Age, subjectivity and the concept of subjective age: A critique

Abstract

This paper presents a critique and proposes a reformulation of the concept of subjective age. It questions the nature of 'subjectivity' used in framing the concept and the consequent failure to distinguish between 'subjectivity' and 'self-identity'. I argue that age is not easily framed as a phenomenal (for-me) experience and that it is at least questionable whether aging or agedness possess what might be termed a 'first-person' subjectivity. What is usually referred to as 'subjective age' can be better understood as an aspect of an individual's self-categorisation or self-schema, derived less from its experiential aspect than from its widespread use as an identifier of people's social being – their they-self. Understood as part of a person's self-schema, 'subjective age' is less a subjective than an inter-subjective construct, reflecting one's place in society. Many of the correlates and consequences of 'subjective age' reflect a more general self-evaluation, derived from the network of inter-subjective relations in both system and life world experience, rather than the phenomenal experiences of embodied age.   Integrating research on self-categorisation and social identity with 'self-perceived' age offers a clearer conceptual base from which to study subjective age, leaving the thornier question of the subjectivity of age to students of aging in the humanities and human sciences.

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Introduction

It is a common enough observation that, at least in the latter half of one's life, a person's chronological age often belies their own sense of being that age. Psychological research on older populations has considered this to reflect a difference between two registers of experience, an 'objective' and a 'subjective' age. In recent times, the topic of subjective age has become a major source of research, exploring "subjective age, age identity, self-perceptions of aging, attitudes toward aging and age stereotypes and awareness of age-related change" (Diehl, Wahl, Brothers and Miche, 2015: 20). Much of this research has focused upon issues of measuring rather than meaning, devising means of calculating subjective age, (usually in later life) as well as its correlates and consequences (Barak, 2009; Debreczeni and Bailey, 2021; Montepare, 2009; Stephan, Sutin, and Terracciano, 2018). In the most recent edition of the Handbook of the Psychology of Aging, it has been described as follows:

> "Adults' self-perception and awareness of aging is most commonly assessed in terms of subjective age using the question "How old do you feel most of the time?" Based on the age in years (i.e., felt age) given in response to this question, researchers have used individuals' felt age to calculate a proportional difference score by subtracting the person's actual chronological age and dividing this difference score by the chrono-logical age (Rubin & Berntsen, 2006). This proportional difference score indicates how much younger or older a person feels relative to his or her actual age". (Dahl, Brothers and Wahl, 2021, 157)

Less often has the conceptual foundation of 'felt' or 'subjective' age been interrogated, let alone what that subjectivity 'feels' like. In research practice, most 'tests' of its underlying structure have been confined to statistical analyses of self-report data concerning this 'gap'

between subjective and chronological age, or examinations of the dimensionality of the construct itself (Goldsmith and Heiens, 1992; Kotter-Grühn, Kornadt and Stephan, 2016; Montpare, 2020; Rubin and Bernstein, 2006; Spuling et al., 2019).

Within this burgeoning field of study, the implicit 'subjectivity' of age has gone largely unexamined; how age is lived, embodied and experienced from within. Yet, as de Beauvoir pointed out, over a half century ago, "the plurality of experiences [that happen to people who become old] cannot possibly be confined in a concept or even in a notion" (de Beauvoir, 1977: 313). This contrast – between the apparent simplicity attached to subjective age, measured as 'the age you feel' and the ambiguity and contradictions that constitute age as a subjectivity – provides the context for this critique.

Despite some early attempts to access the inner experience of aging (e.g., Kafka, 1949; Lehr and Puschner, 1962) and the occasional recent foray into this area within the medical humanities (Bullington, 2006) there has been little concerted phenomenological research into the experience of aging (Bavidge, 2016: 207). Some have argued that the methods used to understand aging objectively 'uncover only evidence of aging' and are ill suited to exploring the 'messy' experience of age (Gadow, 1986: 132). Others have questioned whether age can ever be fully realised as a subjectivity (de Beauvoir, 1977: 323; Kaufman, 1986). The focus of the present paper is this overlooked problematic, between the conceptual basis of 'subjective' age deployed in empirical research and its putative relationship to aging as a subjectivity. In drawing attention to this contrast, between 'subjective age' as an aspect of identity or self-categorisation and aging as a phenomenal 'me-experience' (Guillot, 2017), I will argue that the appropriate framing of 'subjective age' should not be through the domain of subjectivity but should be treated as an aspect of personal and social identity. While literature, philosophy and the human sciences can better

explore the 'messiness' of age's phenomenal subjectivity, psychological and social sciences are better placed to study age as an identity and facet of self-categorization.

