Journal of Aging Studies 40 (2017) 16–22

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

Rewriting age to overcome misaligned age and gender norms in later life☆

Jeremiah C. Morelock *,[1], Jeffrey E. Stokes [2], Sara M. Moorman [3]

Boston College United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 July 2016
Received in revised form 5 November 2016
Accepted 15 December 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Age norms
Later life
Gender
Subjective age

ABSTRACT

In this paper we suggest that older adults undergo a misalignment between societal age norms and personal lived experience, and attempt reconciliation through discursive strategies: They rewrite how they frame chronological age as well as their subjective relations to it. Using a sample of 4041 midlife and older adults from the 2004–2006 wave of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS II), we explore associations of age and gender with subjective age and at what age respondents felt people enter later life. Our results confirm that as men and women age, they push up the age at which they think people enter later life, and slow down subjective aging (there is a growing gap between subjective and chronological age). Relations between a person's age and at what age they think people enter later life were stronger for men than for women. For every year they get older get older, men push up when they think people enter later life by 0.24 years, women by 0.16 years. Age norms surrounding the transition to later life may be more prominent for men than for women, and the difference in their tendencies to push up when they mark entry into later life may be a reflection of this greater prominence.

Several studies have focused on discrepancies between chronological age, the age of the body and subjective age, the age one feels (Weiss & Freund, 2012; Weiss & Lang, 2012; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005). Some suggest that dissociation from one's chronological age group may be used as a defensive strategy against negative age stereotypes (Hummert, 2015; Stephan, Chalabaev, Kotter-Grühn, & Jaconelli, 2013; Weiss, Sassenberg, & Freund, 2013). While a number of studies have investigated slowing down subjective aging, or increasing the gap between chronological age and subjective age (Hubley & Russell, 2009; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008; Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005), the re-definition of at what age people enter "later life" has not received the same attention. Here we look at both strategies as alternate methods of "rewriting age."

Scholars have recently underscored the promise of applying life span and life course theories to the topic of subjective age (Barrett & Montepare 2015). As Barrett and Montepare describe, life span theory focuses on individual, objective developments, paying less mind to social factors. Life course theory acknowledges socially constructed meanings, typically focusing on how changing life events and contexts - imbued with these meanings - influence individuals. Others use a more thoroughgoing social constructionist approach, turning entirely away from common, linear models of the life course, and calling even more attention to the fluidity of age narratives (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991; Hockey & James, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, 2007). We start from a critical or postmodern life course approach similar to the "lifecoursing" approach of Rosenfeld and colleagues (Rosenfeld, Ridge, Catalan, & Delpech, 2016; Rosenfeld & Gallagher, 2002), in that we focus squarely on how people construct and use aging narratives, rather than emphasizing the contexts and life events that shape their aging narratives. Yet rather than taking the more customary route for social constructionists of qualitative analysis, we take a quantitative approach to the associations between chronological age and social constructions of aging and later life, which naturally affords us the advantage of hypothesis testing in a sizable sample. We expect that with increasing chronological age, men and women increasingly face expectations about aging that are unfit – unwelcome or misaligned with lived experience – and in response, men and women will subvert the discourses via *rewriting age*. We focus on two strategies of rewriting age. We ask whether with increasing chronological age, people slow down subjective aging, increasing the gap between their subjective age relative to their chronological age, and push up their definitions of when people enter later life.

☆ This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: morelocj@bc.edu (J.C. Morelock).

[1] Jeremiah C. Morelock is a doctoral candidate in sociology at Boston College. His research interests include disease narratives, organizational communication and age norms. He has published in Social Theory and Health, and the Journal of Applied Gerontology.

[2] Jeffrey E. Stokes is a doctoral candidate in sociology at Boston College. His primary research interests are in the areas of aging, families, and health. Recent publications appear in The Gerontologist, Social Psychology Quarterly, and Research on Aging.

[3] Sara M. Moorman is an associate professor of sociology at Boston College. She is a fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and has recently published work in The Gerontologist, the Journal of Aging and Health, and the Journal of Marriage and Family.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2016.12.003
0890-4065/

We further investigate whether there are gender differences in these associations. We expect that men more than women will rely on raising the ages at which they feel people enter later life, because it pertains to age norms regarding timing of life transitions – namely out of the able workforce – which prior research have shown to be more pressing for men (Settersten and Hagestad (1996b). While relative narrative flexibility in subjective age has been studied rather extensively, our analysis is novel in relating this issue to how men and women may shift their definitions of when people enter later life, which has not received the same attention in prior literature.

