

“You’re Only as Old as You Feel”: Self-Perceptions of Age, Fears of Aging, and Life Satisfaction From Adolescence to Old Age

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We examined differences in subjective age identification from adolescence to old age and the relation between subjective age and fears about one’s own aging and life satisfaction. Using a questionnaire format, 188 men and women from 14 to 83 years of age made judgments about how old they felt, looked, acted, and desired to be. Respondents also answered questions about their personal fears of aging and present life satisfaction. Results revealed that individuals in their teens held older subjective age identities, whereas during the early adult years, individuals maintained same age identities. Across the middle and later adult years, individuals reported younger age identities, and women experienced younger age identities than men across these adult years. Results also revealed that discrepancies between subjective and actual age were associated with personal fears of aging and life satisfaction, especially in younger men and women.

Considerable research in the aging field has demonstrated that many adults over age 60 maintain subjective age identities (e.g., how old one feels) that are younger than their actual age (Baum & Boxley, 1983; Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Artt, 1972; Osteen & Best, 1985; Peters, 1971; Zola, 1962). Consistent with the popular view that “you’re only as old as you feel,” there is evidence that these self-conceptions of age may be better predictors of aging adults’ psychological and physical functioning than is their chronological age (Birren & Cunningham, 1985; George, Mutran, & Pennypacker, 1980; Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976; Nuttall, 1972). Although self-perceptions of age have been widely studied in older adults, little is known about how or whether these views change or differ across the life span. Identifying developmental patterns in subjective age perceptions is important in aging research because it is unclear whether older adults’ age perceptions reflect stable self-views or changes in self-perceptions that accompany life-course transitions and aging. As such, one goal of the present investigation was to extend past research by examining subjective age across a wider developmental age range than has previously been studied.

In one of the few studies on subjective age with multiple age groups (20–69 years), Kastenbaum et al. (1972) reported that all groups held subjective age identities that were younger than their actual age, and the discrepancy between actual and subjec-

tive age increased markedly with chronological age. Closer inspection of the Kastenbaum et al. data, however, revealed that differences between actual and subjective age were almost zero in the youngest age groups, suggesting that the early adult years may be a transition period from same age to younger age identity.

Kastenbaum et al., noted that the apparent pervasiveness of a younger age identity across all age groups in their sample was contrary to expectations that the youngest age group would feel and desire to be more grown up. The experience of an older age identity during adolescence would be consistent with the view that this life stage marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, during which time individuals strive toward a self-definition as independent, autonomous, and self-reliant (Erikson, 1963; Keniston, 1977). To test this possibility and to obtain more comprehensive data on developmental patterns in age identification, the present investigation examined self-perceptions of age in adolescents as well as in adults.

Theorists in the aging field have suggested that the tendency of aging adults to maintain younger subjective age identities is a form of defensive denial by which they can disassociate themselves from the stigma attached to growing old (Peters, 1971; Ward, 1977). Although several researchers have sought support for this hypothesis by examining the relation between older adults’ subjective age identities and the negativity of their attitudes toward the elderly, little or no relation has been found between these perceptions (Keith, 1977; Ward, 1977). It may be argued, however, that subjective age and denial of aging are more closely related to attitudes or fears associated with one’s own aging rather than to general attitudes toward the elderly (Kafer, Rakowski, Lachman, & Hickey, 1980). In the present study, fears about one’s own aging were examined in relation to subjective age identification to test whether feeling younger is associated with greater fears of getting older.

Denial of aging has been viewed as adaptive or instrumental in promoting “successful” aging, and it has been shown that better psychological adjustment and health are positively re-

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lated to the definition of oneself as younger than one's actual age (Bennett & Ekman, 1973; Bultena & Powers, 1978; Linn & Hunter, 1979; Peters, 1971). Another variable that has been linked to successful aging is life satisfaction (Palmore, 1981). In fact, "many consider it to be the primary ingredient in 'the good life' and the ultimate criterion of successful aging" (Palmore, 1981, p. 95). Thus, one might expect subjective age identity to be positively associated with life satisfaction, although there is little research in this area (Barak & Stern, 1986). As such, the present study also explored the relation between subjective age identification and life satisfaction.

