



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



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Background

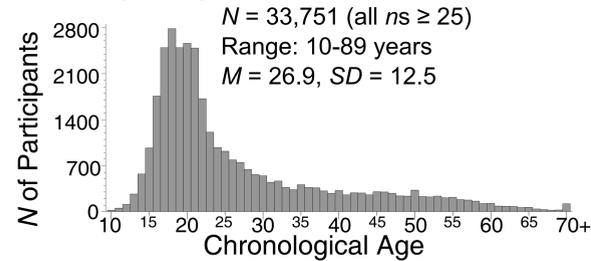
As implied by aphorisms like “you’re only as old as you feel,” subjective age experiences may elicit aspects of age identity distinct from chronological age. Subjective age has been used in gerontological research to assess age identity, and it predicts psychological and physical functioning better than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

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

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

Method

1. Chronological Age



2. Subjective Age

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

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

*For all graphs, adults aged 70-89 were grouped to maintain sufficient sample size.

Separately regressing chronological age on *felt* or *desired* age indicated that both increased linearly with chronological age, but more slowly.

One 10-year increase in chronological age equaled:

- *Felt Age:* $6.4 \pm .03$ years older ($R^2 = .45$)
- *Desired Age:* $5.2 \pm .03$ years older ($R^2 = .52$).

On average, those under 25 *felt* older and *desired* to be older still, while adults (aged 30+) *felt* younger and *desired* to be younger still.

Felt Age

“How old do you feel?”

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

Subjective-Chronological Age Difference (years)

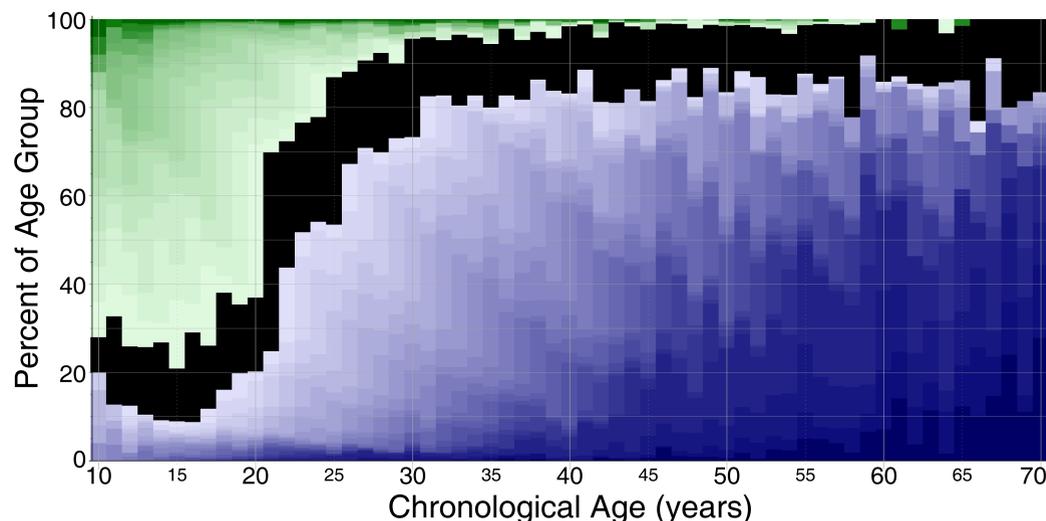
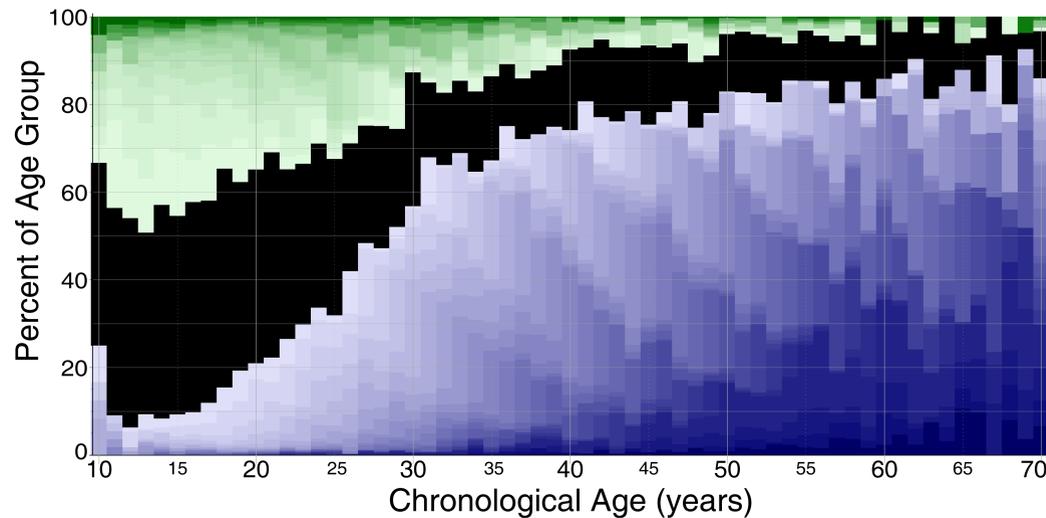
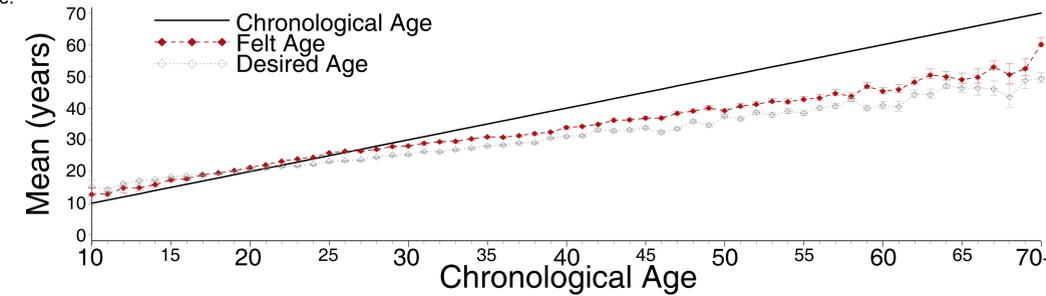
Same Age:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	≥20	≥25	≥30	≥35
Older:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	≥20	≥25	≥30	≥35
Younger:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	≥20	≥25	≥30	≥35

Desired Age

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

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

Results



Conclusions

Although the relationship between subjective age identity and chronological age was approximately linear (Figure 1), the cumulative barplots (Figures 2 & 3) display how the patterns of subjective-chronological age discrepancies changed across the age span.

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

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

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

References

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