At present, subjective age's formulation as 'felt' or 'thought' age has become widely accepted, with little questioning of what exactly is meant by this seeming subjectivity. Two particularly problematic issues arise from accepting the 'facticity' attached to the term. In the first place, most existing research assumes that age maps equally if differently on to two distinct aspects of selfhood, one the Cartesian 'cogito' that does the thinking, perceiving and feeling (the 'I') and the other, the 'me' that is the object of such thinking, perceiving and feeling, the 'my-self' as I understand myself to be. In the second place the concept of subjective age assumes that age and aging possess a phenomenally grounded characteristic (or set of characteristics) experienced as aspects of 'me-ness' beyond the mere recognition that a person's recorded chronological age can elicit a variety of thoughts, feelings and reactions arising from this recognition. In other words, there is an assumed close connection between internally experienced and externally identified agedness.

By ignoring or passing over this distinction between self as subject and self as identity, research framed largely around the latter is often treated as if it is saying something about the former. This assumption, that subjective age is something more than mere self-categorization; that it constitutes some form of unique experience (Spuling et al., 2019), some distinct subjectivity (Montpare, 2020) needs to be questioned, not necessarily by further statistical measures and tests, but by a more conceptual, phenomenologically informed analysis. This is particularly important when students of aging from other traditions have argued that age as a 'me-experience' may be phenomenally "unrealizable" (de Beauvoir, 1977: 323) and that older people "do not relate to aging as a category of experience or meaning" (Kaufman, 1986: 7). If an aging self primarily makes sense as a form of self-categorization, that is contingent in part upon the way society uses age as a form of social

categorization, then research on subjective aging should not be treated as research on age's subjectivity, but as an aspect of social identity.

These two possible ways of registering being 'aged', as distinct 'I' experiences or as a recognition of one's social being-in-the-world, in turn reflect a key issue in philosophy, and to some extent also in psychology and the social sciences. This is the question of whether there is an epistemically unbridgeable gap between the interior world of consciousness and the external world whose existence is potentially independent of that internality. This disjunction between the objective and the subjective has been explored in a variety of ways, from the methodological traditions established in sociology and psychology to the analytical reflections of phenomenological philosophy. So, before addressing the question of subjectivity in relation to aging studies, I will first examine the general concept of subjectivity as it has been deployed within philosophy, psychology and the social sciences.

While it is true that the topic of subjectivity has been explored elsewhere – in cultural and literary studies – it is often confounded with identity (Hall, 2004; Smith, 1988). Hence the focus in the present paper will be between the psychological and social sciences and philosophical approaches to self and subjectivity. The aim is to make clear the basis for a distinction between subjectivity as an 'I' experience and subjectivity as a matter of self-categorization – a consciousness of my 'me-ness' and the relevance of this distinction in questioning the construct of 'subjective age'. In the final section of the paper, I will argue that it would be more coherent to frame 'subjective age' without reference to its embodying some distinct phenomenal experience of age, treating it primarily as a component or facet of an individual's self-schema. By considering subjective age as an identity that is open to differing degrees of internalisation this field can then open to broader developments within the field of identity and self-categorization. This would in turn leave the matter of age's subjectivity to

analyses, debates and discussions located within the humanities and human sciences, as Sally Gadow suggested over thirty years ago (Gadow, 1986).

Subjectivity and phenomenology.

