

Characteristics and Psychological Correlates of Young Adult Men's and Women's Subjective Age¹

Joann M. Montepare

Tufts University

This research examined young adult men's and women's subjective perceptions of their age along several dimensions including how old they felt, looked, acted, desired to be, and thought they were regarded by others. The relationship between young adults' subjective age identities and other perceptions of the self were also examined. It was found that both men and women felt and believed that they acted and were regarded by others as older than their chronological age. On the other hand, same age identities were maintained along other age dimensions. Results also indicated that how old men and women thought they were regarded by others was strongly linked to how dominant, affiliative, confident, and socially potent they viewed themselves. Results are discussed within a life-span developmental framework which calls attention to the need for assessing the components and implications of younger as well as older adults' subjective age.

Researchers in the aging field have often observed that how old people perceive themselves does not always correspond to their age group status or chronological age (see Peters, 1979; and Barak & Stern, 1986 for reviews of pertinent research). For example, when asked to identify the age group to which they belong, many older adults will report that they consider them-

¹Portions of this paper were presented at the 95th annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, NY, August, 1987. This research was conducted when the author was a post-doctoral fellow supported by a NIMH post-doctoral training grant (#RERC 5-T32-MH17058) awarded to the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Thanks are extended to Jennifer Fleet who helped in the coding and analysis of the data. Correspondence regarding this research may be addressed to: Joann M. Montepare, Department of Psychology, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155.

selves to be young or middle-aged adults (Ward, 1984). Relatedly, when asked to estimate, in years, how old they feel adults over the age of 60 have been shown to feel as much as 10 years younger than their actual age (Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, and Artt, 1972; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Sex differences in subjective age perceptions have also been noted with older adult women experiencing more youthful age identities than their older adult male peers (Barak & Stern, 1986; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Moreover, the amount of discrepancy older adults perceive between their actual and subjective age depends upon the dimension being assessed. For example, Kastenbaum *et al.* (1972) found smaller discrepancies between older adults' actual age and how "young" they believed they looked compared to how "young" they believed they acted.

The available research with older adults has also shown that men's and women's subjective age identities are correlated with a host of social, psychological, and physical variables. However, this research is not without dispute regarding the reliability and direction of some relationships. For example, there has been mixed evidence regarding the relationship between subjective age and marital status, educational status, and financial status (Barak & Stern, 1986). Moreover, whereas some researchers have found a positive relationship between younger age identities and greater life-satisfaction (Linn & Hunter, 1979; Mutran & George, 1982), others have found an inverse relationship, at least for women (Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Consistent effects, however, have been reported regarding self-esteem, self-confidence, feelings of personal control, and sense of purpose in life with those having younger identities showing more positive views than those with older age identities (Peters, 1971; Barak & Stern, 1986). Several researchers have also found that better physical health is strongly tied to a more youthful subjective age identity (Markides & Boldt, 1983; Osteen & Best, 1985).

Although the research which has been done on older adult men's and women's perceptions of their age has contributed greatly to an appreciation of the complex, multidimensional, and psychologically-rich nature of the subjective age variable, it has had an important limitation. Specifically, it has paid limited attention to questions regarding the characteristics and correlates of the age perceptions of men and women from other age groups. A valuable outcome of such research would be that we may come to understand better the potential determinants of individual differences in psychological and physical functioning within specific age groups across the life span.

The little research that has been done with multiple age groups indicates that, like older adults, young adults experience discrepancies between their actual and subjective ages. However, younger individuals are more likely to maintain older rather than younger age identities, and the magnitude of the discrepancy they experience is much smaller than that experienced by older

adults (Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Nevertheless, variations in young adults' age perceptions have shown links with other self-perceptions maintained by young adults. For example, Montepare and Lachman (1989) found that young adults with older age identities reported better life satisfaction and fewer fears of aging than those with same or younger age identities.

