ABSTRACT

The action-theoretical conceptualization of the model of *Selection, Optimization, and Compensation* (*SOC-Model*; P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000) proposes that by setting and pursuing personal goals individuals can actively influence the direction of development (selection), the level of functioning (optimization), and the maintenance of functioning in the face of losses (compensation) within physical, social, and psychological constraints. The *SOC-Model* allows to integrate lifespan developmental and action perspectives and served as a general framework for the investigation of differences between younger and older adults regarding orientation toward promoting gains, maintaining functions, and preventing losses.

The dissertation studies presented examined if the increasingly less positive ratio of developmental gains to losses in adulthood (P. B. Baltes, 1987) is reflected in personal goal orientation. More specifically, three questions guided the studies: (1) Do younger adults primarily orient their goals toward *growth*, whereas older adults primarily focus on *maintenance* and *prevention of loss*? (2) Are there age-related differences in the associations between goal orientation and subjective well-being? (3) What is the role of expected resource demands of goals in explaining age-related differences in goal orientation?

Adopting a multi-method approach, four studies used independent samples of younger and older adults, different types of measurement (i.e., self-report and preference-choice behavior), as well as different life contexts (i.e., goals relating to self-generated goal domains, cognitive and physical functioning goals).

In Study 1, younger ($n = 49$; $M = 22$ years) and older participants ($n = 41$; $M = 70$ years) rated each of six self-generated goals with respect to goal orientation toward growth, maintenance, and prevention of loss. On average, younger adults reported a primary goal orientation toward growth, whereas goal orientation toward maintenance and prevention of loss were more frequently reported in late adulthood. Loss-avoidance was negatively related to general well-being in younger but not older adults. In old age, orienting goals toward maintaining functions was positively associated with general subjective well-being.

Study 2 used a more parsimonious conceptualization of self-reported goal orientation comprising only two dimensions (i.e., *growth* and *maintenance–prevention of loss*). Study 2 confirmed the general pattern of findings in Study 1 regarding age-group differences in goal orientation in a sample of 48 younger ($M = 21$ years) and 52 older adults ($M = 72$ years).

Studies 3a and 3b assessed goal orientation on the level of preference-choice behavior. Study 3a referred to the domain of cognitive functioning in a sample of 55 younger ($M = 22$ years) and 58 older adults ($M = 71$ years). Study 3b examined goal orientation of goal selection behavior in physical functioning with 52 younger ($M = 24$ years) and 49 older adults ($M = 69$

years). In both studies, participants chose between goals with different orientations. Goals were either directed toward growth or toward maintenance–prevention of loss, and were portrayed as demanding either equal or unequal amounts of resources (i.e., growth requiring more resources than maintenance–prevention of loss). In both goal domains, younger adults more frequently selected goals oriented toward growth than goals oriented toward maintenance–prevention of loss. Older adults, in contrast, selected goals oriented toward maintenance–prevention of loss just as frequently as growth-oriented goals in the domain of cognitive functioning (Study 3a), and more often selected goals oriented toward maintenance–prevention of loss in the domain of physical functioning (Study 3b).

Studies 3a and 3b consistently demonstrated that younger and older adults had a strong goal orientation toward maintaining functions and counteracting losses when making explicit the higher resource demands of pursuing growth-oriented goals as opposed to goals directed at maintenance and loss-prevention. This finding underscored the role of expected resource demands as an underlying factor of age-related differences in goal orientation.

Taken together, there was converging evidence on age-related differences in personal goal orientation across samples and types of measurement. The results of the four studies were in line with lifespan theories that regard balancing developmental gains and losses throughout life by selection of personal goals as an important process of adaptive developmental regulation. Shifting one's goal orientation from promoting gains toward maintenance and loss-prevention from early to late adulthood appears to constitute one mechanism to successfully adapt to the changing ratio of resource gains to resource losses across the lifespan. The dissertation serves as one example to show that embedding the concept of personal goals into a lifespan context as well as conceptualizing personal goals and goal-related processes as important components of developmental regulation enriches both the lifespan developmental and the action-theoretical perspective.