

# Life stories, subjective well-being, and age

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## Introduction

Research shows that older adults experience higher subjective well-being (SWB), defined as greater life satisfaction, more positive affect, and less negative affect<sup>1</sup>, compared with both younger and middle-aged adults.<sup>2</sup>

Research also shows that different aspects of life stories are differentially related to SWB<sup>3</sup>.

In this study, we focused on type and valence of self-event connections in life stories. Self-event connections refer to causal connections between events and the self, and may address stability or change in the self. Both stability and change connections may be either positive or negative<sup>4</sup>, and this may be related to SWB.

## Aims

To examine:

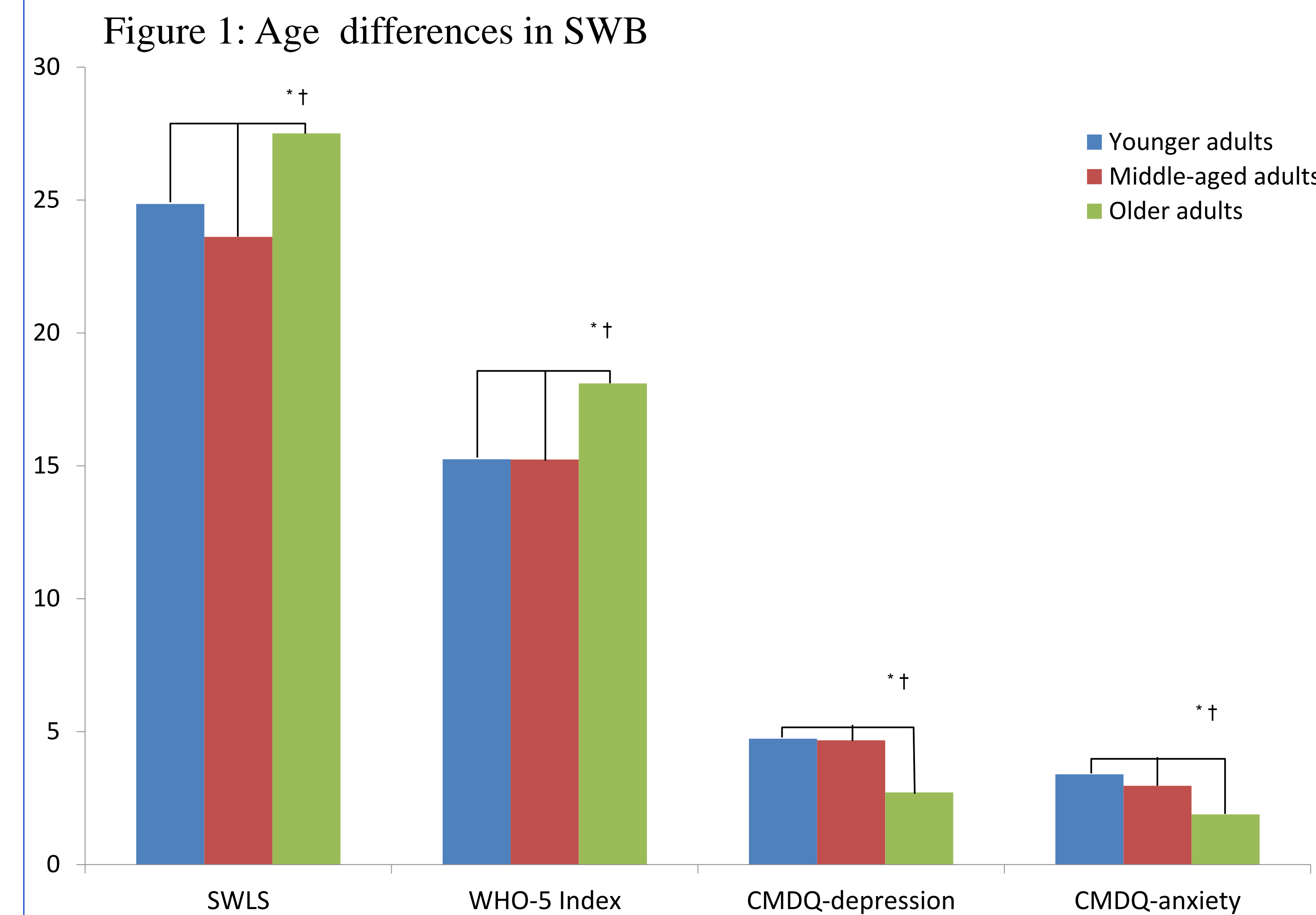
- 1) Age differences in SWB
- 2) The relation between type and valence of self-event connections in life stories and SWB
- 3) Age differences in type and valence of self-event connections in life stories
- 4) Whether age differences in type and valence of self-event connections in life stories mediate age differences in SWB

