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Predictors and Consequences of Involvement in Age-Discrepant Romantic Relationships

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## Abstract

This study was designed to explore predictors and consequences of involvement in age-discrepant relationships. Prior research has identified some demographic characteristics that seem to be linked to involvement in these relationships, such as ethnicity, level of education, and marital status. This study examined these characteristics as well as age differences in the relationships of participants' parents, postulating that individuals who have parents who are very different in age would be more open to age-discrepant relationships themselves. Along with demographic predictors, this study also looked at the success rate of these relationships, hypothesizing that age-discrepant relationships would be associated with lower levels of satisfaction. Exchange orientation was examined as a possible mediator between age-discrepancy and satisfaction. Participants (N=69) completed demographic, relationship satisfaction, and exchange orientation questionnaires online. Results indicate that parents' age is a significant predictor of involvement in age-discrepant relationships ( $r = .27, p < .05$ ) and that participation in age-discrepant relationships predicts lower relationship satisfaction for the younger partner ( $r = -.49, p < .001$ ). Exchange orientation partially mediated the relationship between age-discrepancy and satisfaction for younger partners. This research is important because it brings depth to a little-studied area by examining one process (i.e., modeling) by which individuals become involved in age-discrepant relationships and one mechanism (i.e., the development of an under-benefiting exchange orientation) by which age-discrepant relationships are linked to satisfaction.

## Predictors and Consequences of Involvement in Age-Discrepant Romantic Relationships

My first true contact with age-discrepant relationships occurred at work this past summer. One of my co-workers and I became rather good friends and would share information about our personal lives with each other. During one lunch hour, she began talking about her new boyfriend and she told me that he was thirty-two years old, making him approximately twelve years older than her. I found this to be very shocking because I had never really heard anyone my own age talk about dating someone so much older than themselves. My co-worker also told me that her mother, who was in her early forties, had just recently remarried a man who was in his seventies. I found this to be extremely surprising as well. I had never really thought about being in an age-discrepant relationship such as this; it never really occurred to me. I began to wonder why she was so comfortable with being in one. Was my co-worker modeling her mother's behavior? Did her own attitudes about the purpose of relationships play some role?

Much research has been conducted to examine why people choose particular partners in their intimate romantic relationships. One of the overall themes found in this literature is that similarity breeds attraction. People tend to date and/or marry people who are like them on a wide range of characteristics including age, ethnicity, religion, educational level, and interests and activities (Zak, Armer, Edmunds, Fleury, Sarris, & Shatynski., 2001). Despite these trends, there are certainly instances where people choose partners who are different from themselves, such as when younger people date or marry someone who is much older or younger than themselves, as can be seen in the story above. To date, relatively few studies have been conducted on age-discrepant romantic relationships.

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the existing literature by examining both the characteristics of individuals who enter into age-discrepant relationships and the outcomes of these relationships. In particular, this study will examine whether individuals in age-discrepant relationships differ from those in age-similar relationships in terms of demographic characteristics or in their attitudes toward romantic relationships. This study will also examine whether individuals in age-discrepant relationships are more or less satisfied with their partners than individuals in age-similar relationships.

#### Characteristics of Individuals in Age-Discrepant Relationships

Existing research indicates that both demographic variables and relationship experiences can play a role in determining who is likely to become involved in age-discrepant relationships. In their study, Shehan, Berado, and Vera (1991) examined demographic predictors, showing that ethnicity, gender, level of education, and marital status are all factors that contribute to involvement in age-discrepant relationships. Specifically, African American women are more likely to participate in age-discrepant relationships than women of other ethnicities. Women are more likely to be the younger partner in these relationships. People with lower levels of education are more likely to become involved as are people who have been previously married or who are older (Shehan et al., 1991). Prager (1995) focused on how attitudes derived from previous relationships might impact age choices regarding a romantic partner. He found that people who become involved in age-discrepant relationships tend to have had insecure attachments to caregivers as children. Prager (1995) interpreted these findings as evidence that adults could be looking to age-discrepant relationships for the attachment

that they did not receive in childhood. Specifically, these individuals could be looking for the parental figure in these relationships that was not present during childhood.

