



Subjective Aging and Age Identity: A Review

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Abstract: Subjective age is a concept that represents the age experienced by the individual subjectively. Traditionally, it is asked, “how old do you feel?”. However, over time, various sub-dimensions have been defined and examined in various studies. Studies on the concept of subjective age and its sub-dimension, age identity were reviewed in this review. According to studies, an individual’s subjective age is a factor that determines well-being, health, motivation, social participation, and experiences in the aging process. Contrary to the chronological age, which is accepted as the onset of old age, the subjectivity of the aging process and the contexts in which the aging process takes place to determine whether the individual feels old and other factors on which this situation is effective. Moreover, while age identity is affected by the social structure and life situation, it also affects the later experiences of the individual. In this sense, it is revealed that there is a bidirectional relationship with the life situation but the subjective experiences of the aging individual should be taken into account when conducting age-related studies.

Keywords: Age identity, Chronological age, Perceived age, Subjective age, Subjective aging

Öznel Yaşlanma ve Yaş Kimliği: Bir Derleme

Öz: Öznel yaş, bireyin öznel olarak deneyimlediği yaşı temsil eden bir kavramdır. Geleneksel olarak “kaç yaşında hissediyorsun?” şeklinde sorulmaktadır. Ancak zaman içerisinde çeşitli alt boyutları tanımlanmış ve çeşitli çalışmalarla incelenmiştir. Bu derlemede, öznel yaş kavramı ve onun alt boyutu olan yaş kimliği kavramına yönelik çalışmalar incelenmiştir. Çalışmalara göre, bireyin öznel yaşı, iyilik hali, sağlığı, motivasyonu, sosyal katılımı ve yaşlanma sürecindeki deneyimlerini belirleyen bir unsurdur. Yaşlılığın başlangıcı olarak kabul edilen kronolojik yaşın aksine, yaşlanma sürecinin öznel yaşı, ve yaşlanma sürecinin gerçekleştiği bağlamlar bireyin kendini yaşlı hissedip hissetmediği ve bu durumun etkili olduğu diğer unsurları belirler niteliktedir. Ayrıca yaş kimliği, sosyal yapı ve yaşam durumundan etkilenirken, bireyin daha sonraki deneyimlerini de etkilemektedir. Bu anlamda yaşam durumu ile çift yönlü bir ilişki olduğu ancak yaşla ilgili çalışmalar yapılırken yaşlanan bireyin öznel deneyimlerinin dikkate alınması gerektiği ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Algılanmış yaş, Kronolojik yaş, Öznel yaş, Öznel yaşlanma, Yaş kimliği

1. Introduction

While aging is a lifelong process beginning from the womb, the definitions regarding the start of old age depends on the social structure and given meanings to it (Tufan, 2016, p.18). The concept of age may be used both formally and informally. While its formal structures are related to social structures and institutions; the informal structure of age is related to behaviors defined according to suitable age by norms (Møhlolt, 2019, p.3). Therefore, the limits regarding age and start of old age has an importance which reflects social policies, products and everyday and time for acts of individuals (Laz, 1998). However, in

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such situations, the most frequently referenced age is chronological age and considering the heterogenous nature of aging (Baltes, Baltes) it is obvious that not every individual of the same age will experience a certain life period in the same way.

In the life-long development processes, chronological age refers to a measurement that shows the point at which an individual finds oneself in life but it is argued that chronological age fails to fully reflect the aging process. For this reason, among the factors affecting development, the individual and subjective nature of aging has begun to be emphasized (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2016, p.86). Differences in the perception of experiences at the same chronological age group are expressed as "subjective perception of aging" or "subjective aging" (Diehl, Wahl, 2015).

Subjective aging, which is an umbrella term, contains various structures within itself. Kotter-Grühn (2016, p.86) summarized these structures as follows:

"Self perception of aging: How individuals experience their aging process

Old age stereotypical: Beliefs about typical characteristics of older individuals

Age identity: Defining oneself by an age group

Awareness of age related changes: Change experiences that increase awareness of aging

Subjective age: How old an individual perceives oneself to be"

According to Kastenbaum et.al. (1972), the subjective age is a complex personal structure which reflects the ages of an individual (ages of me); how old the individual feels (felt age); how old an individual looks (look age); how old an individual acts (do age) and how old an individual desires to be (ideal age) (Montepare, 2009, p.43). In this respect, age identity emerges as an expression of subjective age. This study is aimed towards reviewing the approaches to age identity and the studies expressing its lifetime effect, and to create a broad perspective on the concept in question.