Age and gender

Scholars studying aging from a social constructionist point of view often highlight the fluidity of the concept of age (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). From a life course perspective, the meaning of aging varies for different people according to a variety of external factors over time, surrounding participation in institutions such as education, work and family (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996b, 1996a). Other researchers show the creativity and agency which older adults often display in narrating age in ways that work for their specific circumstances, overcoming negative age stereotypes in the process (Kaufman, 1986). The fluidity in how individuals narrate age and aging, as well as the influence of both external factors and their own agency in shaping these narratives, provide great insight into the many possibilities of how people can orient toward their own aging processes. Kaufman presented first person accounts from a small sample of older adults on how they understood and creatively narrated themselves and their life trajectories. Rosenfeld and colleagues used a critical approach to the life course which surrounds their concept of "lifecoursing," which denotes how people use a normative model of the life course as an "interpretive resource" (Rosenfeld et al., 2016; Rosenfeld & Gallagher, 2002). Yet less attention has been paid to seeing on a broad scale which demographic categories of people tend to use which narrative mechanisms. In other words, research is scant that uses quantitative methods to further understand how the fluidity in social constructions of age is patterned across larger populations. Settersten and Hägestad's work (1996a, 1996b) is an exception; however, they discuss patterns and fluidity in how people interpret ideas and pressures surrounding age norms and milestone changes, rather than the strategies people use to break down, diffuse, and overcome age norms.

In this article we focus on gender differences, as a key area in which narrative strategies of rewriting age might statistically differ across larger populations. When specifically addressing the social construction of aging as it applies to gender, articles look for in depth, qualitative information on specific areas of lived experience (Nikander, 2000; Ojala, Pietilä, & Nikander, 2016). The major advantage to such an approach is the capacity to unearth rich qualitative data, yet such depth of focus coincides with a tendency to look at one gender at a time. Such research points to the prominence of gender differences in society, but does not specifically investigate gender differences within the space of single studies. An exception to this trend can be found in the work of Settersten and Hägestad on cultural age deadlines (1996a, 1996b). They discovered some gender differences in how men and women oriented around norms about the timing of transitions in family, education, and work. Deadlines concerning education and employment are more prominent for men, whereas deadlines for family are comparable, although qualitatively distinct, for men and women. Hence, overall men's lives are more structured by normative deadlines than are women's lives.

Age rewriting strategies

Several studies have investigated pushing down subjective age relative to chronological age (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Hubley & Russell, 2009; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005). Evidence suggests that as people age, there tends to be an increasing gap between their chronological age and subjective age, the former being of a higher number than the latter. Here we frame this tendency as subjective aging slowing down. Subjective age appears to pull away from chronological age as the latter increases. We suggest that some sort of *misalignment* between age norms and lived experience is at play. Whether due to defense against negative stereotypes (Hummert, 2015; Stephan et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2013), or as a more neutral response to a sense of growing misfit between norms and reality, it would seem that one way or the other a misalignment is behind it.

In this paper, we use the term *rewriting age* to refer to people's strategies of slowing down subjective aging and pushing up when they think people enter later life, which we suggest people employ to reconcile misalignments between age norms and lived experience. For example, if in a person's lived experience, they feel like what they imagine somebody 10 years younger is supposed to feel like, this misalignment can be mitigated through holding subjective down by 10 years relative to chronological age. Alternatively, if in chronological years a person approaches what they consider to be "later life," yet they do not feel "old," the misalignment can be helped by raising the age at which they consider "later life" to start.

Hypotheses

We expect that as adults get older, they will use age rewriting strategies more. They will define later life as beginning comparatively later and slow down subjective aging, increasing the gap between subjective and chronological age. Men have more normative timelines over the life course than do women, specifically concerning education and work (Settersten & Hägestad, 1996a). Because the transition into "later life" is a milestone in the life course, and may specifically relate to employment as it may signify retirement in particular, we suspect men more than women may grapple with this change and misalignments between norms and lived experience that have to do with it. Hence, we expect men more than women will be drawn to pushing up when they mark the start of later life, but not more drawn to decreasing subjective age relative to chronological age.