#### Consequences of Involvement in Age-Discrepant Relationships

There is little existing empirical research on the outcomes of age-discrepant relationships. What little work has been done does suggest that negative attitudes toward age-discrepant relationships exist, but may be unfounded. In his study, Cowan (1984) examined adults' and adolescents' attitudes toward age-discrepant relationships. He found that both adolescents and adults believed that age-discrepant relationships were less successful overall than age-similar relationships, especially when the older partner was female (Cowan, 1984). However, research done by Zak et al. (2001) shows that these beliefs may be unwarranted. In particular, Zak et al. (2001) found that individuals in age-discrepant relationships reported more unselfish, sacrificing love and experienced less jealousy than those in age-similar relationships. The age-discrepant relationships were found to be more successful overall, such that both partners were more satisfied with the quality of the relationship. In general, perceptions of age-discrepant relationships seem to be negative, while self-reports of individuals involved in this type of relationship are positive.

#### The Current Study

The current study will examine a number of demographic characteristics to determine whether they are associated with becoming involved in age-discrepant relationships. Consistent with prior work, it is hypothesized that people in age-discrepant relationships will be more likely to be of a minority ethnicity and have less educational experience. This study also looks at relationship status (e.g., dating, engaged, married),

hypothesizing that those in age-discrepant relationships would be more likely to be dating because dating relationships are often not as successful and long-lasting as marriages. In addition, a new, previously unstudied, variable will be added. Specifically, this study will include a question that assesses age differences between participants' parents. It is predicted that individuals with parents who are in age-discrepant relationships will be more likely to participate in this type of relationship themselves than those whose parents are in age-similar relationships. This hypothesis is consistent with social learning theories proposed by Albert Bandura who suggests that we model the behaviors and beliefs of those around us (Engler, 2006).

To examine the outcomes of age-discrepant relationships, the current study will look at relationship satisfaction. In particular, this study will examine how satisfying these relationships are as compared to age-similar relationships. Hypotheses regarding relationship satisfaction are unclear. On the one hand, individuals in age-discrepant relationships may be more satisfied. This finding would be consistent with those reported by Zak et al. (2001) on the success of age-discrepant relationships. On the other hand, individuals in age-discrepant relationships may be less satisfied than those in age-similar relationships. This finding would be consistent with the bulk of the research literature. First, it would be consistent with Cowan's (1984) work indicating that age-discrepant relationships are perceived to be less successful. It would also be consistent with a large literature showing that individuals who share many similarities with their partners tend to be happier than those who share fewer similarities. For example, contrary to the idea that opposites complement, it has been found that one of the strongest predictors of marital

success is similarity, especially in attitudes, values, beliefs, and personality characteristics (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003).

A final goal of the present study is to examine why age-discrepant relationships might be linked with lower relationship satisfaction. One possibility is that people who are involved in age-discrepant relationships are more likely to hold negative relationship attitudes. Prager (1995) examined one such attitude (i.e., the idea that one's partners could substitute for an emotionally-absent parental figure). Another relationship attitude that has received quite a bit of attention in the relationship attitudes literature involves the distinction between exchange versus communal relationship orientations. First proposed by Clark and Mills (1979), individuals who have an exchange orientation are primarily concerned with fulfilling their own needs. Relationships are viewed as give-and-take situations and gaining something from the partner is valued. If there is an imbalance in exchange-oriented relationships, both partners feel unhappy. Specifically, the partner on the short end of the relationship will usually feel angry and/or depressed, and the person with the advantage will often feel guilty (Aronson, 2004). Individuals with a communal exchange orientation are more focused on the combined effort between the two partners. In relationships characterized by communal exchange, partners are viewed as working together to meet their needs. It has been proposed that relationships high in exchange are less satisfying because those who place more importance on equal amounts of exchange will be more aware of the imbalances that occur within the relationship, causing irritation (Sprecher, 1998).

