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## Emotion regulation strategies in adulthood: a comparison of three age groups

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### Introduction

Emotional regulation is defined as the use of strategies to modify the intensity, duration and expression of emotions towards the fulfillment of individual goals (Gross, 1998; John y Gross, 2007; Thompson, 1994). The importance of studying this process throughout the lifespan development is that emotions and emotion regulation affect the well-being and health of individuals. The hypothesis of emotional maturity associated with aging holds that people accumulate more lifetime wealth of experience and this gives them greater ability to control their emotions and optimization of their emotional experience (Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992). In a similar way the socioemotional selectivity theory, argues that elderly people tend to privilege the optimization of emotional experience and the search for meaning (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). The empirical evidence on numerous research supports these hypotheses. Indeed, it has been shown a decrease in the frequency of negative emotions at this stage, attentional biases toward gratifying emotional information and greater emotional control perceived. It has also shown increased use of "anticipatory" regulatory mechanisms such as cognitive reappraisal (CR) –known as the capacity to modify the meaning of events in order to reduce its negative emotional impact- and less use of strategies focused on behavioral aspects as suppression of emotional expression (SEE) –understood as the effort to avoid bodily expression of emotion (Charles, Reynolds y Carstensen, 2001; Ryff, 1989 Mather y Carstensen, 2005; Lawton et al., 1992; Gross et al., 1997). The evidence on these differences associated with age, comes mostly from studies of North American samples, so we believe it would be interesting to explore these differences in a different population context; therefore the objective of this work was to explore age-related differences in emotion regulation strategies-specifically RC and SEE-in a sample of participants divided into three age groups, young adults, middle-aged and older. Hypothesis: The elderly group will present higher frequency of use of the CR and lower frequency of use of the SEE compared to the group of middle-aged adults and young adults group.

### Methodology

**Participants:** This study is part of a larger study in which subjects were invited to participate voluntarily in the research through the Faculty of Psychology of the National University of Mar del Plata (Argentina). For this study, we specially selected a subsample of 148 participants according to age group and educational level. And three groups were formed: the young adult group consists of 86 young people between 18 and 25 years old (34 women). The adult group comprised of 33 middle-aged adults between 40 and 60 years (26 women) and the elderly group consisting of 29 age between 65 and 80 years old (20 women). All participants had university-level education, in the case of the young adult group all of them were active college students, while most of the participants of the other groups most had finished their university studies (68%).

**Materials and procedure:** we first relieved demographic data relating to age, gender and highest level of educational attainment. Then we used the ERQ -Emotion Regulation Questionnaire- (Gross & John, 2003; translation and adaptation into Spanish of Rodríguez-Carvajal & Garrosa Moreno-Jimenez, 2006). It is a 10-item Likert scale that asks about the frequency of use of two emotion regulation strategies -RC and SEE-where response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

We present descriptive statistics for both strategies in each age group.

#### Descriptive statistics for the variables under study in the three age groups

	Age group	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
CR	Young adults	86	4,44	1,17	1,17	7,00
	Middle-age adults	33	5,10	1,10	2,00	7,00
	Elderly adults	29	4,80	1,30	1,00	6,83
SEE	Young adults	86	2,90	1,26	1,00	6,00
	Middle-age adults	33	3,12	1,16	1,00	6,00
	Elderly adults	29	3,83	1,33	1,00	7,00

The mean scores for the RC are higher in the group of middle-aged adults with respect to the group of young adults and older adults. In the case of the SEE, the average scores are progressively higher as the groups are made by older participants.

To explore the influence of the age factor on the frequency of use of both strategies a Factorial ANOVA was performed. It was introduced the gender as a control variable.

#### Factorial ANOVA results controlling gender.

Dependent Variable	Factor	F	Sig.	Eta <sup>2</sup>
CR	Age	3,27	,04*	,04
	Gender	,01	,92	,00
SEE	Age	4,52	,03*	,08
	Gender	7,66	,001*	,17

As shown in the table above, age is a factor of significant influence on the frequency of use of both strategies, even when controlling for gender of participants. In the case of the SEE gender is a factor of influence on this variable. For knowing between which age groups are specifically located the significant differences were performed post-hoc contrasts using the Games-Howell test (Levene statistic  $F= 1.34$ ,  $p= .24$  for CR and Statistical Levene  $F= 0.45$ ,  $p= .81$  to SEE).