H1. *Chronological age will be positively associated with definition of when people enter later life by men and women (i.e. as men and women age, they will tend to define later life as beginning comparatively later).*

H2. *The association between chronological age and definition of when people enter later life will be stronger for men.*

H3. *Subjective age will be positively associated with chronological age, yet the gap between the two will increase over time.*

H4. *The association between chronological age and subjective age will not be stronger for men.*

Methods

Data and sample

We used data from MIDUS II, the second wave of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States. The MIDUS study began in 1995. A national probability sample was taken from the lower 48 states of the U.S., limited to non-institutionalized English-speaking residents from ages 24–74. The primary method of recruitment participants was random digit dial (RDD). Additional participants were selected from an urban oversample, a sample of siblings of main RDD participants, and a national RDD sample of twins (Ryff et al., 2012). A total of 4963 MIDUS I participants (75% of those living) also responded to MIDUS II, with interviews conducted from 2004 to 2006. Key items of interest

for our study (e.g., definitions of when people enter later life) were exclusively included in a self-administered questionnaire. Therefore we restricted our sample to MIDUS II participants who completed the self-administered questionnaire and the telephone interview (Ryff et al., 2012). This left us with a final sample of 4041 midlife and older adults (81.42%). Ages in the sample ranged from 30 to 84, encompassing a wide range of mid-to later life. 72.5% (2931 of 4041) of respondents were under 65, while 61.2% (2474 of 4041) were under age 60.

Measures

Outcomes

Definition of when people enter later life. Participants were asked what age(s) most men and women are no longer middle aged. Responses were coded to refer to a participant's answer concerning his/her own gender. That is, we used female participants' answers to the question concerning what age most women are no longer middle aged, and the inverse for men. Definition of when people enter later life was measured continuously in years.

Subjective age. Participants were asked the following question: "What age do you feel most of the time?" Subjective age was measured continuously in years.

Predictors of interest

Chronological age. Chronological age was measured continuously in years, and ranged from 30 to 84.

Gender. To assess differences in effects according to gender, analyses were run separately for men and women.

Control measures

To help ensure validity, we included controls for potential confounds concerning associations of chronological age with subjective age and definition of when people enter later life (see, e.g., Dubus, 2014; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008; Weiss & Lang, 2012; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005). Controls included *income*, *self-rated health*, *psychological well-being*, *marital status*, *parental status*, *employment status*, *race/ethnicity*, *education*, and *MIDUS subsample*. Participants reported *income* for the previous year, responses ranging from 1 (*Less than $0*) to 42 (*$200,000 or more*). *Self-rated health* was measured using a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). *Psychological well-being* was measured using a 43-item mean-score scale ($\alpha = 0.94$) ranging from 1 (*lowest well-being*) to 7 (*greatest well-being*) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). *Marital status* was measured using 4 exhaustive, mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators for *married* (reference group), *never married*, *widowed*, and *divorced/separated*. A dichotomous measure of *non-parental status* indicated whether a respondent had children. *Employment status* was measured using 3 exhaustive, mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators for *employed* (reference), *retired*, and *not employed*. The not employed category was diverse, including those unemployed and looking for work, students, homemakers, disabled persons, etc. *Race/ethnicity* was measured using 4 exhaustive, mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators for primary self-identified racial/ethnic background, including *White* (reference), *Black*, *Hispanic*, and *Other race/ethnicity*. *Education* was measured using 5 exhaustive, mutually exclusive indicators for *less than high school*, *high school degree* (reference), *some college*, *college degree*, and *some education beyond college*. The *MIDUS subsample* participants were originally selected from was measured using 4 exhaustive, mutually exclusive dichotomous indicators for *main RDD* (reference), the *city oversample*, the *sibling subsample*, and the *twin subsample*.

Analytic strategy and missing data

The present study examines how people's chronological age in mid and later life is related with their subjective age and when they believe people enter later life, and whether any such associations differ by gender. Analyses were run separately for men and women. We addressed our research hypotheses using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Post-hoc tests were used to determine significant differences in coefficients for men and women. As a robustness check, we estimated models that simultaneously analyzed men's and women's responses, with interaction terms for gender differences. Significant results were unchanged, therefore separate analyses are presented.