According to Sprecher (1998), there are two types of exchange orientations. Under-benefiting exchange orientation occurs when individuals feel as if they are being

short-handed; they feel as though their partners are not returning what they feel they are giving to them. In an over-benefiting exchange orientation, one partner feels as though he/she is receiving so much from his/her partner and not really returning the favor; these individuals are short-handing their partners, slightly taking advantage of them (Sprecher, 1998). One possibility is that people in age-discrepant relationships will have a greater exchange orientation than those in age-similar relationships. This finding would certainly not prove – but would be consistent with stereotypes that people in age-discrepant relationships are looking for an exchange (e.g., younger women are dating older men for money and financial stability; older men are dating younger women for physical needs and satisfaction). This exchange orientation, could, in turn, lead to lower relationship satisfaction. Exchange orientation, will, then, be examined as a mediator of the relationship between age-discrepancy and satisfaction in this study.

## Methods

### *Participants*

There were sixty-nine individuals participating in this study. Of the sixty-nine participants, fourteen were male and fifty-five were female. Participants ranged in age from fifteen to fifty-six years, with a mean age of twenty-five years. Ethnicity varied little among participants, with 85% being Caucasian and the other 15% consisting of Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans. Three of the participants reported high school as their highest level of education, fifty-four participants reported college as their highest level of education, and twelve participants had experience in some level of graduate school or higher.

All participants were involved in heterosexual romantic relationships. Fifty participants were dating, four were engaged, and fifteen were married. The age difference between partners ranged from zero to twenty-eight years. Of the relationships that had an age difference, 25% of participants had a partner that was at least five years younger or older than themselves. In their relationships, forty-three participants were the younger partner, ten were the same age as their partner, and fifteen were the older partner. One participant did not specify the age of his/her partner. In their relationships, men were equally likely to be the younger or older partner. Five men were the same age as their partner, four men were the older partner, and four men were the younger partner. In their relationships, women were more likely to be the younger partner. Thirty-nine women were the younger partner in the relationship, eleven were the older partner, and four were the same age as their partner.

### *Procedure*

Before completing the on-line questionnaire, participants viewed an informed consent form. After completing the informed consent form, participants were given a demographic survey, a relationship satisfaction scale, and an exchange-orientation scale. Once all of the surveys were completed, participants were debriefed.

The demographic survey included questions assessing participants' age, gender, ethnicity, relationship status (e.g., dating or married), partner age, and age difference between partners (see Appendix A).

The relationship satisfaction scale consisted of seven items assessing relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988). An example item was: How well does your partner meet

your needs? Items were answered using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (poorly) to 5 (extremely well). The scale had a reliability of  $\alpha = .90$  (see Appendix B).

The exchange orientation scale consisted of forty items assessing the amount of exchange within a relationship (Sprecher, 1998). The survey was divided into over-benefiting and under-benefiting exchange scales. An example of an over-benefiting item was: "I usually do not forget if I owe my partner a favor." An example of an under-benefiting item was: "I usually do not forget if my partner owes me a favor." Each item was answered using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The over-benefiting scale had a reliability of  $\alpha = .81$ , and the under-benefiting scale had a reliability of  $\alpha = .85$  (see Appendix C).

### Results

The first set of analyses was designed to examine predictors of involvement in age-discrepant relationships. Ethnicity, relationship status, and level of education were all found to be insignificant predictors of involvement,  $ps > .05$ . However, age difference between parents was found to be a significant predictor of involvement in age-discrepant relationships,  $r = .27, p = .03$ . Specifically, the larger the discrepancy in the ages of participants' parents, the larger the discrepancy in the age of the participant and his or her romantic partner.

The next analysis examined the consequences of involvement in age-discrepant relationships. Age-discrepancy was a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction, but only among participants who were the younger partner,  $r = -.49, p = .001$ .

The final analysis examined exchange orientation as a mediator of the relationship between age-discrepancy and satisfaction, where a mediating variable is one that explains