The aforementioned research with younger adults provides strong evidence that subjective age is a meaningful construct for these individuals as it is for older adults. However, many important questions remain unanswered. One question is whether sex differences in subjective age perceptions exist in early adults as they do in later adulthood. A related question is whether sex differences exist in the relationship between subjective age and other self-views. Questions such as these are particularly important in light of the suggestion that societal "double standards of aging" put women more at risk than men for developing negative views of themselves in relation to their age (Sontag, 1972).

The present study used a questionnaire format to extend our knowledge about young adult men's and women's perceptions of their age. Keeping in line with the prevalent view that subjective age is a multidimensional construct, 105 young adult men's and women's age perceptions were assessed along six dimensions. In order to examine potential links between men's and women's age identities and other self-perceptions, data were obtained regarding the respondents' perceptions of themselves along several psychological dimensions suggested by research with older adults to be significant correlates of self-perceived age.

METHOD

Respondents

Fifty-five males (M age = 18.38) and 60 females (M age = 18.82) ranging in age from 17 to 21 enrolled in an Introductory psychology course participated in fulfillment of the experimental participation course requirement. The male and female respondents were Caucasian and did not vary significantly in age, $t(113) = 1.73$, $p > .05$.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire included items assessing respondents' chronological age, as well as six subjective age perceptions and 12 other self-perceptions. To insure anonymity and confidentiality, the questionnaires were identified with code numbers.

Subjective Age Measures. Respondents' subjective age perceptions were assessed by asking them to indicate on a 7-point bipolar scale with endpoints labeled (1) a lot younger than my age and (7) a lot older than my age, the age that most closely corresponded to (a) the way they felt (Felt Age), (b) the way they looked (Look Age), (c) the age of the person whom their interests and activities were most like (Act Age), (d) the age that they would like to be if they could pick out their age right now (Desired Age), (e) how old they thought their parents treated them (Parental Age), and (f) how old opposite-sex peers treated them (Opposite-Sex Age). In addition to providing scale responses, respondents were asked to indicate, in actual years, the age that best represented how old they regarded themselves along the aforementioned dimensions.

Psychological Correlates. To assess the potential psychological correlates of men's and women's age perceptions, respondents completed Gough's Adjective Check List (ACL). This instrument was used because it taps a broad range of perceptions of the self similar to those studied in past research with older adults. Scale scores were computed for each respondent for the following variables according the procedures outlined by Gough & Heilbrun (1983): achievement, dominance, endurance, affiliation, autonomy, change, succorance, abasement, deference, self-confidence, and personal adjustment. Definitions of these scales appear in Table I. Scores were also computed for an experimenter-designed index reflecting self-perceived physical attractiveness and social poise.²

RESULTS

Characteristics of Men's and Women's Subjective Age

To ascertain how the young adult men and women perceived themselves with respect to their age, overall mean ratings for each of the subjective age scale measures were computed within respondent sex. In addition, to elucidate perceived discrepancies between respondents' actual and subjective ages, subjective age difference scores were computed within respondent sex by subtracting respondents' chronological age from each subjective age estimate. Mean subjective age scale scores and mean difference scores for men and women are presented in Table II.

To assess potential sex differences in subjective age identification, independent *t*-tests were performed on men's and women's mean subjective age scale scores for each subjective age measure. Contrary to research indicating that older adult women maintain more youthful age identities than

²The following items were used in the index of self-perceived attractiveness: attractive, good-looking, handsome, poised, polished, mannerly, sophisticated, charming, flirtatious, sexy. Overall attractiveness scores consisted of the total number of adjectives endorsed by the respondent.

Table I. Overview of ACL Scale Dimensions

Achievement: To strive to be outstanding in pursuit of socially recognized significance.
Dominance: To seek and maintain a role as leader in groups, or to be influential and controlling of individual relationships.
Endurance: To persist in any task undertaken.
Affiliation: To seek and maintain numerous personal relationships.
Autonomy: To act independently of others or of social values and expectations.
Change: To seek novelty of experience and avoid routine.
Succorance: To solicit sympathy, affection, or emotional support from others.
Abasement: To express feelings of inferiority, through self-criticism, guilt, or social impotence.
Deference: To seek and maintain subordinate roles in relationships with others.
Self-confidence: To feel confident about one's ability to achieve goals.
Personal adjustment: To have a positive attitude about one's life in feeling meaning in it.
Attractiveness: Self-perceived physical attractiveness and social poise.

older adult men (Montepare & Lachman, 1989), no significant sex differences were observed along any of the subjective age dimensions assessed in the present research.