Most men (84.57%) and women (78.07%) provided complete data on all items. The item with the most missing for both genders was income, with 12.26% and 17.46% respectively of male and female respondents lacking information. We conducted missing data diagnostics, and found no patterns. We addressed missing data with multiple imputation by chained equations (Royston, 2005). The imputation equations included all independent and dependent measures, and all imputed measures were used in our analyses (Johnson & Young, 2011). Listwise analyses garnered similar results, but weakened gender differences concerning definitions of when people enter later life. Multiple imputation enhanced sample size and protected against potential bias from listwise coefficients. Imputed analyses are presented here.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for all measures are displayed in Table 1. Men and women were both approximately 56 in chronological age ($\mu = 56.53$ for men, $\mu = 56.00$ for women), and reported feeling approximately 10 years younger overall ($\mu = 47.00$ for men, $\mu = 46.17$ for women). However, men's and women's definitions of when people of their own gender enter later life were significantly different from one another, albeit substantively similar. Men considered male later life to begin around 62, while women considered female later life to begin around 63 ($\mu = 62.01$ for men, $\mu = 62.85$ for women, $p < 0.001$).

Analytic results

Definition of when people enter later life

The results of OLS models concerning participants' definitions of when people enter later life are reported separately for men and women in Table 2. Confirming H1, chronological age was positively associated with definitions of when people enter later life by for both men and women.

Men. Chronological age was positively associated with definitions of when people enter later life ($B = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$). Several control measures were related with when men think people enter into later life. Men with some college education ($B = 1.07$, $p < 0.05$), a college degree ($B = 1.21$, $p < 0.05$), or some education beyond college ($B = 2.10$, $p < 0.001$) defined later life as beginning approximately 1 to 2 years later than men with only a high school degree did. Men who reported greater psychological well-being ($B = 1.09$, $p < 0.001$) felt later life begins at a higher age than men who reported lower psychological well-being. Men who were never married ($B = 1.74$, $p < 0.05$) felt people enter later life about 1.75 years later than did men who were married. Retired men thought people enter later life earlier ($B = -1.44$, $p < 0.05$) than did men who were employed.

Women. Chronological age was positively associated with definitions of when people enter later life ($B = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$). Women who had some college education ($B = 1.03$, $p < 0.05$) or had some education beyond college ($B = 1.75$, $p < 0.01$) thought people entered later life

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, National Survey of Midlife Development in United States (MIDUS II), 2004–2006 ($N = 4041$).

	Men ($n = 1802$)		*Women* ($n = 2239$)		
	Mean or *n*	SD or %	Mean or *n*	SD or %	Gender Difference
Outcomes					
When people enter later life	62.01	7.57	62.85	8.15	***
Subjective age	46.97	13.49	46.17	13.64	–
Independent variables					
Chronological age	56.53	12.23	56.00	12.51	–
Income[a]	$35,600	$18,560	$19,659	$14,880	***
Self-rated health[b]	3.56	1.02	3.54	1.00	–
Psychological well-being[c]	5.03	0.61	5.01	0.63	–
Marital status:					
Married	1417	78.72%	1448	64.79%	***
Never Married	133	7.39%	169	7.56%	–
Widowed	49	2.72%	258	11.54%	***
Divorced/separated	201	11.17%	360	16.11%	***
Parental status:					
Has children	1543	85.63%	1973	88.12%	*
No children	259	14.37%	266	11.88%	*
Employment status:					
Employed	909	50.47%	1078	48.45%	–
Retired	569	31.59%	609	27.37%	**
Not employed	323	17.93%	538	24.18%	***
Race/ethnicity:					
White	1635	91.29%	1998	89.80%	–
Black	53	2.96%	94	4.22%	*
Hispanic	45	2.51%	68	3.06%	–
Other race/ethnicity	58	3.24%	65	2.92%	–
Education:					
Less than high school	105	5.83%	141	6.31%	–
High school degree	417	23.15%	673	30.11%	***
Some college	473	26.26%	686	30.69%	**
College degree	407	22.60%	377	16.87%	***
Some graduate school	399	22.15%	358	16.02%	***
MIDUS subsample					
Main RDD	818	45.39%	987	44.08%	–
City oversample	211	11.71%	175	7.82%	***
Sibling subsample	267	14.82%	370	16.53%	–
Twin subsample	506	28.08%	707	31.58%	*