the relationship between the predictor variable (in this case, age-discrepancy) and the dependent variable (in this case, relationship satisfaction). Because the correlation between age-discrepancy and satisfaction held only for younger partners, analyses were limited to this group. Although both types of exchange orientation were looked at, under-benefiting exchanged was the only type that served as a mediator. In this case, all four criteria needed for a variable to be deemed a mediator were met. First, there was a significant relationship between the predictor variable (age-discrepancy) and the dependent variable (satisfaction),  $t(41) = -3.61, B = -.49, p < .001$ . Second, there was a significant relationship between the predictor variable (age-discrepancy) and the mediator (under-benefiting exchange orientation),  $t(41) = 2.34, B = .34, p < .05$ . Third, there was a significant relationship between the mediator (under-benefiting exchange orientation) and the dependent variable (satisfaction) when controlling for the predictor variable (age-discrepancy),  $t(40) = -2.09, B = -.29, p < .05$ . Finally, the relationship between the predictor variable (age-discrepancy) and the dependent variable (satisfaction) decreased in significance once the mediator was controlled for,  $t(40) = -2.81, B = -.39, p < .01$ . Under-benefiting exchange orientation, then, was found to partially mediate the relationship between age-discrepancy and satisfaction, again only among the younger participants (see Figure 1). As a partial mediator, under-benefiting exchange orientation explains that in age-discrepant relationships, the younger partner is less satisfied because he or she is feeling as though he or she is not receiving as much from his or her partner or out of the relationship in general. This feeling, in turn, leads the younger partner to feel satisfied with the relationship overall.

## Discussion

Results of the current study indicate that people who are involved in age-discrepant relationships are more likely to have parents who are involved in age-discrepant relationships. This finding is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, suggesting that people mimic and imitate the behaviors of those around them (Engler, 2006). Because parents play very influential roles in their children's lives, it makes sense that their behavior would leave a memorable impression on their children. These children, then, would be simply acting upon example.

Although parents' age-discrepancy seems to be a predictor of involvement in age-discrepant relationships, the other demographic characteristics (i.e., ethnicity, relationship status, and education level) were not significant predictors of the likelihood of one's involvement in these relationships. These insignificant findings could result from a lack of variation among participants. The majority of participants were dating, Caucasian, and had some college-level educational experience. Future research would require a more diverse sample to examine these factors as predictors of involvement in age-discrepant relationships.

The results also indicate negative self-reports from individuals involved in age-discrepant relationships. Specifically, the current study found that the participant who was the younger partner reported feeling less satisfied within the relationship. This finding is inconsistent with a study done by Zak et al. (2001) in which individuals indicated more feelings of unselfish love and trust than individuals in age-similar relationships. Because of the inconsistent results of the two studies, it is difficult to state a definite, or exact, outcome for these age-discrepant relationships. However, the age difference between partners in the current study ranged from zero to twenty-eight years,

while the age difference between partners in Zak et al.'s (2001) study ranged from zero to twenty years. It could be that because the current study contained relationships with higher age-discrepancy, the younger partners then reported less satisfaction. Because the age range was not as high in Zak et al.'s (2001) study, lower levels of satisfaction may not have been reported as frequently.

Results also suggested that the younger partners in age-discrepant relationships are less satisfied with the relationship, in part because they feel they are under-benefiting in exchange. It could be that these individuals are searching for the attachment, connection, and exchange in an older partner because these characteristics were not fulfilled with their caregiver as a child (Prager, 1995). As a result of not connecting with their caregiver as a child, these individuals could then be incapable of forming the proper attachments and interactions necessary for a healthy relationship. Because they never had a fulfilling relationship, they could be unaware of what these relationships consist of and how they operate. It would then seem that these individuals are searching for something that they can not really achieve and obtain until they realize that the problem really lies within them-selves.