2. Age Identity

The concept of age identity refers to an individual's inner experiences in old age and the aging process and is the result of different aspects of the aging process and processes of self-identification or separation from others. In scientific research, the age identity of an individual is generally measured by questions such as, "how old do you feel?", "which age group do you feel you belong to?", "how do you perceive and understand your own aging process?" (Carr, 2008, p.10). However, the answers to the aforementioned

questions may lead to different interpretations of how identity is interpreted, depending on the perspective used.

Various approaches have been proposed regarding the concept of age identity and its measurement. While in the traditional one-item measure, the person was asked how old they feel, George et al. (1980) presented the Semantic Differentiation Method based on the fact that age identity and role identities presented in connection with the self can also be adapted to age identity. According to this method, the participants mark the items they deem appropriate from the items consisting of two-pronged options under the categories of "middle age", "elderly" and "myself" (p. 284-285). In the next process, Barak (1987) developed a numeric, non-categorical tool that includes the felt, visible, created and interest age based on functional age elements, similar to age identity, and named it cognitive age.

3. Perspectives and Studies on Age Identity

Along with various perspectives on examining age identity, many studies have been carried out using these perspectives by attempting to understand what kind of situations age identity has an effect on in the aging process. Thus, various study findings shared in the age identity literature are evaluated and related issues are classified in this section.

3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an attempt to accurately describe things from an individual's point of view (Carr, 2016, p.174). According to the phenomenological approach, identity is not the object of a pre-existing reality, but the individual's experience of that reality. For this, it requires a conscious self and also requires separation from the outside world. However, this separation is not a complete separation, the person is also affected by the external world situations while living the reality in question (Husserl, 1970; Ainlay, Redfoot, 1982, p.9). One of the examples on examining age identity with a phenomenological approach is related to the body. The body is the center of the activities performed and is also affected by the rules of the outside world. Bullington (2016, p.70) stated that the body perceived by the individual is subjective because it is not objective but "experienced", and for this reason, we can understand the experiences and subjectivity of the aging body with phenomenology. Bavidge (2016, p.207) speaks of the danger of dividing life into phases such as childhood, youth, middle age, and old age, and states that if we separate old age from other phases of aging, we will distort the view of the way of life. It is also possible to consider this perspective from interpretations of time and existentialism relationship. According to

Heiddegger (2008) we divide time into ‘past, today and future’. However this separation is not given in time’s essence, instead created through purposes within the tasks and activities (Camcı, 2015, 2018). In this sense, phenomenology can be used as a perspective to understand how individual experiences of age identity emerge by considering lifetime effects.

Aging experienced subjectively will also be reflected in the individual’s interpretation of the aging process. This depends not only on chronological age but also on age roles perceived as appropriate or desirable within the current chronological age or ten-year period. (Barak, 2009). Kastenbaum and Durkee (1964) stated that if there is no single and dominant way to define aging, then individuals have something to learn in a particular way of interpreting terms (singular special topics) (Barak, 2009). In this sense, the subjective perception of the age identity of an individual transitioning to retirement will also be shaped according to the opportunities and limitations offered by the social group (retired people) and the environment in which they live. However, in any position, in order for one to continue to develop throughout one’s life, one’s perception of oneself must be suitable for this. The perception of aging and old age has also become an important factor at this point. Many studies carried out in the following period have shown that individuals with a positive perspective on aging and their own old age are at a higher level in terms of health, function and well-being (Stephan et al., 2012).

Gullette (2003) mentioned about age autobiography within the life story studies. According to this, perceptions and awareness towards the age identity may change through time and lifelong experiences. In addition, Coupland et.al. (1991) examined the age identity through intergenerational discourses. The words that have been used by different generations gave clues about their age identities. Therefore, it has been stated that the discourses in daily life show the age identity. In this sense, “being old” can be considered as a situation that is interpreted and categorized within the daily experiences related to the age category at a certain point, rather than the flow in life. (Pamuk, Salur, 2022, p.191)

Age identity is also related to gender identity. Like gender, people also learn norms regarding age categories and how to act in an age-related situations (West, Zimmerman, 1987; Laz, 1998; Krekula, 2009; Pamuk, 2018). In some studies, it was learned that women perceive aging more negatively than men and express a higher age identity in case of their spouse’s illness (Barrett, 2005; Schafer, Shippee, 2010; Alfaro et.al. 2019). Mason and Chik (2020) demonstrated the relationship between age identity and gender in a qualitative study. Barret and Gumber (2018) associated changes with age identity through daily bodily problems, previous operations, medications, and assistive instruments, experiences and examined whether these elements play the role of “reminders of age identity”. In this sense, bodily experiences have

a significant impact upon age identity.