In light of the unanswered questions regarding subjective age identification, the present investigation sought to identify (a) patterns of subjective age identification from adolescence through old age, and (b) the relation between individuals' subjective age and their personal fears about aging and their life satisfaction. To achieve these goals, a questionnaire was administered to 188 men and women between 14 and 83 years of age. It was expected that older adults would maintain younger age identities and that with increases in adults' chronological age there would be increases in the discrepancy between actual and subjective age. Adolescents were also expected to experience discrepancies between their subjective and actual age. Specifically, it was expected that they would maintain older age identities. On the other hand, young adults were expected to maintain same age identities. On the basis of existing research and theory, it was expected that adults with youthful subjective age identities would have greater personal fears about aging and greater life satisfaction than those with less youthful identities. No specific hypotheses were formulated about the relations between subjective age, fears about aging, and life satisfaction for younger age groups because of the lack of previous empirical work with these age groups.

Method

Sample

A total of 188 individuals living in the suburbs surrounding Boston, Massachusetts were surveyed. Of those sampled, 81 were men (M age = 29.74 years; SD = 18.46 years; range = 14–78 years) and 106 were women (M age = 36.06 years; SD = 20.64 years; range = 15–83 years).

Sampling was done mainly on the basis of convenience; however, care was taken to sample individuals across age from similar socioeconomic and educational backgrounds so that any observed differences in age perceptions across age were not attributable to differences in these background variables. The questionnaires were administered to high school and college students in classroom settings or were sent through the campus mail. The adults in the sample were obtained mainly from an adult educational workshop. However, questionnaires were also sent through the campus mail to several faculty members from different university departments. The older adults in the sample were obtained primarily through local senior citizen centers. Directors at the participating centers distributed the questionnaires to the older adults, who were allowed to take them home and return them when they had been completed. Of the 298 questionnaires that were distributed, 63% (188) were completed and returned.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire assessed several background characteristics, subjective age identity, fears about one's own aging, and present life satisfac-

tion. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the questionnaires were identified with code numbers.

Subjective age identity. Subjective age identity was assessed using a format similar to the one used by Kastenbaum et al., (1972). More specifically, respondents were asked to specify, in years, the age that most closely corresponded to (a) the way they felt, (b) the way they looked, (c) the age of the person whom their interests and activities were most like, and (d) the age that they would like to be if they could pick out their age right now. Cronbach's alphas for male and female respondents indicated that the four subjective age measures could be combined into a single index (α = .76 and .72, respectively). Thus, a subjective age index score was computed for each respondent by averaging across each respondent's four subjective age estimates.

Fears about one's own aging. Using 5-point scales ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5), respondents indicated their agreement with four statements expressing anxieties about aging selected from the Attitudes Toward Own Aging scale of the Aging Opinion Survey (Kafer et al., 1980). The statements were those that had the highest factor loadings on the originally reported version of this scale and included the following: (a) I always dreaded the day I would look in the mirror and find a grey hair, (b) I fear that when I'm older all my friends will be gone, (c) The thought of outliving my spouse frightens me, and (d) The older I become, the more anxious I am about the future. For each respondent, a composite score was computed by averaging across responses to the four items. Composite scores had moderate reliability for male and female respondents (α = .60 and .52, respectively) and ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores representing greater fears of aging.

Life satisfaction. Using the Cantril Self-Anchoring Ladder (Cantril, 1965), respondents rated how they felt about their lives at the present time. Scale values ranged from *worst possible life* (1) to *best possible life* (10).

Results

Patterns of Subjective Age Identification

As a first step in ascertaining the pattern of subjective age identification from adolescence to old age, men's and women's subjective age index scores were regressed on their actual age scores. The resultant equation was then used to estimate men's and women's subjective age identities across 5-year intervals.¹ To determine if the age estimates represented same, younger, or older age identities, estimates along the regression line were compared with points along a line representing no discrepancies between subjective and actual age. If estimates along the regression line crossed points along the comparison line, the respondents' age identities were same age identities (i.e., subjective age was equal to actual age). If the estimates fell below the comparison line, the respondents' age identities were younger age identities (i.e., subjective age was less than actual age). Finally, if the estimates fell above the comparison line, the respondents' age identities were older age identities (i.e., subjective age was greater than actual age). Figure 1 depicts the observed patterns of subjective age identities for men and women. As predicted, individuals in their teens held older age identities, whereas those in the early adult years maintained same age identities. Also as predicted, not only were younger age identities maintained by individuals across the adults years, but also

¹ The regression equation was $Y = 9.24 + .62X$, for men, and $Y = 12.26 + .46X$, for women.

discrepancies between actual and subjective age became more pronounced with advancing chronological age.²

To assess possible sex differences in subjective age, we compared the slopes of the regression lines for men and women. This revealed that the slope of the regression line for men was significantly steeper than that for women, $t(183) = 2.68, p < .001$. This finding indicates that with increasing chronological age, women experience greater discrepancies between their actual and subjective age than do their male peers, a finding consistent with other research on sex differences in subjective age identification (Linn & Hunter, 1979; Streib & Schneider, 1971; Ward, 1977).