Self-hood and subjectivity have been topics of interest to philosophers for hundreds of years. The phenomenological approach, according to Husserl, can be said to have originated with Rene Descartes and his meditations on the nature of existence (Husserl, 1964:3). Husserl however sought to avoid the solipsism inherent in the Cartesian model, whereby the self/ego's very existence calls into being the world of space and time. This distinction – between the thinker and the thought about – seemed to imply an unbridgeable distinction between the mine-ness of phenomenal consciousness, and the otherness of the contents (in contrast to the process) of consciousness, including therefore the self as an object thought about. Instead, Husserl argued that the world as experienced included other consciousnesses, whose existence was known in the same way that the ego (thinker, *res cogitans*) was capable of being represented as that which is thought about. This duality, for Husserl, meant that otherness could take two forms, one referring to the absolute otherness of objects that possess no 'subject position' and the other, a *relative* otherness whereby both oneself and other egos could be represented as potential subjects, potential thinkers. Through this latter grouping, Husserl evolved the idea of a phenomenal 'inter-subjectivity', a direct experiencing shared by both oneself and others (Carr, 1973).

The status of such 'inter-subjective' phenomenology poses a dilemma; whether it constitutes an equivalence to the sense of me-ness that distinguishes one's own experience or whether it is more equivalent to a sense of a shared 'they-ness'. By assuming the latter - that my sense of self is folded into others and thus shares in making me (and they) equivalent objects of conscious reflection – what has been called first person identificatory knowledge

(Crowell, 2005: 123) implies no distinction between personal and social identity. My reflections upon 'feeling' my age – or my class, ethnicity, gender or indeed any other self-characteristic shared with others – might in the first instance be framed as part of the inter-subjectivity by which I necessarily experience my self as a 'myself'. On the other hand, my sense of age might arise through measured self-reflection, a form of self-categorisation, albeit realised through an implicit 'inter-subjective' social comparison, whereby I experience and reflect upon myself as one among other similarly self-conscious beings.

The phenomenal tradition continues to wrestle with "the festering issues surrounding 'inter-subjectivity' and its comparability with experiencing of the transcendental ego (Dallmayr, 1980: 221). If all first person positions inherit their subjectivity as a mediated position – the largely unconscious, automatic learning of being an 'I' - then one can argue that such primary subjectivity is 'inter-subjective' in a more primitive sense than in the second case, when I describe myself as an I that is framed in 'third person' terms, as in I am of such a height or such a class or such an age that draws upon the identificatory knowledge of third persons (Crowell, 2005: 123).   If one follows Heidegger as much as Husserl, it is possible to argue that subjectivity, in the sense of a pure, non-referential sense of first person 'me-ness' cannot be realised without at the same time acknowledging that any sense of 'I' involves a 'being-already-in-the-world' (Dallmayr, 1980: 234; Heidegger, 2010: 369). Thus, while avoiding positing a purely solipsistic ever present, transcendental subjectivity, it is still possible to distinguish the first-person position of an inter-subjective 'I' from the subjectivity associated with a third person identificatory position, the 'I' as   "an objectively present….they-self" (Heidegger, 2010: 257). While the latter seems to correspond to social identity, the former seems closer to personal identity – terms employed in the psychological and social sciences, that will be addressed in the next sections.

Subjectivity within the psychological sciences

Within the psychological sciences, subjectivity has its origins in the development of the

concept of the subject in late nineteenth century experimental psychology (Danziger, 1994).

As Danziger has pointed out, the term was originally used to refer to both the skilled observer

of and 'neutral' responder to events engineered in the laboratory. His (for these were mostly

male investigators) responses were intended to illuminate mental life, less by their

experiential elements than by the psycho-physical responses elicited to physical stimuli.

Within this 'introspectionist' tradition a dilemma soon arose between the subject positioned

as an investigative instrument reporting on conscious experience and the subject as the

expression or actualization of the experience itself (Danziger, 1990: 47).

While the former – subjects positioned as 'objective' instruments employed in

research to 'reveal' various aspects of mental life – has long continued as a staple ingredient

in psychological research, the latter – subjects as expressions of experience – have faded

from the scene, and with their absence, the disappearance of subjectivity as an object of

concern. Much later, Ghiselli and Ghiselli revisited this distinction in their discussion of the

difference between 'objective' ratings where "the qualities of the stimulus individual and not

the response of the rater" were considered key, and "subjective" ratings where the nature of

the respondent's response was the focus (Ghiselli and Ghiselli, 1972: 264). Despite the

growing recognition of the influence of the observer on what was being observed, the main

task of psychological experimentation remained upon achieving an objective response in

which the subject surfaced first and foremost as the subject of the experiment, whose

"subjectivity" was confined to the research context.

