

# Regret

## Life-Span Changes in the Nature of Life Regrets

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### Introduction

New life stages promote new life goals and our most intense regrets should change in relation to our new goals and priorities.

Research shows that 'Work' and 'Education' regrets are more common for older adults, who also tend to regret their inactions more than their actions. However, past research focuses in frequency and fails to indicate which regrets are actually more intense.

We still don't know whether regret intensity changes with time and whether our most frequent regrets are also our most intense. Furthermore, we don't know whether regret-reducing processes, such as justification, are employed differentially across the life-span.

### Key Research Questions

1. Do different age groups have different regrets?
2. Are the most common regrets for each age group also the most intense regrets?
3. Are age-group differences in the intensity of regret reflective of different life goals and priorities?
4. Do we use regret reducing processes differentially across the life-span?

### Methods

#### Participants

N = 653 New Zealander adults (aged 18-87)  
Selection: New Zealand Electoral Roll

#### Age groups

Younger (18-39 years; m = 31, n = 155)  
Middle-aged (40-59 years; m = 49, n = 220)  
Older (60 years+; m = 68, n = 105).

#### Measures

**Regret:** Greatest long-term life regret. Coded as 'Action' or 'Inaction', and by life domain.

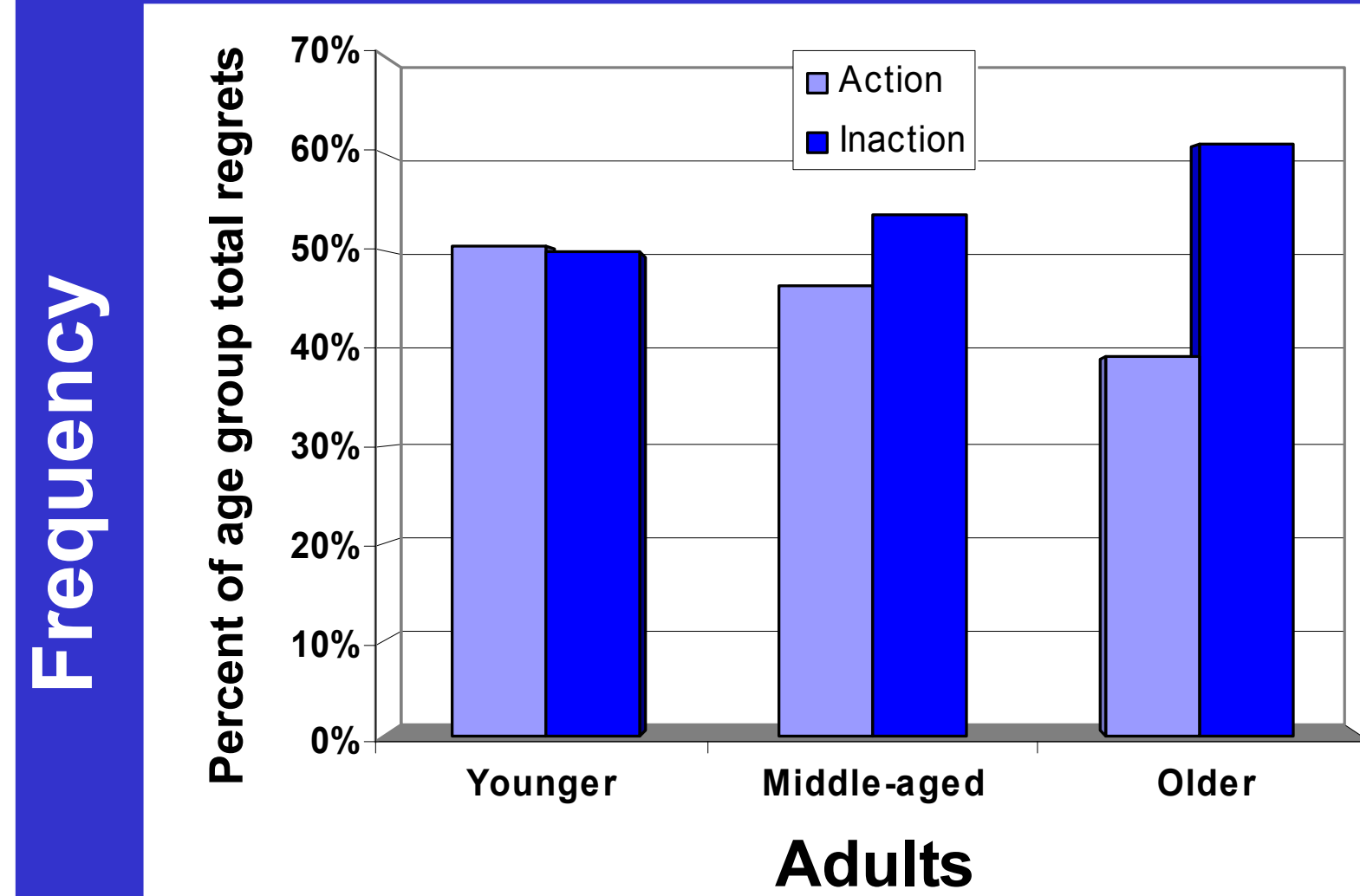
**Intensity:** 1 Low—9 High

**Justification Type:**

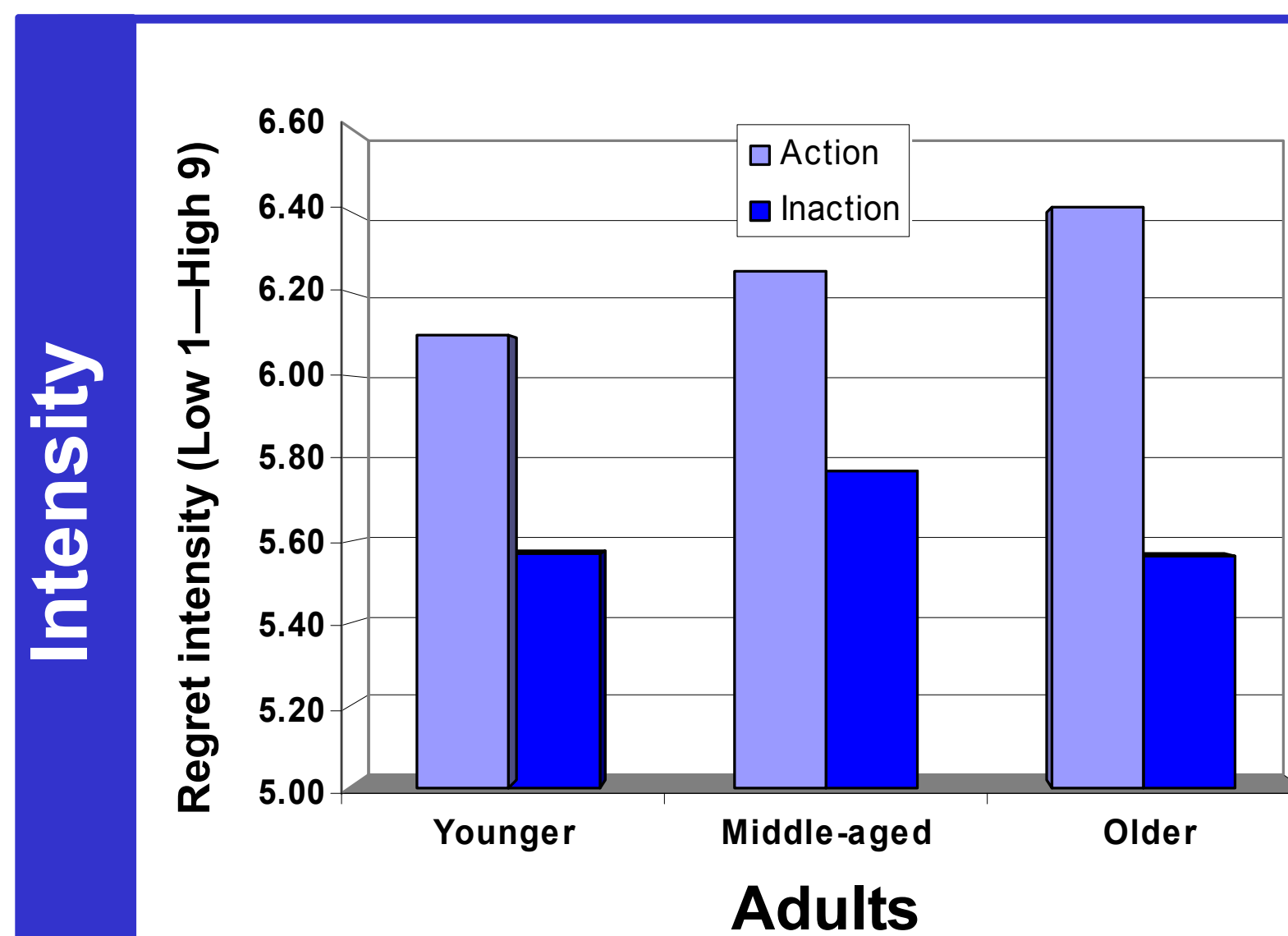
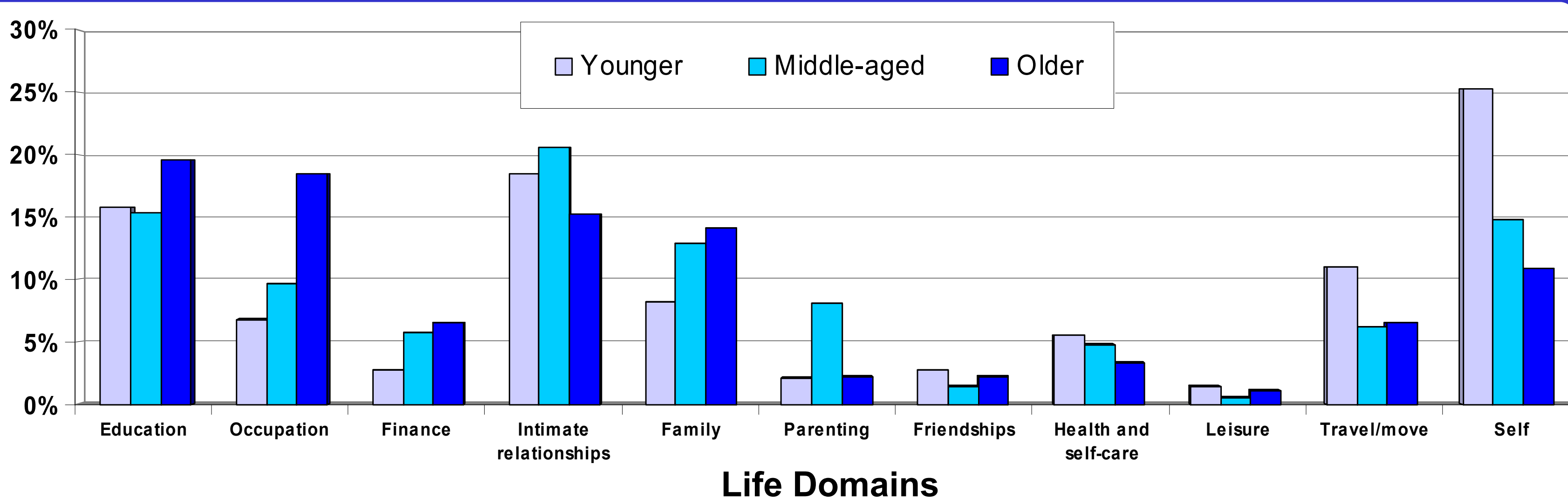
'Personal' 'Situational' 'No Justification'