In another study examining the relationship between age identity and body image with African and American women, it was found that there were cultural differences with regards to the level of negativity surrounding age identity which was notably higher amongst American women (Sabik, Cole, 2017). In this context, it can be stated that body image and the perception of gender, which has a cultural basis, are also related to age identity. Similarly, in the study of Barret and Barbee (2017) with people who are in the minority group in terms of sexual orientation, it was observed that the desired age and the age at which they believe they entered middle age and old age were earlier than that of heterosexual individuals.

Negative self-judgments (stereotypes) can negatively affect older adults' self-perception and performance. Self-perception about aging refers to individuals' perceptions of their own age and aging and many methods have been tried to evaluate self-perception up until the present day. (Kotter-Grühn et al., 2012). In the study of Kasleuske and Gineikiene (2017) the tendency to continue the selfhood may be reflected in product choices. According to this, people who feel younger than their chronological age may choose more nostalgic products in order to serve this tendency.

3.2 Successful Aging, Health and Wellbeing

Baltes and Baltes (1990) mention that subjective experiences may also change the reference group, which includes the transitions that occur in life. According to the lifespan perspective, life-long transitions also mean the transition of an individual from one social group to another, and therefore bring along a new age identity according to the rules and characteristics of the new social group (Montepare, 2009, p.43). In addition, the age of transitions may also differ between the individuals within the same group (Sherman, 1994; Kaufman, Elder Jr., 2002, p.170). According to a study by Kaufman and Elder Jr. (2003, p.278) on grandparenthood and age identity, the participants who enjoyed being a grandparent reported feeling much younger than who disliked it. In addition, those who became grandparents earlier in life felt much older than those who became so in later years. Therefore, age identity related to transitions may differ among the members of a community or a group defined by chronological age.

While talking about successful aging, it is stated that one of the most important factors is the way of making sense of aging. Before talking about the principles regarding this, Baltes and Baltes (1993) stated that the view of successful aging emerged by being inspired by Cicero's work called *De Senectute*. Cicero stated that aging is not a period of decline and loss and that, under appropriate conditions, positive changes and productive functions can take place. In this context, a positive and progressive perspective

is considered as a prerequisite for successful aging. However, the point where Baltes and Baltes' (1993) theory differs from Cicero is that it does not ignore biological and physical losses. On the contrary, since they classify the aging process as normal, optimum (utopian), and pathological, it has been suggested that development is possible at an advanced age, by preserving the existing reserves, regardless of the situation.

There are studies referring to the incompatibility between ideal age and perceived age having an effect on subjective life expectancy, life satisfaction (Rupperecht, Lang, 2020); physical experiences (Radtke vd. 2016), and health status (Sherman, 1994). Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn Et.al. (2008), examined the relationship between the change on age identity and satisfaction from the aging process within a longitudinal study. According to this, as the difference between age identity and chronological age increases, individuals' satisfaction with the aging process also increases and the decrease in subjective age that occurs with advancing age (feeling younger than one is) may be a strategy for successful aging. Later, however, Weiss and Lang (2012) argued that this widening of the difference between subjective age and chronological age was not a strategy for successful aging but rather a strategy to distinguish themselves from the “older group associated with loss and disease” in order to avoid exposure to negative images of aging.

Westerhof and Barrett (2005) criticized that although the Selective Optimization with Compensation Model (SOC) (Baltes, Baltes, 1990) is a theory of German origin, it is similarly applied in the United States and international differences are not taken into account and in this context, perspectives on youth may differ. He argued that the interventions to be applied against the losses that occur in old age may also differ due to this reason. To test this, they compared the relationship between age identity, well-being, and life satisfaction with individuals living in Germany with those in the United States. In this case, the relationship between the concept of successful aging and age identity and cultural differences in this relationship were emphasized. There are other studies examining cultural differences in age identity (Barak Et al., 2001; Barak, 2009; Barak, 2011).

According to some studies, subjective age is a predictor on motivation of older people. Therefore, feeling younger than chronological age is related to higher motivation to work and to sustain work-related activities (Ye, Post, 2020) and task-oriented behaviors (Kim Et.al. 2017). However, despite subjective age being a determining factor, chronological age has no effect on work motivation (Akkermans Et.al. 2016). Interestingly, it was also noted that while actual age is a motivating factor for activities for retirement-related activities; subjective age is a motivator for connection with others and the age awareness is a motivation factor for health-related behaviors (Montepare, 2020) in old age. In literature, the other dimensions examined related to subjective age is control feeling (Bellingtier and Neuport, 2020).