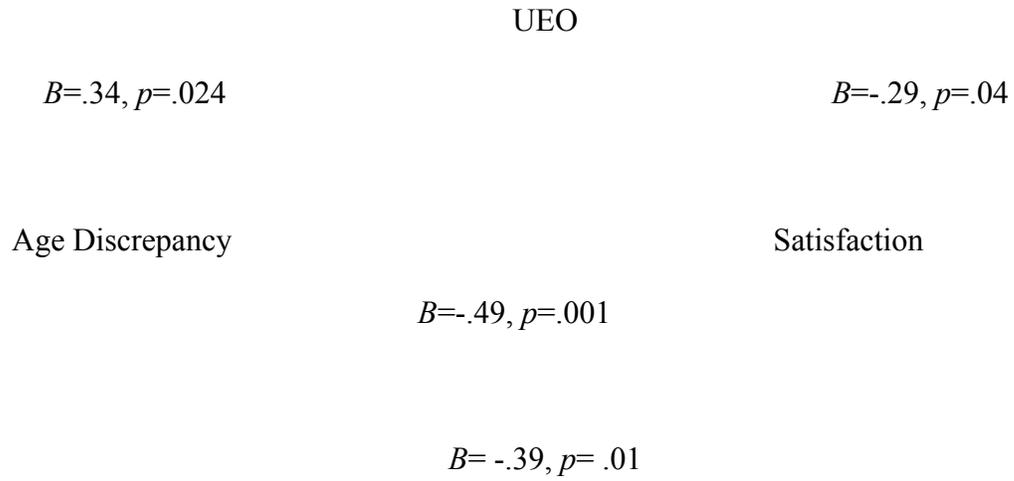
It could also be true that the older partner admires the youth and vitality of the younger partner, and sees these traits to be personally fulfilling. As a result, the needs of the younger partner are disregarded, and the needs of the older partner are put first. This would then also lead the younger partner to feel taken advantage of and as though he or she was under-benefiting. These feelings of under-benefiting would then lead to dissatisfaction within the relationship.

Overall, it seems as though age-discrepant relationships are a risk factor for dissatisfaction, mainly for the younger partner. Although it is likely that individuals are imitating the behavior of parents, it is very probable that many will feel as though they are under-benefiting in the relationship; feeling less satisfied as a result. Not all of these age-discrepant relationships are negative and unsatisfying; however, it seems that the common belief that similarity brings people together and leads to satisfaction is more accurate than the idea that opposites attract.

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Figure 1.



## Appendix A

### Demographic Survey Questions:

1. Ethnicity
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Education level
5. Marital/relationship status
6. Age-difference between parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles
7. Age of romantic partner
8. Length of relationship
9. How was partner met
10. Where was partner met
11. What attracted participant to partner

Appendix B

Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988).

Please mark on the answer sheet the letter for each item which best answers that item for you.

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?  
1 (poorly) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (extremely well)
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?  
1 (unsatisfied) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (extremely satisfied)
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?  
1 (poor) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (excellent)
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?  
1 (never) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (very often)
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?  
1 (hardly at all) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (completely)
6. How much do you love your partner?  
1 (not much) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (very much)
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?  
1 (very few) 2 3 (average) 4 5 (very many)

Appendix C

Exchange Orientation Scale (Sprecher, 1998)

**Underbenefiting Exchange Orientation**

Answers 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

I usually do not forget if my partner owes me a favor. 1 2 3 4 5

If I have something to offer the relationship that my partner is incapable of also giving (e.g., money, status, physical attractiveness), I expect him/her to compensate by giving other things in return 1 2 3 4 5

I usually remember if my partner owes me money 1 2 3 4 5

If I take my partner out to dinner, I expect him/her to do the same for me sometime.  
1 2 3 4 5

When I exchange gifts with a partner on an important occasion (Christmas, anniversary) I feel bad (cheated) if I have spent significantly more money on him/her than he/she has on me. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner owes me a favor, I don't mind if she/he waits a long time before repaying. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner feels entitled to an evening out with friends of either sex, then I feel entitled to do the same. 1 2 3 4 5

It bothers me if my partner doesn't fulfill his/her obligations to me. 1 2 3 4 5

If I do dishes three times a week, then I expect my partner to do them three times a week also (or something equivalent). 1 2 3 4 5

If I were to campaign for someone running for office, I'd expect some sort of compensation or at least recognition. 1 2 3 4 5

If I tell my partner about my private affairs (business, family, love experiences) I expect him/her to tell me something about his/hers. 1 2 3 4 5

If I'm out to dinner with my partner, I would much rather that he/she pays the bill entirely than if I paid the bill entirely. 1 2 3 4 5

I prefer not to send a second letter to a partner unless I had received a letter or phone call in response to my first letter. 1 2 3 4 5

When I invite my partner to dinner at my house, I prefer that he/she offers to bring something (e.g., wine, dessert). 1 2 3 4 5

If I praise my partner for his/her accomplishments, I expect him/her to praise me for mine as well. 1 2 3 4 5

If I give my partner a ride to work on an occasional basis (approximately 6 times a month), then I expect him/her to repay me in some way. 1 2 3 4 5

I wish my partner would show more acknowledgement when I say or do nice things to them. 1 2 3 4 5

It bothers me if my partner/people I like do less for me than I do for them.