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$.
[a] Income was measured on a scale ranging from 1 = *Less than $0* to 42 = *$200,000 or more*. Men's average income of $35,600 is based on a mean of 19.24 on the raw scale. Women's average income of $19,659 is based on a mean of 12.83 on the raw scale.
[b] 1 = *Poor*; 5 = *Excellent*.
[c] 1 = *Lowest*; 7 = *Highest*.

between 1 and 2 years later than women with only a high school degree did. Additionally, women who had better self-rated health ($B = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$) or reported greater psychological well-being ($B = 1.51$, $p < 0.001$) thought people entered later life at a higher age. Retired women felt people enter later life about 1.5 years later ($B = 1.51$, $p < 0.05$) than women who were employed. Women who identified with the "other" race category defined later life as beginning earlier ($B = -2.09$, $p < 0.05$) than did white women.

Gender differences. Men and women differed in terms of how their own ages were related to at what ages they felt people enter into later life. A post-hoc test for equivalence of coefficients confirmed effects of chronological age on definitions of when people enter later life were significantly different for men and women ($p < 0.05$). Confirming H2, chronological age had a stronger positive association with the age at which people enter later life for men than for women; men more so than women leaned toward rewriting up the start of later life as they got older. Among control variables, gender differences were only found in the relationship between retirement and when people think later life starts ($p < 0.05$). Retired men viewed later life as beginning earlier than women did.

Subjective age

The results of OLS models concerning participants' subjective age are reported separately for men and women in Table 3. Confirming H3, chronological age was positively associated with subjective age for both men and women.

Men. Chronological age was positively associated with subjective age ($B = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, men who had less than a high school education reported feeling over 2 years younger ($B = -2.23$, $p < 0.05$) than men who had only graduated high school. Men with better self-rated health ($B = -1.93$, $p < 0.001$) or greater reported psychological well-being ($B = -1.53$, $p < 0.05$) reported feeling younger also.

Women. Chronological age was positively associated with subjective age ($B = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$). Women with better self-rated health ($B = -2.11$, $p < 0.001$), greater psychological well-being ($B = -2.59$, $p < 0.001$), or from the city oversample ($B = -1.63$, $p < 0.05$) reported feeling younger. Women who were retired felt about 2 years older ($B = 1.99$, $p < 0.05$), and women who were not employed reported feeling over 1 year older ($B = 1.14$, $p < 0.05$) than women who were employed.

Gender differences. There were no significant differences in effects for men and women concerning subjective age, hence H4 was confirmed. That is, men and women engage equally in the strategy of slowing down subjective aging.

Discussion

In this study we expected to see women and men raise their definitions of when people enter later life as their chronological ages increased (H1), men more so than women (H2). We also expected to see both genders slow down subjective aging, and for this to be comparable for men and women (H3). Our results confirmed these hypotheses. Overall, men may be more reactive to aging and later life than women. Prior research has supported this notion. Men have been shown both to display ageist attitudes, and to consider age as defining elderly men, to a significantly greater extent than women (Bodner, Bergman, & Cohen-Fridel, 2012; Musaiger & D'Souza, 2009).

Some of our controls might account for several attributes often associated with feeling younger. Prior studies have shown better physical health and psychological well-being correspond with lower subjective age (Keyes & Westerhof, 2012; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008; Weiss & Lang, 2012). Our study agreed. As analogous predictors of definitions of when people enter later life, these relationships were there for psychological well-being, somewhat so for self-rated health. The effects remaining of chronological age on subjective age and definitions of when people enter later life are hence with the aforementioned typical associations removed. This leaves a kind of surplus in the association of chronological age with our dependent variable, which suggests that there is more at play than neutral misalignment. It is possible that when aging and later life are culturally construed in ways that threaten a person's preferred sense of self, increasing chronological age can lead to increasing misalignments between age norms and lived experience. Defensive responses to such misalignments may include age rewriting strategies.