## Methods

101 younger adults (aged 20-25), 81 middle-aged adults (aged 45-56), and 88 older adults (aged 62-76) described up to ten chapters and up to ten specific memories in their life story and rated these on event valence, positive and negative stability connections, and positive and negative change connections.

SWB was measured using four self-report indicators: The Satisfaction With Life Scale<sup>1</sup>, The WHO-5 Well-being Index<sup>5</sup>, and the subscales of depression and anxiety from The Common Mental Disorder Questionnaire.<sup>6</sup>

## Results



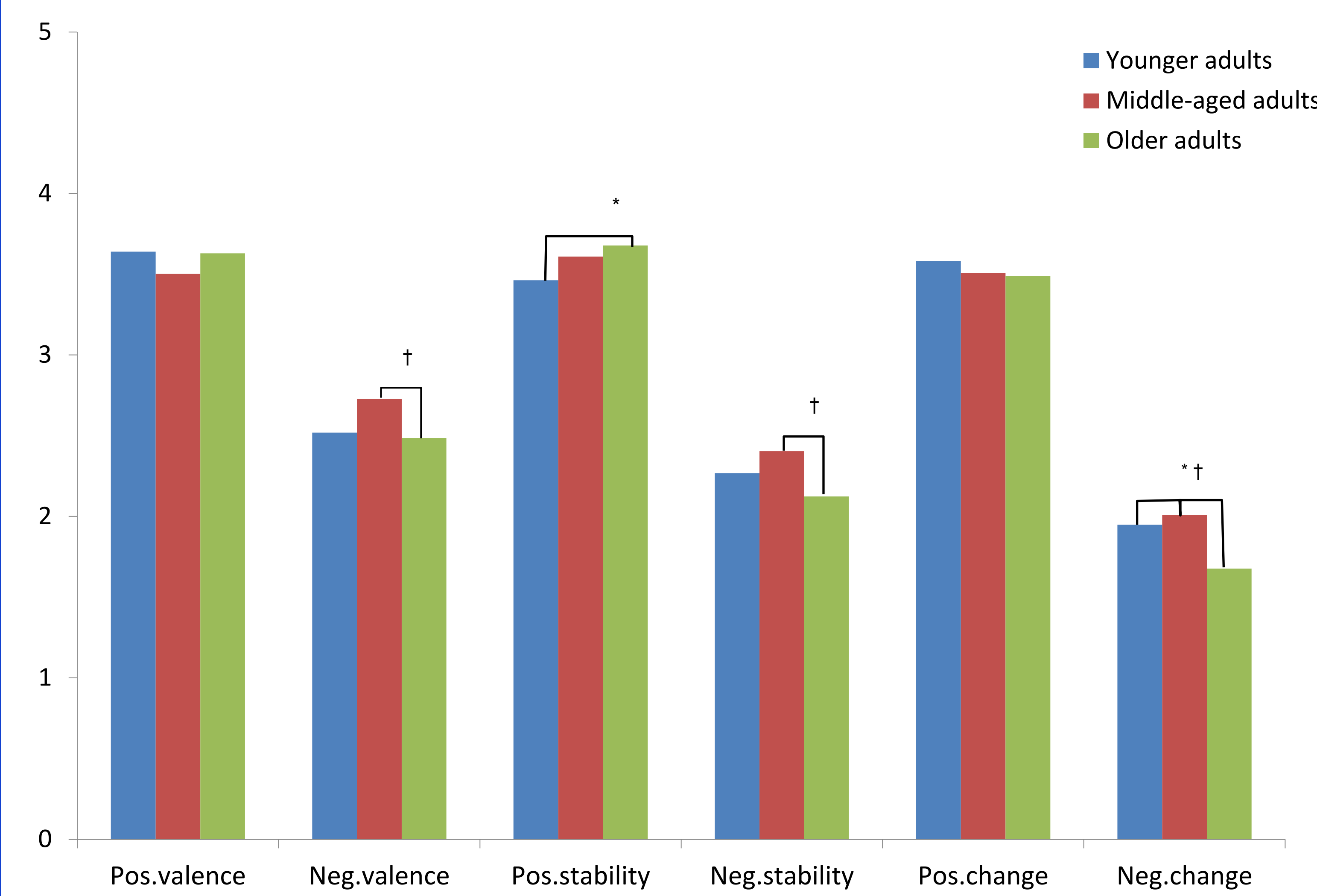
\* Younger adults compared with older adults,  $p < .05$   
 † Middle-aged adults compared with older adults,  $p < .05$