As the remit of investigations broadened to include the subjectivity of responses, early

social psychological experimentation turned toward the impact of others on the subject – and

the study of group influences. This rendered the subjective vs objective dimension more

complex, and the concept of subjectivity was extended to incorporate social influence on subjective judgements (Asch, 1955). From its beginnings in social psychology, this conceptualization of subjectivity and selfhood moved increasingly toward challenging the notion of the individual subject or ego. Instead, turning back to Heideggerian thought, subjectivity was re-located within intersubjectivity and mental processes – from experience and perception to opinions and judgements –in processes that are thoroughly imbued with the social, in terms of both past and present settings, relations and categorisations. This shift in focus moved subjectivity away from the abstracted quality of pure ego and individual consciousness to a position where it was increasingly framed through conceptualisations of personal and social 'identity', within a social framework through which experience, especially social experience, is filtered.

In sum, the 'creation' of the subject in early psychological research involved a division between the subject as a trained medium through which a subject-less 'psycho-physical' consciousness might be studied (typically in the domain of sensations and perceptions) and subjects who served as reactors to controlled external conditions (Danziger, 1990). With the development of social psychology, the subject as reactor became a social being, whose subject status was thoroughly imbricated by her or his group membership. This led to a more explicit focus upon the variety of social identities and multiplicity of selves that framed the participants in explicitly social 'experimentation'. The self became less a skilled *agent* of observation than the hapless *subject* of inquiry, a self whose self-hood was expressed through and experienced within her or his particular social identity as 'subject'.

Subjectivity within the social sciences

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim sought to distinguish between two forms of consciousness, namely individual and collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1898).

The former he considered largely a matter of the neurological underpinning of consciousness, while the latter was representative of the social – that is the realm of inter-subjective relations. While he was willing to treat 'collective' or 'social' thought and representations as much matters of sociological fact as social institutions and structures, he was at pains to set aside considerations of 'subjects' as individual consciousnesses leaving them to the domain of psychology. He famously delineated two aspects of *homo duplex,* "one purely individual, which has roots in our organism, the other social, which is nothing except an extension of society" (Durkheim, 2005: 44). Discarding the former as individual and organismic, he made the latter the focus of his sociology.

It would fall to Alfred Schutz to seek to bridge the gap between the purely phenomenal and the social, in his major work, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932/1967). Schutz tried to bring together the phenomenal experience of the self with that of other selves, arguing that "I can attend to your stream of consciousness just as I can attend to my own [and] in the living intentionality of this experience I "understand" you" (Schutz, 1967: 140). This every day, unreflective understanding, Schutz contrasts with the stance of the social scientist, when "I no longer experience my fellow man [sic] in the sense of sharing his life with him: but instead, I "think about him" 'treating others as 'objects of thought rather than by immediately grasping them as they occur' (Schutz, 1967: 141).

This disjunction between the inter-subjective mode of experiencing the social world and a more reflexive mode offered different perspectives on what constituted 'society' and the relationship between shared collective experiences contrasted with one's own experiences of society, effectively reproducing a 'subjective' vs 'objective' view of others, of society, albeit favouring the latter as more suited to the discipline of sociology. In contrast to Durkheim's division between the biological/species being and the social constitution of experience, of consciousness, Schutz emphasised instead the distinction between the shared

understanding of experience between people – a kind of inter-subjectivity – and the more reflective stance that objectivises social relations. Schutz's arguments for a phenomenological sociology, however, have not been adopted with anything like the enthusiasm that Durkheim's or Weber's concerns were for an objective social science, that chooses to 'stick to the data' and thus maintain an appropriate scientific 'objectivity' in studying society (Durkheim, 1982; Weber, 1949).