Relation Between Subjective Age Identification, Fears About Own Aging, and Life Satisfaction

To assess the relation between respondents' actual and subjective ages and their personal fears of aging and life satisfaction, a series of multiple regression analyses with backward elimination were performed. In these analyses, respondents' actual age and subjective age index scores, as well as their interaction, were entered as predictors of respondents' fears of aging and life satisfaction scores. Separate analyses were performed for men and women.

As indicated in Table 1, actual age, subjective age, and their interaction, emerged as significant predictors of fears of aging for both men and women. To elucidate the interaction effects, estimates of men's and women's fears of aging scores were plotted for three different actual and subjective age values and are illustrated in Figure 2. In interpreting Figure 2 (and subsequent figures), several points should be kept in mind. First, each subjective age value holds a different meaning for each actual age value. For example, a subjective age of 20 represents same age identities for 20-year-old respondents, whereas the same subjective age value indicates younger age identities for 40- or 60-year-old respondents. Second, for illustration purposes, the same actual and subjective age values (20, 40, and 60 years) were used to plot the pattern of effects revealed by the regression equations, even though not all of these values were actually obtained in the sample data. For instance, although many 20-year-old respondents held subjective ages that were several years older than their actual age, none reported a subjective age of 60.

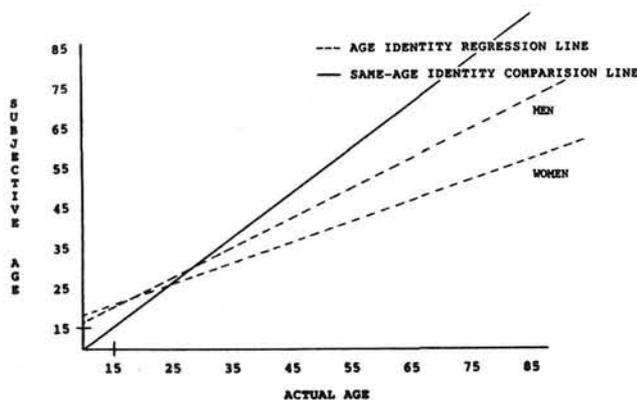


Figure 1. Age identities for men and women across the life span.

Table 1

Results of Regression Analyses With Backward Elimination Predicting Men's and Women's Fears of Aging and Life Satisfaction From Their Actual Age, Subjective Age, and the Interaction of Actual and Subjective Age

Variable	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
Fear of aging (men)		
Actual age	1.70	.09
Subjective age	2.86	.005
Interaction	-3.40	.001
$F(3, 77) = 4.39, p < .007, R^2 = .15$		
Fear of aging (women)		
Actual age	1.80	.07
Subjective age	2.22	.03
Interaction	-1.99	.05
$F(3, 102) = 6.21, p < .0006, R^2 = .15$		
Life satisfaction (men)		
Subjective age	2.95	.004
Interaction	-2.66	.009
$F(2, 78) = 4.75, p < .01, R^2 = .11$		
Life satisfaction (women)		
Actual age	-2.40	.02
Subjective age	3.17	.002
$F(2, 102) = 5.03, p < .008, R^2 = .09$		

Counter to prediction, little relation was found between subjective age and fears of aging for older men and women. However, subjective age was related to younger individuals' fears of aging: Those with the oldest age identities had the least personal fears of aging (see Figure 2).

Regression analyses predicting men's life satisfaction revealed that subjective age and the interaction between actual and subjective age were significant predictors (see Table 1). Counter to prediction, subjective age was not strongly related to older men's life satisfaction. It was, however, related to life satisfaction for younger men: Those with the oldest age identities reported the greatest life satisfaction (see Figure 3).

Regression analyses predicting women's life satisfaction revealed that actual age and subjective age, but not their interaction, were significant predictors (see Table 1). Consistent with the relation between subjective age and life satisfaction found for younger men, younger women with the oldest age identities reported the greatest life satisfaction. A similar relation was found for older women, although the inverse had been predicted. Those older women with younger age identities had the lowest levels of satisfaction. Finally, younger women reported greater life satisfaction than did older women.

² The patterns of same, older, and younger age identities determined by comparing estimates along the regression to points on the comparison line were statistically confirmed by computing 95% confidence intervals around the regression lines for men and women.

