

Age Identity

are needed for testing other theories of social change. Two prominent examples (Hobcraft et al., 1982) that need additional methodological development are (a) *cohort-inversion models* that suggest that cohorts experiencing exceptionally adverse or beneficial events early in life will respond inversely later in life and (b) *continuously accumulating or evolving cohort effects models* that suggest that, contrary to what conventional linear models assume, cohorts are continuously exposed to influences that alter their developmental trajectories over the life course. There currently are few, if any, statistical models with which to apply these conceptually appealing models. The development of such analytic devices and tools thus should be a priority for future research.

SEE ALSO Volume 3: *Aging; Cohort.*

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AGE IDENTITY

The concept of age identity refers to the inner experience of a person’s age and aging process. Age identity is the outcome of the processes through which one identifies with or distances oneself from different aspects of the aging process. In scientific research a person’s age identity is measured with questions such as “How old do you feel?”; “To which age group do you belong?”; and “How do you perceive and understand your own aging process?”

Age identity belongs to the domain of the subjective experience of aging. Key measures of age identity thus are subject to personal biases and misinterpretation, yet researchers in the field of gerontology have long taken the personal experience of one’s own age and aging process to be a subject worthy of investigation. Different aspects of age identity have been studied empirically since the 1950s (Barak & Stern, 1986). There are two reasons why it is important to study this topic. First, age identities, however biased they may be, have important consequences for individual development over the life course. Second, age identities represent visions of aging that come from older persons. It is important to highlight these perspectives in research, as they are not paid much attention in contemporary society.

FEELING YOUNG

Consistent with the saying that “you’re only as old as you feel,” one of the most widely replicated findings in age identity research is that older individuals tend not to feel old. In 1986 S. R. Kaufman conducted a series of in-depth interviews about the personal experiences of aging. Despite changes in their physical and social functioning, many older persons had a strong inner experience of continuity that was not affected by their rising chronological age. Kaufman concluded that older people have an “ageless self.” Many older persons also do not feel that they belong to the elderly age group and tend to see

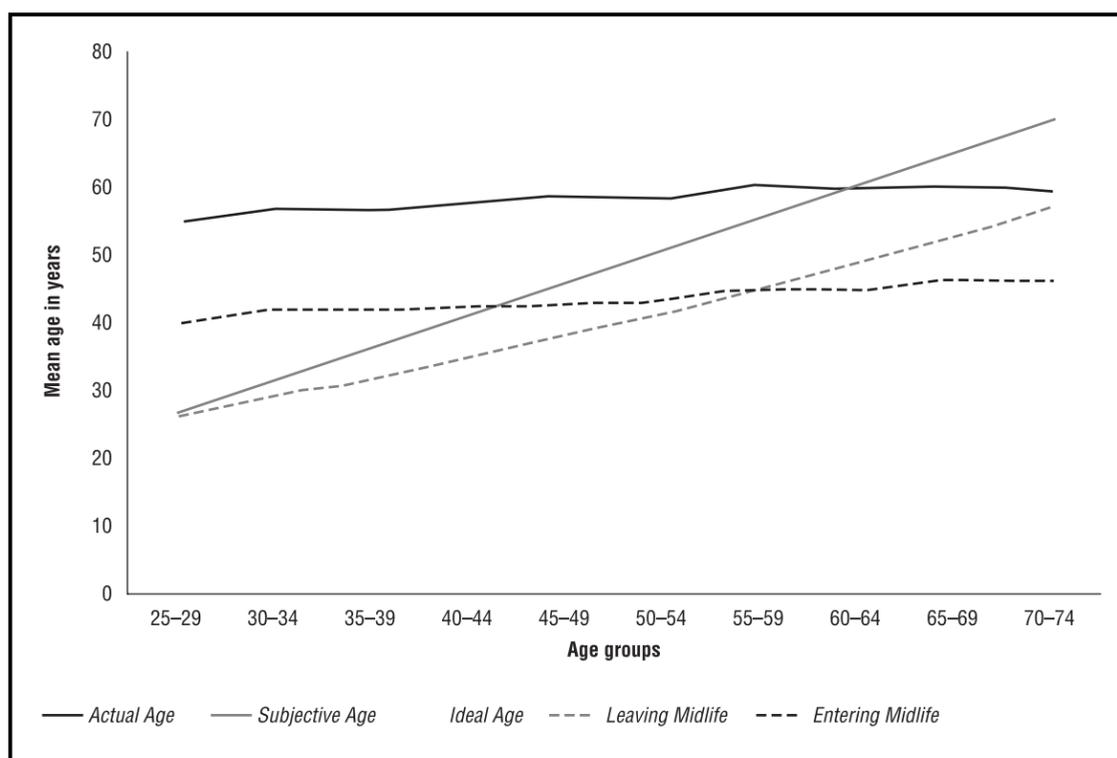


Figure 1. Different aspects of age identity as compared to actual age. CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

themselves as doing better than their peers. In general they see themselves as an exception to the general belief that aging is related to decline.