Unlike in Europe, this emphasis upon the 'objectivity' of social facts was treated with less rigidity in the United States of America. Here, little distinction was made between the subject in social psychology and subjects in sociology, exemplified in particular by developments in the symbolic interactionist approach (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine, 2003). A growing body of applied research highlighted the power of social situational influences upon seemingly subjective decisions, judgements and individual choices, emphasising the role of the social in mediating individual experience. In many ways this reinforced the view of the social psychologist and sociologist, George Mead who claimed that "the self …is essentially a social structure" (cited in Sandstrom, Martin and Fine, 2003: 117). This view of the self as constituted not by the individual organism nor by a 'for-itself' consciousness, but by the roles, perspectives, identities and standards we internalise rendered the idea of a private 'inside' as little more than the partial internalisation of the outside world. Self-hood and subjectivity, from this perspective were constituted equally by our inter-subjective relationships with others. The 'first-person' perspective, in short, was no more than an amalgam of 'third person' already existing interpretations and understandings.

The recent cultural turn in the social science has seen a resurgence of interest in 'subjectivities', not as phenomenological experiences or existents but as 'subject positions' (Smith, 1988). Drawing upon the French philosopher Louis Althusser and his idea of the self as the interpellation of others, subjectivity becomes a matter of positions determined (called

out) by particular cultural discourses and practices. This more recent formulation of subjectivity divests it not only from a 'transcendental ego' but also from any personal intentionality. Instead, individual actions, expressions and experiences are viewed through the medium of cultural or social position, much as the introspectionists sought to train subjects to become no more than vehicles through which conscious processes such as perception, memory and sensation could be observed and studied.

Subjectivity versus self-categorisation

At the risk of over-generalisation, subjectivity in the psychological and social sciences has become divested of any agency – in what might be called 'self-determination'. Instead, it has become elided with the self that has been framed through a multiplicity of personal and social identities, self-schema that are activated by 'situational' forces. Such schema both ensure a basic stability to everyday social relations and organise a set of socially ordered subjectivities/identities by which we both 'belong' with, and at the same time 'differentiate' our selves from, salient others. In helping to co-ordinate, the narrative unity by which the self – as first person – can be discussed – as third persons – self-schema serve as both an internal and external map through which the individual maintains a position 'in-the-world' and in his or her life narrative. Within this broad socio-cultural framework, discrepancies between 'objective' and 'subjective' ratings, responses, or accounts are better understood as different facets of our social identities framed by differently constructed narratives and not as a contrast between 'internal-psychic' and 'external-social' conditions, (or put phenomenologically, between a 'for-itself' and an 'in-itself' self).

Approaching the subjectivity of age less through experiential phenomena – as 'me-experiences' – than as aspects of identity and self-categorisation calls for a clear shift in focus. No more should attention be directed toward the interiority of subject positions and

the me-ness and mine-ness attached to a phenomenal experience of age. Instead, the focus should be on the objective use of 'I' as it is reflected in the exteriority of social relations. This shift reframes how one thinks about the topic of 'subjective age'. In contrast to work conducted within what might be called the phenomenological approach to age and ageing – what does age 'feel' like; how does one 'experience' or become 'aware' of one's own ageing – age becomes a socially mediated self-categorisation, a 'they-self' as Heidegger might term it, that is always 'reflected back from things' (Crowell, 2005: 123). Such framing can be reflected back quite formally, as a necessary aspect of one's social-civic identity, or somewhat less formally and less precisely as an attribute of one's identity in the world – as a social being who is father or mother, grandfather or grandmother, or simply a retiree or senior citizen.

As a component of self-identity, age has a triple exteriority. In the first place, it serves as a public documentary record, independent of what a person may feel or think about himself or herself; secondly, it serves as an anchoring life narrative embedded in remembered and anticipated dates events and relationships and finally it comprises one facet of an individual's sense of social identity. Before the concept of 'subjective age' was introduced, psychologists and sociologists had studied this topic in terms of 'age identification' or 'age perception' (Blau, 1956; Linn and Hunter, 1979; Peters, 1971). This research could be characterized as the study of age as an element in self-categorisation or social identity. The discrepancy between self-categorisations of one's age and one's objectively delineated age status reflected no more than the more generally recognised phenomenon, that differences between assigned/objective and attributed/subjective statuses are widespread and cover many aspects of our social identity. Re-iterated and re-framed by sociologists from Durkheim, Schutz and Weber to Bourdieu this has been a central feature in both symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology (Letherby, Scott and Williams, 2013).