To ascertain the specific nature of the men's and women's age identities, one-sample *t*-tests were performed within respondent sex comparing each mean subjective age scale rating to a rating of 4 to determine if the ratings reflected same (equal to 4), older (greater than 4), or younger (less than 4) age identities (see Table II). These analyses revealed that whereas older age identities were manifested on some measures, same age identities were exhibited on others, a finding consistent with Kastenbaum *et al.*'s (1972) observation that individuals' age identities varied across different identity dimensions. More specifically, the present results indicated that both men

Table II. Characteristics of Men's and Women's Subjective Age Identities^a

Subjective age measure	Scale index score		Mean difference score	
	M	F	M	F
Felt age	4.49 ^d	4.92 ^d	1.97	.75
Act age	4.56 ^d	4.75 ^d	1.85	.98
Look age	4.18	4.00	.51	-.18
Desired age	4.13	3.95	.59	-.20
Parental age	4.42 ^c	4.35 ^b	.55	.17
Opposite-sex age	4.49 ^d	4.70 ^d	.63	.83

^aDifference scores represent discrepancies between chronological age and subjective age estimates and were computed by subtracting respondents' actual age from their subjective age estimates. Positive difference scores indicate older age identities whereas negative scores denote younger identities.

^b*p* < .10.

^c*p* < .05.

^d*p* < .01.

Table III. Correlations Between Subjective Age Index Scores and ACL Scores^a

	Felt age	Look age	Act age	Desired age	Parental age	Opposite-sex age
Achievement						
M	.24 ^b	.08	.21	.20	.23 ^b	.24 ^b
F	.36 ^d	.15	.26 ^c	.03	.30 ^c	(.40 ^d)
Dominance						
M	.33 ^c	.13	.23 ^b	.32 ^c	(.39 ^d)	(.36 ^d)
F	.31 ^c	.14	.24 ^b	.09	.20	(.36 ^d)
Endurance						
M	.13	.06	.19	.16	.16	.11
F	.33 ^d	.10	.17	.14	.22 ^b	.28 ^c
Affiliation						
M	.36 ^d	.21	.13	.08	.30 ^c	(.39 ^d)
F	.20	.01	.15	.19	(.35 ^d)	.29 ^c
Autonomy						
M	.05	.01	.11	.15	.16	-.01
F	.18	.16	(.28 ^c)	-.08	.09	.20
Change						
M	.21	-.14	.10	.20	.16	.10
F	.11	.19	.26 ^c	-.02	-.12	.27 ^c

Succorance									
M	-.25 ^b	-.08	-.22 ^b	-.24 ^b	-.26 ^c				(-.36 ^d)
F	-.46 ^d	-.31 ^c	-.28 ^c	-.18	-.29 ^c				(-.47 ^d)
Abasement									
M	-.28 ^c	-.08	-.18	-.22	(-.41 ^d)				-.29 ^c
F	-.27 ^c	-.19	-.26	.08	-.06				(-.29 ^c)
Deference									
M	-.07	-.03	-.04	-.01	-.23 ^b				-.05
F	-.19	-.19	-.25 ^b	.18	-.02				-.15
Self-confidence									
M	.36 ^d	.26 ^c	.18	.19	.27 ^c				(.42 ^d)
F	.33 ^d	.17	.24 ^b	-.01	.26 ^c				(.41 ^d)
Personal adjustment									
M	.36 ^d	.23 ^b	.16	.22 ^b	.30 ^c				(.50 ^d)
F	.10	-.09	-.03	.04	.13				.14
Attractiveness									
M	.27 ^c	(.45 ^d)	.15	.10	.19				.32 ^c
F	(.35 ^d)	.11	.23 ^b	.20	.07				.31 ^c

^aValues in parentheses indicate the subjective age measures that emerged as significant predictors in the regression analyses.