1 2 3 4 5

When buying a present for my partner, I often try to remember the value of what he/she has given me in the past and I try not to buy something of more value.

1 2 3 4 5

If I show up on time for a date, I become upset if my partner shows up late.

1 2 3 4 5

**Over-benefiting Exchange Orientation**

I usually do not forget if I owe my partner a favor. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner has something to offer the relationship that I'm incapable of also giving (money, status, physical attractiveness) I would try to compensate by giving other things in return. 1 2 3 4 5

I usually remember if I owe my partner money. 1 2 3 4 5

When I exchange gifts with a significant other on an important occasion (Christmas, anniversary), I feel bad (guilty) if I have spent significantly less money on him/her than he/she has on me. 1 2 3 4 5

If I owe my partner a favor, it doesn't bother me to wait a long time before repaying.

1 2 3 4 5

If I feel entitled to an evening out with friends of either sex, then I feel my partner should feel entitled to the same. 1 2 3 4 5

It bothers me if I don't fulfill my obligations to my partner. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner does dishes three times a week, then I expect to do them three times a week also (or something equivalent). 1 2 3 4 5

If someone were to campaign for me running for office, I'd expect to give compensation or at least recognition in return. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner tells me about his/her private affairs (business, family, love experiences) I expect to tell him/her something about me. 1 2 3 4 5

If I'm out to dinner with my partner, I would much rather pay the bill entirely than have him/her pay the bill entirely. 1 2 3 4 5

I prefer that my partner does not send a second letter before I have had the chance to send a letter or make a phone call in response to his/her first letter. 1 2 3 4 5

When I go to dinner at my partner's house, I prefer to bring something (e.g., wine, dessert). 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner praises me for my accomplishments, I will praise him/her for his/her accomplishments as well. 1 2 3 4 5

If my partner gives me a ride to work on an occasional basis (approximately 6 times a month), then I expect to repay him/her in some way. 1 2 3 4 5

I try to show my partner acknowledgement when he/she says or does nice things for me. 1 2 3 4 5

It bothers me if my partner/people I like do more for me than I do for them.  
1 2 3 4 5

When buying a present for my partner, I often try to remember the value of what he/she has given me in the past and I try not to buy something of less value.  
1 2 3 4 5

If I'm late for an date with my partner I get upset with myself. 1 2 3 4 5

### Informed Consent Form

This independent research study is being conducted by Amy Bender, a senior psychology major at Hanover College. The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine age-discrepant relationships. As part of the study, you will be asked to complete on-line documents including a short demographic questionnaire, a scale assessing relationship orientation, and another scale assessing relationship satisfaction.

The entire study should not take more than thirty to forty-five minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in the study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the study is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the response you give. The information given in the questionnaire and scales will not be used beyond the study.

Questions about this study can be addressed to Amy Bender by email at [bendera@hanover.edu](mailto:bendera@hanover.edu). You may also contact Ellen Altermatt at 812.866.7317.

I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time.

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Signature

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Date

### Debriefing

The study in which you participated was designed to investigate the causes and consequences of being involved in age-discrepant relationships, in which one partner is five or more years older than the other. I am hypothesizing that people in age-discrepant relationships will share certain demographic characteristics (e.g. parents who are very different in age) and that these relationships may be less likely to survive, perhaps because the exchange features of these relationships are more salient. Little research exists on this subject, but it indicates that there are certain demographic characteristics that predict involvement in these relationships; however, research on the outcomes of these relationships is mixed.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants. If people know what is being tested before the study begins, they may respond differently, jeopardizing the results.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact Amy Bender at [bendera@hanover.edu](mailto:bendera@hanover.edu). For more information on this topic, please read:

Zak, A., Armer, E., Edmunds, K., Fleury, T., Sarris, M., & Shatynski, B. (2001). Age-discrepant relationships: Do these romances fare well?. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 3(1), 119-122.