The questions posed by research on subjective age can arguably be re-framed within that tradition – through the processes of social identity and self-categorisation (Hornsey, 2008; Turner and Reynolds, 2010). Rather than treating subjective age as a matter of direct phenomenal experience, such empirically focused research could frame it as a matter of the self-concept, an inter-subjectively constructed way of being 'me' and the variable integration of social identities within my self-schema (Amiot, Sablonniere, Terry and Smith, 2007). What distinguishes age as a more problematic form of self-categorisation, however, at least as compared with other more stable social identities such as one's ethnicity, race, gender or sexuality, is the fact that age changes its form – both socially personally and physically. That fluidity or changeability in its points of reference means that age as a facet of identity or self-categorisation requires regular updating. That fluidity or changeability in its points of reference means that age as a facet of identity or self-categorization requires regular updating. As social change now increasingly impacts upon the referential basis of agedness, an even more interactive process arises, whereby both intra- and inter-individual changes affects this aspect or facet of social identity. The self-concept ceases to be the completed outcome of our inter-subjective, adult development. The longer one lives, the greater the demand to update and the greater the chance of failing – or refusing – to keep up to date. This fluidity has wider ramifications as witness the recent shift from a focus upon age group or life-stage social identities (such as teenagers, pre-teens, kids, adults, seniors etc.) to generational identifications (such as millennials, generation Z, baby boomers, etc). Positioning the objective 'I' within such a shifting matrix of time age and cohort has become more open. The points of reference by which those facets of identity determine our self-categorisation as aged have arguably moved from mere length of life, physical function or familial status to matters of generationally dated lifestyle performativity and taste.

The breadth of already existing research concerned with self-categorisation, social identity and the social dynamics of the variable self offers a rich resource into which social gerontological research on subjective age might tap. As an approach, it is also less conceptually problematical. At the same time, it introduces into the study of self-categorisation and social identity a facet more inherently changeable and contingent than many other aspects of identity and self-categorisation thus far studied. As a facet of social identity, age functions differently from class and status in constituting an aspect of one's self concept – in the sense that it requires updating even in the absence of observable social change. Turning from studying 'subjective age' as a 'subjectivity' to its function as an aspect of 'identity' or facet of 'self-categorisation' frees it up from the phenomenological problems posed by representing 'age' as an inner 'experience'. A further argument for abandoning any quest for a calculable subjectivity of age comes from the writings of Simone de Beauvoir. Her argument concerning the fundamental 'unrealizability' of age as a 'for me' experience (Beauvoir, 1977) provides the final context for critiquing any possibility of defining or determining a subjectivity of age based on a psychological or social scientific approach.

Age as an unrealisable subjectivity.

In her book, *Old Age*, Simone de Beauvoir described old age as 'an unrealisable' (de Beauvoir, 1977: 323). In adopting this position – of the impossibility of old age constituting a subjectively realisable phenomenal experience – de Beauvoir y ruled out the possibility that age could be a phenomenally experienced state of the subject. Her notion of the phenomenological unrealizability of age as a 'for me' subjectivity should not be confused with assuming that individuals have no sense of age in framing their personal identity. Nor does it deny that, as embodied beings, individuals possess distinct biological, physical and social characteristics associated with age. Whether as a person or as a social being,

individuals seem possessed by a need for coherence, a basic self-narrative that assumes they occupy a stable place in the world, in society and in experience. This may not constitute the same kind of object-like quality, or exactly the same kind of externality that is afforded to others, but it still assumes that most self-categorizations share a basic common vocabulary to that deployed by and about others. This is however not the 'me-self' or 'for me' experience associated with the phenomenological position but rather the 'they-self' framework that Heidegger argued provides the foundation from which individual *dasein* functions as "the most real subject of every-dayness (Heidegger, 2010: 124).