In our findings, both men and women rewrote age in both ways. There was no significant difference between men and women rewriting down subjective age. There were, however, significant differences between them rewriting up later life. Men, more than women, used this strategy. This supports our prediction that men and women's respective use of age rewriting strategies would align with Settersten and Hägestad's (1996a, 1996b) finding that men having greater work-

Table 2
Analysis of men's and women's definitions of when people enter later life ($N = 4041$).

People enter later life	*Men* ($n = 1802$) *B* (SE)	*Women* ($n = 2239$) *B* (SE)	Gender difference
Chronological age	0.24***	0.16***	*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	
Income	0.01	0.03	–
	(0.02)	(0.03)	
Self-rated health	0.26	0.41*	–
	(0.18)	(0.18)	
Psychological well-being	1.09***	1.51***	–
	(0.29)	(0.28)	
Never married[a]	1.74*	0.06	–
	(0.85)	(0.77)	
Widowed[a]	−0.58	0.09	–
	(1.08)	(0.58)	
Divorced/separated[a]	−0.48	0.25	–
	(0.54)	(0.46)	
Parental status[b]	−0.40	0.38	–
	(0.63)	(0.62)	
Retired[c]	−1.44*	1.51*	*
	(0.62)	(0.60)	
Not employed[c]	0.55	0.81	–
	(0.48)	(0.47)	
Black[d]	−1.72	−1.19	–
	(1.04)	(0.87)	
Hispanic[d]	−0.63	−0.42	–
	(1.08)	(0.99)	
Other race[d]	−0.42	−2.09*	–
	(0.98)	(0.98)	
Less than high school[e]	0.29	−0.77	–
	(0.80)	(0.74)	
Some college[e]	1.07*	1.03*	–
	(0.48)	(0.43)	
College degree[e]	1.21*	1.02	–
	(0.51)	(0.52)	
Some graduate school[e]	2.10***	1.75**	–
	(0.52)	(0.55)	
City oversample[f]	−0.05	0.54	–
	(0.57)	(0.65)	
Sibling subsample[f]	−0.66	0.64	–
	(0.51)	(0.48)	
Twin subsample[f]	−0.35	−0.58	–
	(0.41)	(0.39)	
R^2	13.15%	11.82%	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$.
[a] Reference group is married.
[b] Reference group has children.
[c] Reference group is employed.
[d] Reference group is White.
[e] Reference group has high school degree.
[f] Reference is main RDD.

related age norms than women, but that family-related age norms would be commensurate across genders.

Our interpretation of our findings in terms of "age rewriting strategies" provides quantitative evidence to further support Rosenfeld and colleagues' (Rosenfeld et al., 2016; Rosenfeld & Gallagher, 2002) concept of "lifecoursing" (2002). We frame age rewriting strategies as forms of creative agency that people use as they orient themselves around notions of the typical life course, making adjustments to bring their age-related narratives and self-concepts closer to what their lived experiences and preferred identities would suggest. Age rewriting strategies could be more or less successful for the individuals employing them to reconcile misalignments of norms and experience posed by increasing chronological age, but these strategies are endemically limited. To push up the definition of when later life begins may distance oneself from social constructions of later life in the short term, but the strategy perpetuates the notion of a "later life" – tied to chronological age. As creative, empowering or healing as age rewriting strategies may be, they maintain a basic orientation around the notion of a normative course of life. In other words, they reinforce age norms in general, even as they subvert particular versions of them. Truly overcoming misaligned age norms may require not just *rewriting* but *unwriting* age.

Limitations and future directions

Our study includes several limitations. Our data were cross-sectional, so although we were able to discern relationships between our key variables, our results can only hint that differences between chronological age, subjective age, and the definition of when people enter later life might grow as a person ages. Longitudinal data would be necessary to examine person-specific trajectories across mid and later life. Additionally, the use of age rewriting strategies may differ between cohorts, corresponding with larger social trends. For example the relaxation of age norms that has taken place since the 1960s (Levin, 2012) may correspond with a greater general tendency to identify younger, while increasing life expectancies may correspond with greater tendencies to

Table 3
Analysis of men's and women's subjective age ($N = 4041$).