Many studies have shown that older individuals feel younger than their chronological age. Figure 1 illustrates this phenomenon by using data from the study on Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS), one of the few nationally representative American surveys that have measured age identity. The figure shows the mean actual age and the mean subjective age for 5-year age groups. It can be seen that in the youngest age group (25 to 29 years old) there is almost no discrepancy between one's actual age and one's felt age. Each consecutive age group has a younger age identity, up to the oldest individuals, who feel about 13 years younger than their actual age. This pattern has been found consistently in studies comparing different age groups (Barak & Stern, 1986, Westerhof, Barrett, & Steverink, 2003). However, when the same individuals are followed over time, it is found that not all individuals experience an increase in perceived youthfulness; unhealthy people tend to feel less young (Uotinen, Rantanen, Suutuma, & Ruoppila, 2006).

To understand why older people tend to feel younger than their actual age, it is useful to look at the standards

individuals use in judging their subjective age. An important standard is people's ideal age: how old individuals want to be. This is an important standard because it provides information about how satisfied older persons are with their chronological age (Uotinen et al., 2006). It can be seen in Figure 1 that the average ideal age is much lower than the chronological age. On average, persons in the oldest age group (70 to 74 years old) want to be almost half their actual age and therefore appear to be very unsatisfied with their age. It also can be seen that individuals on average want to be younger than they actually feel.

Another standard that individuals use in judging their own subjective age are their ideas about when a person enters or leaves a certain stage in the life course. Individuals who participated in the MIDUS study were asked to report the age at which they believe men and women enter and leave middle age. On average, midlife was believed to start at age 44 and end at age 59. In each age group, the mean ideal age is below the age of entering middle age and the mean subjective age is below the age of leaving middle age. Individuals want to be younger than midlife and do not feel older than midlife. It can be concluded that individuals have much younger age identities than their objective age, and their norms about midlife provide support for these perceptions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

How can this bias toward younger age identities be understood? Life-span psychologists have described the phenomenon of feeling younger than one's actual age as resulting from a process of adaptation to age-related changes (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). When individuals are confronted with age-related changes such as the loss of paid employment and the onset of physical decline, they may strive to maintain their existing identity. For example, when an individual who sees himself as an athlete is confronted with limitations in his physical mobility, he may strive to overcome those limitations by exercising and thus maintain his identity as an athlete. This process is called assimilation. Conversely, an individual may react to new experiences by changing her identity, a process called accommodation. In this case the athlete may give up her identity and search for a new one, for example, being an artist or a writer. From this developmental perspective, feeling younger than one's actual age is the result of an assimilation process that maintains an existing identity.

From a psychological perspective, researchers have argued that motives such as self-continuity and self-enhancement may shape age identity. Self-continuity refers to the desire and motivation to remain the same person over time. Identifying with the younger ages one has been thus results in a feeling of consistency with one's past. Self-enhancement refers to the motive to maintain or increase a positive image of oneself. Youthful identities are a way to satisfy this desire in a culture that associates aging with decline and associates youth with vigor and physical attractiveness, reflecting prevailing negative cultural images of old age in American society.

CULTURAL CONTEXTS

According to modernization theory, cultural changes create a social context in which youth is a more valued status than old age. For example, historically, the status of older persons declined as a result of increases in literacy and the dissemination of information through formal educational systems and the mass media, which deprived the elderly of their traditional advantage in knowledge. Because there were no systematic observations on age identities in earlier historical periods, it is impossible to assess whether modernization resulted in an increase in the youthfulness of the identities of older persons. However, cross-cultural studies have shown that there are differences in age identities that are based on the way modernization processes unfolded. Although individuals in many cultures tend to feel younger than their actual age, the discrepancy and the age differences are less pronounced in European and Asian cultures than in the United States. For example, a nationally comparative study showed that 74-year-olds feel about 8 years younger in Germany, compared with 14 years in the United States (Westerhof, Barrett, & Steverink, 2003).