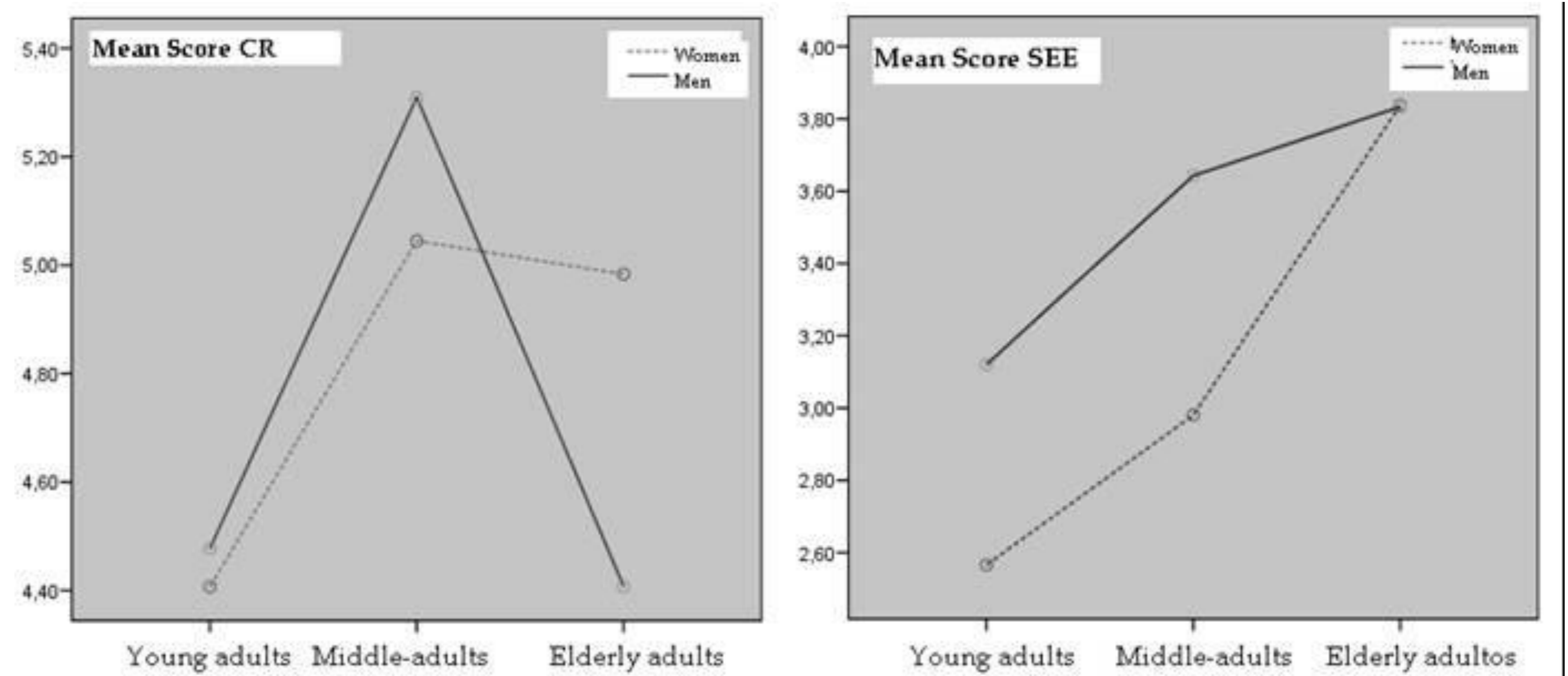
#### ANOVA results and Post-hoc comparisons between groups.

	1≠2	1≠3	2≠3
CR	$p=.017^*$	$p=.40$	$p=.60$
SEE	$p=.64$	$p=.005^*$	$p=.074$

Note: 1= Young adults; 2= Middle-age adults and 3= Elderly adults

### Results

As shown in the above table, the groups differ significantly with respect to the CR are the young adult group and the group of middle-aged adults, in the case of the SEE are the group of young adults and the elderly group. We present two graphs below show the mean scores of each variable for each age group discriminating the gender of the participants.



The graph shows that for CR there is a decrease in mean scores in the elderly group compared to the rest of the groups but how this decline is steeper in the case of men, and shows that for women, the decline is much more mild and moderate. In the case of SEE it can be seen how, although there are higher frequencies of use as the groups are constituted by older participants -male or female-, males use clearly SEE greater extent than women in the younger group and middle-aged adults.

### Discussion

Theories of emotional optimization and emotional selectivity (Lawton, 2001; Carstensen, 1995) postulated that people have become progressively more able to regulate their emotions in a healthy way all along the life cycle, particularly in old age. Consistent with this idea, other studies have found that older adults ( $M = 61$  years old) have higher frequency of use of CR -which has a healthier profile consequences- and lesser in SEE -which has a less healthy profile- than young people ( $M = 20$  years old) (John & Gross, 2004). This has been interpreted as a sign that as individuals mature and gain life experience, learn to make better use of healthier emotion regulation strategies. Our results are partially in the same direction and therefore deserve some considerations. First, there was an increase in the use of the CR in the middle-age group compared to young adult group. However, we include a third group consisting of adults about 65-80 years old ( $M=71$ ), in which we observed a decrease in the frequency of use of this strategy, which would contradict theories of emotional optimization and selectivity. Second, we observe an increase in the use of SEE in the elderly group, which also would contradict the basic tenets of these theories. In this sense, a study made in Spanish population in three age groups similar to ours conducted by Márquez-González, Fernández de Trocóniz, Montorio-Cerrato and Losada-Baltar (2008) also find surprisingly that elderly adults used more frequently SEE than other age groups. The authors explain these results in a sense that we believe adequate to explain also ours. They argue that these results could be explained considering the existence of greater social pressure to suppress emotional expression in older people and also that they could have been socialized in an environment with different rules of emotional expression which could made for example, underestimated the expression of the emotions (Labouvie-Vief, DeVoe & Bulka, 1989). This high frequency of use of the SEE might be showing in fact, this trend of older people to underestimate their negative emotional states and this could interfere with the conduct of their emotional self-reports (Márquez-González et al., 2008); which has been previously observed by several investigators (Diener, Sandvich & Larsen, 1985). Finally, we must consider the great influence that contextual factors, history and culture have on human behavior (eg, Guarino, Feldman, & Roger, 2005). So these results obtained in the Spanish speaking population in ways different from those made with U.S. population could be a start in exploring the age-related differences for emotional management in different cultural contexts, which may be the challenge of future Hispanic research.

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