Table 1. Correlations between event valence and type/valence of self-event connections and SWB

	SWLS	WHO-5 Index	CMDQ-depression	CMDQ-anxiety
Pos.valence	.37**	.34**	-.27**	-.24**
Neg.valence	-.32**	-.30**	.31**	.29**
Pos.stability	.32**	.31**	-.23**	-.22**
Neg.stability	-.29**	-.34**	.35**	.36**
Pos.change	.29**	.35**	-.24**	-.21**
Neg.change	-.36**	-.42**	.44**	.38**

\*\* $p < .01$

Figure 2: Age differences in event valence and type/valence of self-event connections



\* Younger adults compared with older adults,  $p < .05$   
 † Middle-aged adults compared with older adults,  $p < .05$

## Results Continued

Table 2: Hierarchical regression: Younger adults versus older adults

Outcome	Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Outcome	Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	
SWLS	Age	.20**	.09	CMDQ-depression	Age	-.24**	-.12	
	Pos.stability		.25**		Pos.stability			-.15*
	Neg.change		-.26**		Neg.change			.33**
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.18		Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.19	
WHO-5	Age	.31**	.20**	CMDQ-anxiety	Age	-.27**	-.18*	
	Pos.stability		.20**		Pos.stability			-.14
	Neg.change		-.27**		Neg.change			.25**
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.21		Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.15	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 3: Hierarchical regression: Middle-aged adults versus older adults

Outcome	Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Outcome	Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	
SWLS	Age	.27**	.15	CMDQ-depression	Age	-.23**	-.08	
	Neg.valence		-.19*		Neg.valence			.11
	Neg.stability		.01		Neg.stability			.01
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.19		Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.04	.24	
WHO-5	Age	.27**	.13	CMDQ-anxiety	Age	.19*	-.07	
	Neg.valence		-.06		Neg.valence			.08
	Neg.stability		-.02		Neg.stability			.15
	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.23		Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.19	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## Conclusions

- 1) Older adults had higher levels of SWB compared with younger and middle-aged adults.
- 2) Positive self-event connections were related to higher SWB and negative self-event connections were related to lower SWB.
- 3) Compared with younger adults, older adults scored higher on positive stability connections and lower on negative change connections. Compared with middle-aged adults, older adults scored lower on negative valence, negative stability and negative change connections. That is, older adults tended to construct more positive life stories than the younger groups by emphasizing positive stability and de-emphasizing negative valence, negative stability, and negative change.
- 4) These age differences in life stories partly mediated age differences in SWB.

1) Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment - LA English*, 49(1), 71. 2) Van Landeghem, B. (2012). A test for convexity of human well-being over the lifecycle: longitudinal evidence from a 20-year panel. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 571-585. 3) Baerger, D. R., & McAdams, D. P. (1999). Life story coherence and its relation to psychological well-being. *Narrative Inquiry*, 9, 69-96. 4) Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: the emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5). 5) Beck, Per (2011). *Klinisk psykometri*. Kbh.: Munksgaard Danmark. 6) Christensen, K. S., Fink, P., Toft, T., Frostholt, L., Ørnboel, E., & Olesen, F. (2005). A brief case-finding questionnaire for common mental disorders: the CMDQ. *Family Practice*, 22(4), 448-457