These differences were attributed to differences in welfare systems and individualistic values resulting from differences in the modernization process in the two countries.

INTERINDIVIDUAL VARIATION

The focus on average age identities across large groups of persons conceals the fact that there is also clear variability between individuals. Although about three-quarters of Americans feel younger than their actual age, the MIDUS study shows that 15% feel about the same age as they actually are and that 10% feel older than their chronological age. How can this individual variation be understood?

From a life-course perspective, cultural norms provide guidelines for what is considered the optimal chronological age at which life transitions should occur. For example, people judge whether marriage, parenthood, or retirement happens on time or whether an individual is too young or too old for it. In general, when there is a cultural age norm for a particular transition, one can expect that those who experienced that transition will feel older than those who did not. The most consistent evidence for this line of reasoning is found for physical health. Individuals who have poorer health have a less youthful age identity than do their age peers who are in better health (Barrett, 2003). In a culture that largely equates aging with physical decline, individuals tend to use their physical health status as an indicator of their personal aging process. A few studies have examined other life-course transitions, such as the empty-nest phase, retirement, widowhood, and grandparenthood. Although the findings are inconclusive, they tend to confirm that these transitions and their timing in the life course are related to older age identities.

However, life-course transitions tend not to occur at a single uniform age. Life-course theorists have documented that the timing and nature of transitions vary with one's social position, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race. For example, persons of lower socioeconomic status (less education, less income, and lower-status jobs) experience a pattern of cumulative disadvantage over the life course as well as a temporally more compressed life course; that is, they experience life transitions during a shorter, more densely packed period. Thus, one might expect that persons from backgrounds with lower socioeconomic status have older age identities in that they experience health problems and major transitions such as marriage, parenthood, and grandparenthood earlier than do their wealthier peers. This has been found in many studies. The relative health disadvantage of those with lower status is the most important explanation for this finding (Barrett, 2003).

From a feminist perspective, it has been argued that women in Western cultures suffer from a double standard of aging. Whereas aging comes with grace for men, it comes with disrespect and disregard for older women.

One therefore might expect that women will try to escape this double standard by overstating their own youthfulness more than men do. Few if any empirical studies provide support for this hypothesis, however. Similarly, one might expect that ethnic minorities feel older than Whites, as they have disadvantages similar to those of persons in lower socioeconomic positions. Growing older might pose double jeopardy to aging ethnic minorities that might make them feel even older. However, few studies have assessed this proposition rigorously.

INTRAINDIVIDUAL VARIATION

Life span psychologists emphasize that the aging process is multidirectional and multidimensional; in other words, there is a balance between gains and losses in different life domains, such as family, health, and personal development. Therefore, it might be expected that one's age identity is more complex than a simple snapshot measure of whether one feels older or younger than one's chronological age.

Qualitative studies of age identities have revealed that individuals perceive both losses and gains in their personal aging process (Keller, Leventhal, & Larson, 1989). In a nationally representative study of middle-age and older persons in the Netherlands, respondents completed two sentence stems: "what I like about getting older . . ." and "what I don't like about getting older . . ." (Westerhof, 2003). Negative perceptions of aging mainly concern physical and social decline. Physical decline is experienced in terms of increasing vulnerability, a loss of vitality, and complaints about specific functional losses such as losses in mobility, vision, and hearing, which are attributed to normal aging. Social losses pertain to the death of loved ones, the loss of independence, and the loss of respect in society. Positive perceptions of one's own aging process were found mainly in social and psychological functioning. The increasing freedom and autonomy, the continuity of relationships, and the birth of grandchildren are the most important social gains, whereas increases in life experience, wisdom, and tranquillity are the most frequently mentioned psychological gains.

In an effort to incorporate these more complex aspects of age identities into gerontological research, researchers have developed and used multidimensional instruments. For example, the frequently used cognitive age measure (Barak, 1987) characterizes subjective age as feel-age ("I feel as though I am . . ."), look-age ("I look as though I am . . ."), do-age ("I do things as though I am . . ."), and interest-age ("My interest are mostly those of a person of . . . years"). Although the answers to these questions are related, individuals may have a feel-age that is different from their look-age, do-age, or interest-age.