The studies show that subjective age has an effect on a variety of subdimensions of health and wellbeing in old age. Since subjective age affects the experienced stress level, it is assumed that it may affect biological processes too (O'Donovan et. al. 2012; Lahav et.al. 2018). Therefore recently it has been mentioned that there is relationship between subjective age, stress level, and accelerated aging (Greenblatt-Kimron Et.al. 2021). According to other studies it is related to the fear of falling, frailty (Fundenberger Et.al. 2020) and psychiatric symptoms (Avidor Et.al. 2021).

There are also studies on age identity and subjective age during Covid-19 Pandemic. According to a study, individuals believe that the Covid-19 only affect the older people, stated they feel younger than their chronological age. Terraciano Et al. (2020) interpreted this as a strategy for coping from the stress caused by the process of the pandemic. Some studies state that younger subjective age is related to a decreased feeling of loneliness (Shria Et al., 2020; Schorr Et al., 2021) and older subjective age is related to feelings of social exclusion, discrimination and psychosocial disability (Jose Et al., 2021) especially since the beginning of Covid-19 Pandemic.

3.3 Terror Management Theory, Social Identity and Dual Age Identity

According to Terror Management Theory, individuals avoid things that evoke death and because aging has connotations with regards to end of life, getting closer to death, some individuals may also tend to avoid older people (Chronody, Teater, 2016). The identification of aging with death also appears in literature. The Portrait of Dorian Gray (2017) is one of the most important examples of this. In the novel, it is stated that the price of having eternal youth, beauty, and immortality is to lose wisdom and goodness internally. It is as if youth and wisdom are exchanged. Another condition in which aging is associated with death is very advanced age and the presence of dementia. There are studies stating that dementia is accepted as "social death" (Sweeting, Gilhooly, 1997; Cohen, Eisdorfer, 2001; transmitting: Higgs, Gilleard, 2016, p.11).

Another condition that leads to the avoidance of aging is social identity anxiety. According to the social identity theory, the negative view of aging makes the individual strive to be "outside the group" and, as a result, to be included in the group with behaviors such as social mobility, creativity and harmony. Thus, the person can participate in various activities without being excluded from the group, spend money on beauty and cosmetics, and continue to do the non-normative behaviors that young people do (Chronody, Teater, 2016). Especially when it comes to appearance, many older individuals do not see themselves in the same group as their peers and consider themselves in a better condition in terms of health.

Weiss and Lang (2009), Weiss (2014) state that age identity is two sided. Accordingly, a person may feel that they belong to the generation they belong to chronologically; however, he may consider himself outside the group in order to avoid negative perceptions and attitudes. This is seen in older individuals; however, young and middle-aged individuals will not separate themselves from the age group they belong to, as they are not as exposed to negative stereotypes as older individuals.

In a qualitative study conducted with young individuals in Denmark, participants stated that individuals who have left their homes feel older than their peers due to factors such as insufficient social support (Mølholt, 2019). In another study conducted with musicians, it was observed that musicians who passed from youth to adulthood stated that they were "old" and not "on time" to make music, taking into account the social group characteristics and expectations of the society (Ramirez, 2013) In China, the relationship between feeling old and types of social participation has been examined. Participation in political activities, older age, large parenting roles or being at work make one feel old at an earlier age (Liu Et al., 2019).

There are other studies that express self-separation from the age group (Sherman, 1994; Weiss Et al., 2013), showing that it affects media use (Harwood, 1999). In Denmark, the relationship between the images of the elderly in the media and the self-stereotypes of the elderly individuals were examined and the participants stated that while they rejected the cold and compatible characters, they adopted the warm but incompatible characters (Westerhof Et al. 2010).

4. Conclusion

Age identity is a concept relating to the subjective experiences of the aging individual regarding the aging process points to the relational dimension of these experiences. Studies conducted so far have shown that although chronological age has a function in terms of the rules that determine the social order, it is insufficient to explain the heterogeneous aging process and that each aging individual does not feel similar to the age category of the social group.

Moreover, while age identity is affected by the social structure and life situation, it also affects the later experiences of the individual. In this sense, it is revealed that there is a bidirectional relationship with the life situation, but the subjective experiences of the aging individual should be taken into account when conducting age-related studies. Particularly, it should be taken into account that not all people in the same cohort may have the same feelings regarding their aging experiences. Besides the conditions every individual ages within, the meaning given to the felt age of a person may also differ and therefore it also affects the future experiences in the life course.

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