^b $p < .10$.

^c $p < .05$.

^d $p < .01$.

and women held Felt Age, Act Age, and Opposite-Sex identities that were significantly older than their actual age. In addition, men and women reported slightly older age identities for Parental Age. On the other hand, men and women reported same age identities for Look Age and Desired Age.

Inspection of mean age difference scores corresponding to each mean scale score indicated that respondents' older age identities reflected a discrepancy of only about a year or so difference between their actual and subjective age. Thus, whereas older adults are likely to experience as much as 10 years difference between their actual and subjective age, young adults are likely to experience only about one year of difference. These differences most likely reflect the fact the time intervals along the developmental age scale are unequal in biopsychosocial meaning. For example, while one year to a traditional-aged undergraduate corresponds to differences in class standing which are accompanied by a host of varying privileges and opportunities, one year to an older adult seldom corresponds to such marked differences in life experience.

Psychological Correlates of Men's and Women's Subjective Age

To ascertain the relationship between respondents' subjective age and their other self-perceptions, stepwise multiple regression analyses were performed within respondent sex in which the six subjective age measures served as predictors of ACL scores. The results of these analyses as well as the zero-order correlations between age identity and ACL scores appear in Table III. These analyses revealed that for both males' and females' perceptions of how old they were regarded by either peers or parents typically emerged as the strongest predictor(s) of self-perceptions of greater dominance, affiliation, and self-confidence, as well as less abasement and succorance. In addition, women's sense of greater achievement and men's perceptions of greater personal adjustment were also best predicted by how old they thought they were regarded by opposite-sex peers. Finally, one interesting sex difference that was noticed was that whereas men's perceptions of their attractiveness were best predicted by how old they looked, women's perceived attractiveness was best predicted by how old they felt.³

³It is of interest to note that age identity scale scores were significantly correlated with differences scores although the correlations for dimensions such as felt age were much smaller than those for dimensions such as look age. Moreover, difference scores, especially those reflecting felt age, showed some sex differences in their relationship to ACL scores (Montepare & Fleet, 1987). One possible explanation for these differences is that actual estimates of subjective age tap a more affective momentary component of subjective age whereas scale scores tap a more general view of the self. The possibility that "state" and "trait" aspects of subjective age exist has not been considered in previous conceptualizations of this construct. Future research along this line should prove interesting.

DISCUSSION

The present research supports the view that subjective age is a meaningful construct for young adults as it is for older adults insofar as the young adult men and women in the present study experienced discrepancies between their actual and subjective ages just as older adult men and women have been found to do. Moreover, consistent with previous research, the amount of discrepancy young adults experienced was much smaller than that reported by older adults, a finding most likely reflecting the unequivalent nature of developmental time intervals.

Discrepancies older adults' perceive between their actual and subjective age have been proposed to derive, in part, from personal and social change which accompany later life transitions and results in a sense of status ambiguity with regard to one's position in the life course (Ward, 1984). Similarly, young adults may perceive such discrepancies as a result of life transitions which occur during the early adult years. This may be especially true for the present sample of young adult college students insofar as the college experience may be seen a life event which marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood and results in the identity distinction that one is older in ways other than those indicated by one's actual age.

The present study also found that young adults' age identities vary across different dimensions consistent with variations in older adults' identities. More specifically, consistent with discrepancies perceived by older adults reported by Kastenbaum *et al.* (1972), the largest discrepancies found in the present study emerged with respect to how old young adults perceived that they acted. However, whereas older adults generally perceive themselves as acting "younger" than their actual age, young adults perceive themselves as acting "older" than their age. These findings suggests that while the direction of particular discrepancies differ across the life span, the relative salience of such discrepancies remains constant.

