adulthood. We consequently selected an all-male sample of pilot-qualified air force officers, all of whom at the time of this study were either on active duty or had recently retired after completing a life-long air force career. Criteria for selection and conditions of service have been quite similar in the air force since the end of World War II.

Subjects of our study are 57 men (19 in each age group). The young-adult men ranged in age from 25 to 29, the middle aged from 40 to 44 and the young-old from 60 to 64. All subjects completed the Q-sort individually, under instructions to rate each situation as to how

competent they would be to handle that situation. Situations were first sorted into the categories of most competent, least competent and in between, and then sub-sorted into an 11 point quasi-normal distribution from least to most competent.

A nested (3 age groups x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 situation attribute) ANOVA tested for age group effects for the simple, two-way, three-way and four-way situational attribute combinations. Age differences significant at or beyond the 5 per cent level of confidence were found at all levels for some but by no means all of the situational attributes. At the single dimension level, linear age differences were observed for the active-passive dimension; the older subjects reporting greater average competence than the younger in situations requiring passive rather than active response. A similar age difference was also found for the common-uncommon dimensions, with the older subjects reporting relatively greater perceived competence in coping with common situations than did the younger.

A more fine-grained analysis is possible by examining the attribute category combinations. Examination of the two-way combinations shows that the age differences occur for the combination of the two simple effects for which significant age differences were found. That is, age differences in perceived competence are attributable to the older reporting greater competence in situations which are common and requiring passive response, while claiming lower competence than their younger peers in situations which are uncommon and which require active response. At the three-way attribute level we learn further that for the the active-uncommon class of situations there is an age difference favoring the young adults for those situations which also have supportive characteristics; no age differences were found for those active-uncommon situations with depriving attributes. Finally at the four-way level older persons described themselves relatively more competent than the younger on situations categorized as nonsocial-passive-common-depriving, while young-adults reported themselves as more competent than the older subjects on the nonsocial-active-uncommon-supportive attribute combination.

SIGNIFICANT AGE DIFFERENCES
IN PERCEIVED COMPETENCE

THREWAY INTERACTIONS

COMMONNESS BY ACTIVITY LEVEL BY SUPPORTIVENESS

	YOUNG ADULT	MIDDLE-AGED	YOUNG-OLD
COMMON/ACTIVE			
SUPPORTIVE	5.90	5.78	5.50
DEPRIVING	5.70	5.76	6.03
COMMON/PASSIVE			
SUPPORTIVE	4.98	5.96	5.22
DEPRIVING	6.02	6.10	6.56
UNCOMMON/ACTIVE			
SUPPORTIVE	5.86	5.70	6.16
DEPRIVING	7.26	6.93	6.30
UNCOMMON/PASSIVE			
SUPPORTIVE	5.78	5.35	5.80
DEPRIVING	6.48	6.40	6.42

COMMONNESS BY ACTIVITY LEVEL BY SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

	YOUNG ADULT	MIDDLE-AGED	YOUNG-OLD
COMMON/ACTIVE			
SOCIAL	6.13	6.06	6.21
NONSOCIAL	5.48	5.48	5.33
COMMON/PASSIVE			
SOCIAL	6.04	6.54	6.50
NONSOCIAL	4.97	5.52	5.29
UNCOMMON/ACTIVE			
SOCIAL	7.25	6.96	6.58
NONSOCIAL	5.87	5.67	5.87
UNCOMMON/PASSIVE			
SOCIAL	6.56	6.11	6.33
NONSOCIAL	5.70	5.65	5.89

SIGNIFICANT AGE DIFFERENCES
IN PERCEIVED COMPETENCE

COMMON vs. UNCOMMON

	YOUNG ADULT	MIDDLE-AGED	YOUNG-OLD
COMMON	5.68	6.04	5.83
UNCOMMON	6.34	5.96	6.17

ACTIVE vs PASSIVE

	YOUNG ADULT	MIDDLE-AGED	YOUNG-OLD
ACTIVE	5.66	5.89	5.98
PASSIVE	6.34	6.10	6.00

INTERACTION BETWEEN COMMONNESS AND SUPPORTIVENESS

COMMON/SUPPORTIVE	5.75	5.74	5.36
COMMON/DEPRIVING	6.48	6.34	6.30
UNCOMMON/SUPPORTIVE	5.38	5.60	5.98
UNCOMMON/DEPRIVING	6.25	6.25	6.36

INTERACTION BETWEEN COMMONNESS AND ACTIVITY LEVEL

COMMON/ACTIVE	5.80	5.77	5.77
COMMON/PASSIVE	6.56	6.22	5.90
UNCOMMON/ACTIVE	5.50	6.03	6.30
UNCOMMON/PASSIVE	6.26	5.88	6.11

Note: Lower values indicate greater competence; i.e. situational types are ranked as less demanding.

CONCLUSIONS:

MAIN EFFECTS

- 1) *During middle age, commonly occurring situations are considered to be more difficult and uncommon occurrences less difficult.*
- 2) *Situations involving active participation are perceived as increasing in difficulty with age, while those requiring passive response become easier.*

TWO-WAY INTERACTIONS

- 1) *Perceived competence increases with age in common situations with supportive elements, and decreases in common situations with depriving aspects.*
- 2) *Perceived competence increases with age in common situations requiring only passive response, but decrease in common situations requiring active participation. Uncommon situations requiring passive response are perceived as easiest in middle age.*

THREE-WAY INTERACTIONS

- 1) *Perceived competence increases with age in active, common situations with supportive aspects, and in active uncommon situations with depriving aspects.*
- 2) *Perceived competence decreases with age in active and passive, common situations with depriving aspects, as well as in active, uncommon situations with supportive aspects.*
- 3) *Middle-aged subjects described themselves as more competent in passive, uncommon situations and less competent in passive, common situations with supportive features.*