New multidimensional measurement instruments have been designed to capture perceptions of different aspects of the aging process. For example, Steverink, Westerhof, Bode, and Dittmann-Kohli (2001) developed an instrument for measuring the experience of one's own aging in terms of physical decline, social loss, and continued personal growth. Older persons experienced more physical and social decline in their aging process than did middle-aged persons and also felt that they had fewer opportunities to continue their personal growth.

In addition to exploring the different domains that shape age identities, researchers have investigated the ways in which social context affects those identities. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological framework that focuses on the ways individuals present themselves in different social interactions in their daily lives. Nikolas Coupland and Justine Coupland (1995) reported a case study of May, a 79-year-old woman. In a conversation with a woman her own age, May presented herself as active and independent, resisting stereotypical images of older persons. In a conversation with a 38-year old woman, however, May suddenly offered a negative portrait of herself, confirming stereotypical images of being old and dependent. These different ways of presenting oneself are related to who has the initiative in the interaction and to the infantilizing mode of communication of the younger partner.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AGE IDENTITY FOR LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENT

As a potentially biased interpretation and characterization of one's own aging process, age identity has important consequences for one's further life-span development. Psychological theories of self-continuity and self-enhancement suggest that one's age identity is typically younger than one's chronological age and that younger age identities are related to mental health and well-being. Many studies have supported this expectation (Barak & Stern, 1986; Steverink et al., 2001). Well-being often is taken as the outcome of successful aging; thus, these studies suggest that age identities are related to a successful outcome of the aging process. However, existing studies have not shown definitively whether age identity influences mental health or mental health affects age identity in later life.

Research shows persuasively that good physical health is one of the strongest correlates of youthful age identities. Although physical health may affect age identities, the causality also may be reversed: One's age identity may affect one's physical health later in life. Studies have shown that more positive self-perceptions of aging and more youthful age identities are related to better health over time and even to longevity (Levy, 2003).

Perceptions of one's aging process have important consequences for one's further psychological development,

Age Segregation

physical health, and even mortality. However, individuals' denial of aging may contribute unwittingly to the perpetuation of cultural beliefs about old age as a period of decline at the societal level. It is therefore important to construct identities of old age that are positive in and of themselves.

SEE ALSO Volume 3: *Ageism/Age Discrimination; Self*.

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AGE SEGREGATION

Age segregation refers to the separation of age groups in society. This separation may be physical, in terms of spatial

location, or social, in terms of social networks and supports. The separation of age groups can reduce contact between younger and older persons. Because segregation separates members of groups, age segregation may perpetuate stereotypes between generations by limiting opportunities for them to interact. Age-segregated social networks limit the exposure of individuals to others who are not their age. At the same time, age-homogeneous social networks may be perceived as biased or discriminatory because social networks serve to integrate individuals into the greater social context and provide opportunities.

AGE SEGREGATION AND THE LIFE COURSE

The impact of age segregation varies across the life course. Segregation from other age groups is quite high for younger persons due to the time they spend pursuing education. On entering the workforce, age segregation decreases. As individuals age and retire they may once again become more separated from other age groups. Hence, exposure to age segregation is most common at the younger ages and then later in life. With the aging of the baby-boom cohort and the growth in sheer numbers of older persons, scholars and practitioners are increasingly interested in "age integration," the bringing together of persons of all groups as well as the breaking down of age-based structures in society (Riley & Riley, 2000). By understanding how social structures shape lives, life course researchers are able to distinguish a transition to an increasing degree of age integration in social contexts such as education and work (Riley & Riley, 1994).

Age segregation occurs at multiple levels in society. Individuals are embedded in social contexts. Those social contexts tend to shape their access to other individuals and resources in society. It is well established that individuals are attracted to and associate with others who are like themselves. The principle of homophily suggests that individual's social networks are sorted by characteristics including age, race, and gender. This tendency toward homogeneous networks implies that individuals who are dissimilar will be less likely to maintain relationships (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Although social networks are likely to be age homogeneous, family-based social supports will vary over the life course (Burt, 1991). Younger adults may turn to their parents for social support. As they age, the focus may shift from parents to their own children.

In the life course context, transitions may be either gradual or discrete. Age is an example of a gradual component of change across the life course and marital status is an example of a discrete transitional stage. Because age is closely related to marital status, the spatial clustering of groups (such as younger married couples in suburbs) can contribute to age segregation in social networks (Kalmijn