Dimensions of Subjective Age Identity Across the Lifespan: Adults are Aging Physically in Earth Years & Mentally in Martian Years

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Background

As implied by aphorisms like “you’re only as old as you feel,” subjective age experiences may elicit aspects of age identity distinct from chronological age. Subjective age has been used in gerontological research to assess age identity, and it predicts psychological and physical functioning better than chronological age (Kaufman & Elder, 2002; Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Rubin & Berntsen, 2006).

Whereas a slowed subjective experience of time is associated with depression and poor psychological functioning (Blewett, 1992), slowed subjective experience of aging, from a life span perspective, is associated with positive psychological and physical functioning.

Social factors, most notably establishing an identity and the attainment of rights and privileges for young people (Arnett, 2000), and the link between youth and vitality for older people, might motivate differential desires to be older among the young, and younger among the old. At the same time, subjective experience of aging may have a psychological reality that is just slower than the chronological passage of time. We examined how *felt age* and *desired age* differed from chronological age across the age span.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 33,751 visitors to the Project Implicit demonstration Web site (<http://implicit.harvard.edu>) reported:

Chronological Age

Subjective Age

Randomly-ordered items assessing subjective age (response scale: 1-115 years):

- **Felt age:**
“How old do you feel?”
($M = 25.6$, $SD = 11.1$)
- **Desired age:**
“If you could choose, what age would you be?”
($M = 25.1$, $SD = 10.7$)

Felt Age

“How old do you feel?”

In separate regressions with chronological age predicting subjective age, both felt and desired age were linearly related with chronological age. For each 10-year increase in respondents’ chronological age, *felt age* was only $6.4 \pm .03$ years older ($R^2 = .45$) and *desired age* only $5.2 \pm .03$ years older ($R^2 = .52$). On average, those under 25 *felt* older and *desired* to be even older than reality, while adults (aged 30+) *felt* younger and *desired* to be even younger.

Adolescents and young adults (10-25) *felt* older than their chronological age ($M = 1.3$ years older), with 34% feeling older and 22% feeling younger than actuality. In contrast, adults aged 65-89 felt an average of 15.2 years younger, and most (85%) felt younger than their chronological age; just 3% felt older. Although previous research (Rubin & Berntsen, 2006) emphasized the differences between reporting same or different *felt ages*, the cumulative barplot shows that it was primarily young adults that felt their same age—from age 40 and older, only 13% reported feeling their current age.

Same Age:

Older:

Younger:

Desired age grew older along with chronological age, but the discrepancy increased among older respondents. Respondents also tended to choose “landmark” desired ages (e.g., 21, 40, 45). The “ideal age” for people can be conceived of as the age at which people choose their current age as their desired age. 45% of 21 year-olds chose their current age – far more than any other age. And, besides 25 year-olds (33%), no more than 23% of any other age desired their current age. Adolescents (ages 10-17, $M_{diff} = 2.8$, modal age = 21) and young adults (ages 18-25) desired to be slightly older ($M_{diff} = 0.34$ years, modal age = 21). Older adults (aged 65-89) desired to be much younger ($M_{diff} = -22.3$ years; modal age = 50).

Desired Age

“If you could choose, what age would you be?”

Results

Results: *con't.*

Previous evidence for gender differences in subjective age has been mixed (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Rubin & Berntsen, 2006). Women reported *desired* ages that were closer to their chronological age than men ($2.26 \pm .20$ years closer), and men’s tendency to report a more youthful desired age increased with age (by $1.1 \pm .07$ years for every decade of chronological age; no gender differences in *felt* age). These results suggest that the common practice of averaging multiple dimensions of subjective age obscures gender differences and other patterns of change.

Although the relationship between subjective age identity and chronological age was approximately linear (Figure 1), the cumulative barplots (Figures 2 & 3) display how the patterns of subjective-chronological age discrepancies changed across the age span. Adolescents and young adults predominantly subjectively *felt* and *desired* to be the same age or a bit older, while middle-aged and older adults primarily *felt* somewhat younger and *desired* to be younger still.

Conclusions

With each passing Earth year, felt and desired age do grow older, it just takes longer for the year to go by. Past age 25 or so, subjective aging appears to occur on Mars, where one Earth decade equals only 5.3 Martian years. In some sense, our minds age more slowly than our bodies do.

The results for *desired age* suggest that the turning point when chronological age begins to outpace subjective age is age 21. At least in American society, this age symbolizes one’s access to the rights and privileges of adulthood; this suggests despite the heterogeneity in the timing of adult milestones (e.g., marriage, finishing education, financial independence; Arnett, 2000), specific, normative milestones may play an important role in subjective age identity.

At the same time, the linear increase in felt and desired ages suggests that mental experience of time – at least in terms of our personal experience – runs at a slower pace than time itself.

References

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