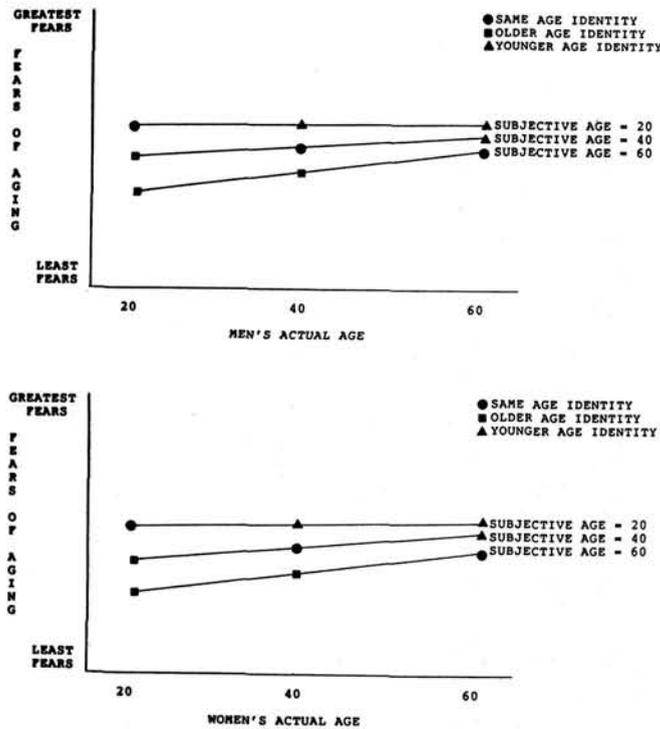


Figure 2. Relation between men's and women's fears of aging, actual age, and subjective age.

Discussion

The present investigation has revealed that during adolescence and across the later adult years, individuals experience discrepancies between their subjective and actual ages. Consistent with existing research, the present data indicated that during the middle and older adult years, individuals' subjective age identities are several years younger than their actual ages. Moreover, discrepancies between subjective and actual ages become more pronounced with advancing chronological age, especially for women. On the other hand, extensions to earlier ages revealed that adolescents' subjective age identities are several years older than their actual ages. This pattern of age differences in subjective age identification is consistent with the proposition that the period of adolescence and later adulthood are accompanied by personal and social changes that result in a sense of status ambiguity with regard to one's position in the life course (Ward, 1984; Waterman, 1982). As such, it may be argued that older and younger individuals' experience of discrepancies between their subjective and actual ages reflects changes in self-conceptions that accompany life-course transitions. Although this hypothesis is consistent with the results of several short-term longitudinal studies on changes in older adults' age identification (Bultena & Powers, 1978; Markides & Boldt, 1983), because the present investigation was cross-sectional, additional longitudinal research using younger as well as older individuals is needed to test its viability.

The present study also demonstrated that discrepancies between subjective and actual age are associated with personal fears of aging. No support was found for a denial of aging hy-

pothesis, however, because greater personal fears of aging were not strongly linked to older men's and women's identification of themselves as younger than their age. The present findings, coupled with weak empirical evidence linking subjective age and negative attitudes toward the elderly in previous research, suggest that mechanisms other than denial may underly older adults' younger age identities. Personal fears of aging were nevertheless associated with younger men's and women's subjective age: Those with the oldest age identities reported the least personal fears of aging. Consistent with Kastenbaum et al.'s (1972) suggestion that younger individuals desire to be grown up, one possible explanation for the latter finding is that younger individuals resist the identification of themselves as young and consider themselves older than their age as one way of disassociating themselves from the potential social stigmas and disadvantages attached to a young age group status. Thus, younger persons who regard themselves as older than their age may not fear being considered old as much as they do being considered young. Although the present results imply that younger individuals who aspire to be older have few personal fears about aging, it is possible that they have fears about getting older other than those assessed in the present study. Indeed, an exploratory study recently conducted by Montepare (1988) revealed that younger individuals' aging concerns focus on issues such as not achieving success in one's marriage or career, experiencing physical and sexual declines, and not being financially independent and secure.