Subjective age	*Men* ($n = 1802$) *B* (SE)	*Women* ($n = 2239$) *B* (SE)	Gender difference
Chronological age	0.76***	0.67***	–
	(0.03)	(0.02)	
Income	−0.01	0.01	–
	(0.03)	(0.03)	
Self-rated health	−1.93***	−2.11***	–
	(0.23)	(0.23)	
Psychological well-being	−1.53***	−2.59***	–
	(0.37)	(0.35)	
Never married[a]	−1.11	−0.20	–
	(1.08)	(0.97)	
Widowed[a]	1.16	0.24	–
	(1.37)	(0.72)	
Divorced/separated[a]	−1.35	0.10	–
	(0.69)	(0.59)	
Parental status[b]	−0.54	−0.83	–
	(0.81)	(0.78)	
Retired[c]	0.03	1.99**	–
	(0.79)	(0.74)	
Not employed[c]	−0.51	1.14*	–
	(0.60)	(0.57)	
Black[d]	−0.66	−2.02	–
	(1.32)	(1.10)	
Hispanic[d]	−0.14	−0.43	–
	(1.36)	(1.24)	
Other race[d]	−1.48	−0.62	–
	(1.23)	(1.27)	
Less than high school[e]	−2.23*	−1.38	–
	(1.00)	(0.93)	
Some college[e]	−1.05	−0.50	–
	(0.61)	(0.54)	
College degree[e]	−0.74	−0.88	–
	(0.64)	(0.66)	
Some graduate school[e]	0.15	−0.57	–
	(0.66)	(0.69)	
City oversample[f]	0.14	−1.63*	–
	(0.70)	(0.80)	
Sibling subsample[f]	0.19	0.26	–
	(0.65)	(0.60)	
Twin subsample[f]	0.04	0.43	–
	(0.52)	(0.49)	
R^2	57.10%	51.59%	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ and ***$p < 0.001$.
[a] Reference group is married.
[b] Reference group has children.
[c] Reference group is employed.
[d] Reference group is White.
[e] Reference group has high school degree.
[f] Reference is main RDD.

push up later life. Future research should utilize longitudinal data in order to distinguish between cohort and age effects.

Secondly, there were limitations with the data. As we took our sample from MIDUS II, our results may suffer from distortions due to attrition between the original MIDUS and the MIDUS II. We cannot account for potential patterns in which participants left between waves, nor can we account for whether such patterns are related to relationships between our key variables. We also had no participants over the age of 84. Effectively, our results cannot test whether relationships represented in our data continue for potential participants over 84.

While this study alludes to ideas and experiences concerning different ages, it cannot truly represent these ideas and experiences in qualitative depth. The item for subjective age, for example, does not include any descriptive discourse from which to analyze what different chronological ages signify to study participants. Only the raw numbers of years are taken. Respondents may vary regarding what personal qualities they attribute to various ages. Regarding the definition of when people enter later life, the study did not provide participants with descriptions and definitions of later life vis-à-vis middle age, nor were they invited to provide their own. Effectively, our study cannot speak to differences in what later life and the transition into it may mean to different people. In this respect, combining the present study with discourse analysis in a mixed methods model would be a more ideal fit. A more expansive theoretical framework also seems appropriate. A good fit for this may be something along the lines of critical realism informed by semiotics, such as proposed by Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer (2004). In simple terms, uniting critical realism and semiotics means one assumes influences of objective realities (such as chronological age), are experienced through human awareness and understanding, which are not only limited but also discursively constituted.

References

Barrett, A. E., & Montepare, J. M. (2015). "It's About Time": Applying Life Span and Life Course Perspectives to the Study of Subjective Age. *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *35*(1), 55–77.

Bodner, E., Bergman, Y. S., & Cohen-Fridel, S. (2012). Different dimensions of ageist attitudes among men and women: A multigenerational perspective. *International Psychogeriatrics*, *24*(06), 895–901.

Dubus, N. M. (2014). Self-perception of when old age begins for Cambodian elders living in the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, *29*(2), 185–199.