**Responsibility:** 1 Low—5 High

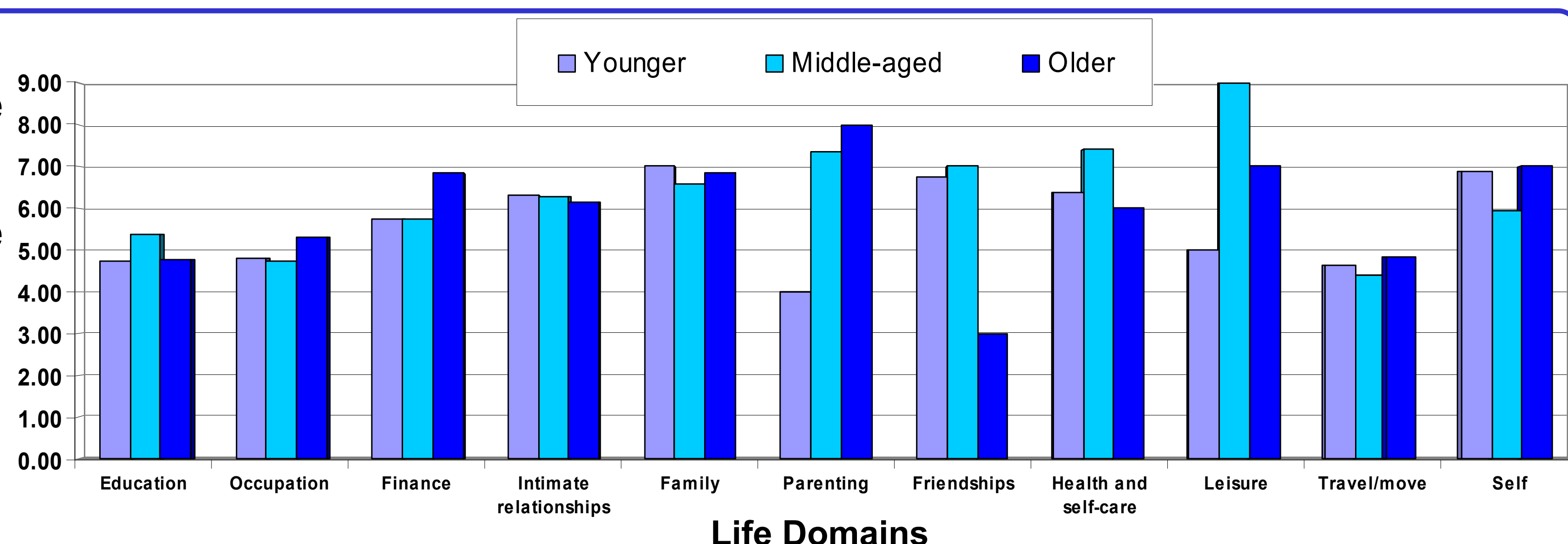
### Results



- Inactions increase with time
  - Actions decrease with time
- Most frequent regrets by life domain:
- 'Self' for younger
  - 'Intimate Relationships' for middle-aged
  - 'Education' for older



- Actions are more intense than inactions across time
- Most intense regrets by life domain:
- 'Family' for younger
  - 'Leisure' for middle-aged
  - 'Parenting' for older



### Regret Reducing Processes

#### Justification Use

Middle-aged adults justify their actions more than younger but this does not influence regret intensity. No age group differences in use of justification type are evident.

#### Feelings of Responsibility

Younger adults feel more responsible than older for their inactions, but this does not influence regret intensity or frequency.

### Intense Regrets as Life Goals

#### Younger adults

Concerned with maintaining family & friendship networks, and identifying core themes of self

#### Middle-aged adults

Concerned with leisure time decisions, maintaining health, and decisions involving their parenting choices.

#### Older adults

Concerned with parenting decisions, leisure time decisions, and maintaining a strong sense of self.

### Conclusions

#### Age Group Differences

Yes, ageing induces changes in the nature of our regrets. We tend to regret inactions more frequently as we age but we still feel more intense regrets for our mistaken actions.

#### Frequency & Intensity

The most frequent or common regrets in our lives are definitely not the most intense. Though some life domains provide both relatively frequent and intense regrets for all, more often than not our most intense regrets are for those decisions which are uncommon.

#### Life Goals

Some life domains reflect core life-stage themes and are both frequent and relatively intense for certain groups (e.g., 'self' regrets for younger adults). Others (e.g., friendships) are not life stage specific but were still intense and reflect important life-long concerns.

#### Regret Reducing Processes

There is some evidence that we justify decisions more and feel more responsible for our regrettable behaviour at certain ages but this does not actually enhance or lessen the intensity of our eventual regret



# The changing nature of life regrets

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2008-11-18

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