Consistent with the foregoing notion that the maintenance of

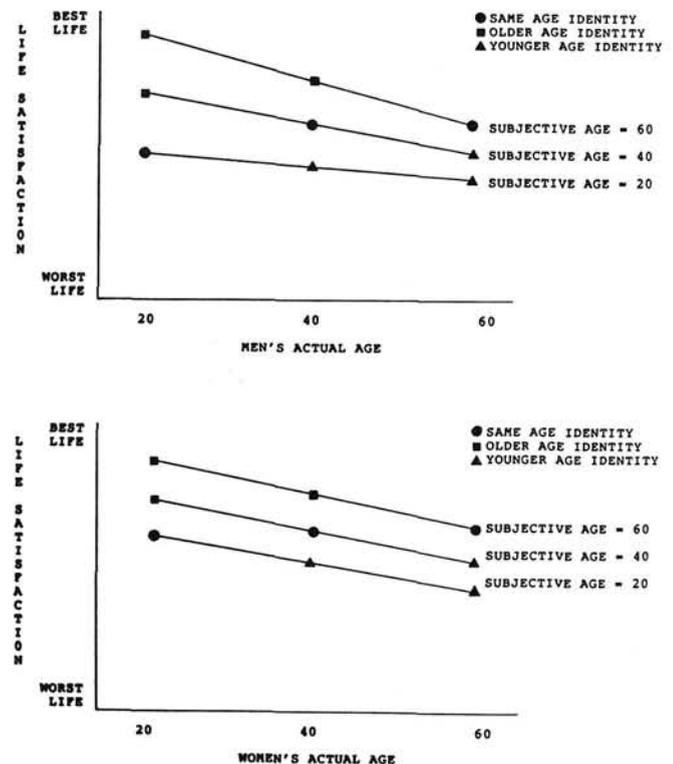


Figure 3. Relation between men's and women's life satisfaction, actual age, and subjective age.

an older age identity is valued by younger individuals, the present study revealed that greater life satisfaction was associated with older age identities in younger men and women. This finding is also consistent with data recently collected by Montepare (1988) showing that young adults with older age identities have more positive self-concepts, greater self-esteem, and greater body satisfaction than those with younger age identities.

Although it was predicted that older women with younger age identities would report greater life satisfaction than those with other age identities, the inverse was found. Consistent with other research on the self-concept, those who had the least discrepancy between their actual age and their subjective age were the most satisfied with their lives (Breyspraak, 1984). In interpreting this result, it is important to consider the possible ways subjective age may be conceptualized. More specifically, the present study treated subjective age as a unidimensional construct because the four subjective age items were statistically intercorrelated. However, consistent with the views of other researchers, it may have been more revealing to treat subjective age as a multidimensional construct insofar as how old people feel or desire to be may be psychologically distinct from how old they perceive they look or act (Barak, 1987; Kastenbaum et al., 1972; Osteen & Best, 1985). Moreover, different subjective age dimensions may bear different relations to other self-views. Consistent with this line of reasoning, Rossi (1980) found that women with high levels of stress in their lives desired to be younger than their actual age, but felt older. Therefore, before any conclusions are drawn regarding women's life satisfaction and their subjective age, it is recommended that additional research examine more systematically the potential relations between individual subjective age components and women's life satisfaction.

Counter to the effects found for older women, the present study failed to find any strong relation between older men's subjective age and their present life satisfaction. Before concluding that subjective age is not linked to men's life satisfaction, it is worth considering the possibility that subjective age components other than those assessed in the present study underscore men's satisfaction with their lives. For example, the present study did not consider how individuals believe they are perceived by others, although such perceptions may have significant, and perhaps different, psychological implications for men and women. Some evidence to support this claim was recently provided by Montepare and Fleet (1987). In particular, these researchers found that whereas how old young-adult women regarded themselves best predicted various other self-perceptions, young adult men's self-perceptions along similar psychological dimensions were best predicted by how old they thought others regarded them. The extent to which these effects hold true for older adult men and women is an interesting question future researchers in the aging field may wish to explore.

In summary, the present investigation demonstrated that subjective age identification varies from adolescence to old age and changes in systematic ways. Furthermore, discrepancies between subjective and actual age are linked to personal fears about aging and present life satisfaction, especially in younger men and women. Relations between younger men's and women's subjective age and other self-views have been heretofore unarticulated in the aging literature. We hope that the present in-

vestigation will motivate other researchers in the aging field to examine in more depth the implications of subjective age across the entire adult life span. To begin, several lines of research are clearly warranted. First, research using longitudinal designs should be undertaken to distinguish between cohort effects and true developmental patterns in younger and older individuals' age perceptions and related psychological correlates. Such research will help to determine if men's and women's subjective age is an antecedent or a consequence of other psychosocial aspects of the self. Second, research is needed to refine the parameters and psychological meaning of subjective age components for men and women at different adult life stages. Finally, research exploring the validity of personal age identification is also of interest. That is, do individuals who report looking or acting younger (or older) than their actual age, actually look or act differently than those who view themselves otherwise?

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