Fairclough, N., Jessop, B., & Sayer, A. (2004). Critical realism and semiosis. *Realism Discourse and Deconstruction*, *23*.
Featherstone, M., & Hepworth, M. (1991). The mask of ageing. (1991). *The body: Social process and cultural theory*. London: Sage.
Hockey, J., & James, A. (1993). *Growing up and growing old: Ageing and dependency in the life course*, *Vol. 20*.SAGE Publications Limited.
Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *Constructing the life course*. Rowman & Littlefield.
Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2007). Constructionist perspectives on the life course. *Sociology Compass*, *1*(1), 335–352.
Hubley, A. M., & Russell, L. B. (2009). Prediction of subjective age, desired age, and age satisfaction in older adults: Do some health dimensions contribute more than others? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *33*(1), 12–21.
Hummert, M. L. (2015). Experimental research on age stereotypes: Insights for subjective aging. *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *35*(1), 79–91.
Johnson, D. R., & Young, R. (2011). Toward best practices in analyzing datasets with missing data: Comparisons and recommendations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *73*, 926–945.
Kaufman, S. R. (1986). *The ageless self: Sources of meaning in late life*. Univ of Wisconsin Press.
Keyes, C. L., & Westerhof, G. J. (2012). Chronological and subjective age differences in flourishing mental health and major depressive episode. *Aging & Mental Health*, *16*(1), 67–74.
Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, A., Kotter-Grühn, D., & Smith, J. (2008). Self-perceptions of aging: Do subjective age and satisfaction with ageing change during old age? *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *63*(6), 377–385.
Levin, J. (2012). *Blurring the boundaries: The declining significance of age*. New York: Routledge.
Montepare, J. M., & Lachman, M. E. (1989). "You're only as old as you feel": Self-perceptions of age, fears of ageing, and life satisfaction from adolescence to old age. *Psychology and Aging*, *4*(1), 73.
Musaiger, A. O., & D'Souza, R. (2009). Role of age and gender in the perception of aging: A community-based survey in Kuwait. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *48*(1), 50–57.
Nikander, P. (2000). "Old" versus "little girl": A discursive approach to age categorization and morality. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *14*(4), 335–358.
Ojala, H., Pietilä, I., & Nikander, P. (2016). Immune to ageism? Men's perceptions of age-based discrimination in everyday contexts. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *39*, 44–53.
Rosenfeld, D., & Gallagher, E. B. (2002). The life course as an organizing principle and a socializing resource in modern medicine. *New Frontiers in Socialization*, *7*, 357–390.
Rosenfeld, D., Ridge, D., Catalan, J., & Delpech, V. (2016). Age and life course location as interpretive resources for decisions regarding disclosure of HIV to parents and children: Findings from the HIV and later life study. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *38*, 81–91.
Royston, P. (2005). Multiple imputation of missing values: Update of ICE. *Stata Journal*, *5*(4), 527–536.
Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(4), 719–727.
Ryff, C. D., Almeida, D. M., Ayanian, J. S., Carr, D. S., Cleary, P. D., Coe, C., ... Williams, D. (2012). National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS II), 2004–2006. *ICPSR04652-V6*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research ([Distributor], 2012-04-18).
Settersten, R. A., & Hägestad, G. O. (1996a). What's the latest? Cultural age deadlines for family transitions. *The Gerontologist*, *36*(2), 178–188.
Settersten, R. A., & Hagestad, G. O. (1996b). What's the latest? II. Cultural age deadlines for educational and work transitions. *The Gerontologist*, *36*(5), 602–613.
Stephan, Y., Chalabaev, A., Kotter-Grühn, D., & Jaconelli, A. (2013). "Feeling younger, being stronger": An experimental study of subjective age and physical function among older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *68*(1), 1–7. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbs037.
Weiss, D., & Freund, A. M. (2012). Still young at heart: Negative age-related information motivates distancing from same-aged people. *Psychology and Aging*, *27*(1), 173.
Weiss, D., & Lang, F. R. (2012). "They" are old but "i" feel younger: Age-group dissociation as a self-protective strategy in old age. *Psychology and Aging*, *27*(1), 153.
Weiss, D., Sassenberg, K., & Freund, A. M. (2013). When feeling different pays off: How older adults can counteract negative age-related information. *Psychology and Aging*, *28*(4), 1140–1146.
Westerhof, G. J., & Barrett, A. E. (2005). Age identity and subjective well-being: A comparison of the United States and Germany. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *60*(3), 129–136.