In contrast to documented sex differences in research with older adults, the present study failed to find evidence that young adult men and women maintain different age identities. Consistent with the view that interindividual differences magnify across the adult life span (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980), it may be hypothesized that men's and women's age perceptions become more differentiated from early to later adulthood. It is also possible that differences between past and present findings reflect cohort rather than developmental differences. To test this possibility more extensive research with longitudinal design needs to be done.

The present research also indicated that the psychological correlates of young adult men's and women's age identities are similar in nature.⁴ However,

⁴In evaluating these results it should be kept in mind that the direction of the causal links between the observed relationships is ambiguous given the correlational nature of the data.

one noteworthy difference was observed with respect to men's and women's perceived attractiveness which as measured in the present study reflected both physical and social attractiveness (e.g., poise). Specifically, greater perceived attractiveness was best predicted for men by how old they believed they looked whereas it was best predicted for women by how old they felt. Physical attractiveness has been linked to sex-differences in the aging experience by way of what Sontag (1972) describes as the "double standard of aging". That is, the view that society offers fewer rewards for aging women than men because aging corrupts women's principle social asset—their physical beauty. To guard against the potentially damaging psychological effects of this pervasive standard, it is possible that women come to view their attractiveness in relationship to their age not so much in terms of actual physical appearance as in terms of social poise and interpersonal gracefulness. Closer examination of the meaning men and women attach to their attractiveness and the relationship between such attitudes and subjective age across the lifespan should prove to be an interesting topic for future research.

Although the present research has been successful in providing answers to several questions regarding men's and women's subjective ages, many questions remain unanswered. One such question concerns the nature of subjective age in men and women from other age groups (e.g., middle-aged adults) and other ethnic groups (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics). Another question concerns the validity of men's and women's subjective age perceptions. For example, it is of interest to assess whether or not the perception that one is regarded by others as older than one's age is consistent with how one is actually perceived by others. If so, then it may be hypothesized that external social forces serve as determinants of men's and women's age identities. If not, then internal mechanisms may be the root of such perceptions.

REFERENCES

- Baltes, P. B., Reese, H. W., & Lipsitt, L. P. (1980). Life-span developmental psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology, 13*, 65-110.
- Barak, B., & Stern, B. (1986). Subjective age correlates: A research note. *Gerontologist, 26*, 571-578.
- Gough, H. G., & Heilbrun, A. B. (1983). The Adjective Check List (1983 ed). Consulting Psychological Press, Inc.
- Kastenbaum, R., Derbin, V., Sabatini, P., & Artt, S. (1972). "The ages of me": Toward personal and interpersonal definitions of functional age. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 3*, 197-212.
- Linn, M. W., & Hunter, K. (1979). Perceptions of age in the elderly. *Journal of Gerontology, 34*, 46-52.
- Markides, K. S., & Boldt, J. S. (1983). Change in subjective age among the elderly: A longitudinal analysis. *The Gerontologist, 23*, 46-52.
- Montepare, J. M., & Fleet, J. (1987, August). *Psychological implications of young men's and women's subjective age identities*. Paper presented at the 95th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York.

- Montepare, J. M., & Lachman, M. (1989). "You're only as old as you feel": Self-perceptions of age, fear of aging, and life satisfaction from adolescence to old age. *Psychology and Aging* 4, 73-78.
- Mutran, E., & George, L. K. (1982). Alternative methods of measuring age identity: A research note. *Social Forces*, 60, 866-875.
- Osteen, F. L., & Best, D. L. (1985, November). *Components of subjective age identification among older adults*. Paper presented at the 38th meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, New Orleans, LA.
- Peters, G. R. (1979). Self-conceptions of the aged, age-identification, and aging. *The Gerontologist*, 11, 69-73.
- Sontag, S. (1972). The double standard of aging. In A. R. Laurence, & D. T. Jaffe (Eds.), *Readings in adult psychology: Contemporary perspectives*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Ward, R. W. (1984). *The aging experience*. New York: Harper & Row.