According to Dan Zahavi, such reflexive self-categorisations are "objectifying", "petrify[ying] the stream [of consciousness] and turn[ing] experiences into isolated objects" (Zahavi, 2003: 159). This might seem a somewhat over-dramatic formulation, but Zahavi's point is that turning the subject (the ego) into an object of reflection (the me) risks invalidating the very phenomenon (subjectivity) one wishes to study. In that sense, asking someone how old they feel or think they are, seeks to 'petrify' their experience, by insisting upon a form of object-like self-categorisation, applicable to the 'everydayness' of oneself as a 'they-self'. In this sense, the subject of subjective age, in the way it is espoused by research on subjective age studies, is less about phenomenal experience than the objectifying self-reflection concerning one's own and others' samenesses and differences. The subject of one's own self-categorisation as 'old', 'not so old', 'very old' is an inter-subjective categorisation derived not from phenomenal consciousness but from the self-reflective social comparison demanded by the research question 'how old do you feel you are?". While age may be unrealizable as a 'me-experience' it is clearly realizable as a reflexive appraisal of one's personal and social identity. At the same time such self-identification may be quite fluid.

In part, this may be because any chosen 'subjective age' does not necessarily represent a central element of an individual's habitual self-schema. Consequently, even if one

ignores the subjectivity attached to subjective age, it can even be questioned whether subjective age constitutes a coherently constituted element of one's personal identity. Unlike self-identities such as class, ethnicity, gender or race, 'subjective age' can be quite fluid, even over relatively short periods of time (Hughes, Geraci and de Forrest, 2013; Kotter-Grühn, Neuport and Stephan, 2015; Stephan et al., 2013). Furthermore, when asked only a minority of people choose age as a salient aspect of their identity (Hyde and Jones, 2015). Thus, an alternative presents itself, that subjective age reflects neither phenomenal experience nor a core element in one's self-schema, but more often functions, at least in later life , as an indirect expression of personal well-being (Kotter-Grühn, Neuport and Stephan, 2015; Miche et al., 2014). This also seems to be the implication of one recent study that found that 'subjective age' added little significant in predicting important work and life outcomes once actual age and core self-evaluations were taken into account (Zacher and Rudolph, 2019).

Of course, age possesses a collectively framed attribute or self-characteristic with which individuals can evaluate themselves and others. It can serve as a potential self-category as well as an index of general mood or self-regard, framed and deployed within already existing systems of social categorization. Such self-ascriptions however may be peripheral to how one construes one's core personal or self-identity (Hyde and Jones, 2015) and may in some circumstances (especially perhaps in later life) reflect more transient aspects of one's mood rather than one's sense of self (Hughes, Geraci and de Forrest, 2013). The extent to which age is or is not central to one's self-categorization might determine both the salience of such research-induced self-evaluation as well as affecting the interpretation of its present correlates and future consequences. To date, research has not questioned either of these issues. While subjective age might shine little light on age as a subjectivity, as an inner experience, framed in this way (i.e., as 'subjective' age), it may equally be problematic in studying age as an aspect of identity or self-categorization.

Saying this is not to deny that 'subjective age' as an age-related self-categorization has no 'real-life' consequences; much research has shown that it clearly does, predicting both better health and longer lives (Kotter-Grühn, Kornadt and Stephan, 2016; Kunze, Raes and Bruch, 2015; Rippon and Steptoe, 2015). More perhaps could be discovered however were subjective age treated as an aspect both of self-categorization and of general mood or well-being. To avoid confusing issues of identity (as they are examined in the psychological and social sciences) with issues of experience (as they are examined in the humanities and human sciences) it might reduce the risk of such confusion by removing the term subjective age altogether whilst avoid risking "the unintentional communication and perpetuation of ageism" that some have felt research on the topic does (Gendron, Inker and Welleford, 2018: 618).

Conclusions

Subjective age has become a hot topic in aging studies, the psychology of aging and social gerontology. The argument of this paper is that the use of this term is problematic. It risks confounding two very different phenomena, one a matter of 'me experiences', the other a matter of 'self-categorization'. While the former constitutes a topic within philosophy and more broadly across the humanities, the latter is part of social psychology. Subjective age, when viewed as an aspect of self-schema, refers to aspects of the objective 'I', the identificatory knowledge about one's self as one of many selves. It reflects those "cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual's social experiences" (Markus, 1977: 64). Thus schematised, the self maintains its coherence by processing information about itself through increasingly elaborated fixed frames of reference, termed 'self-categorisations' (Turner and Reynolds, 2001, 2010). Such processing requires a balance

between self-sameness and self-integrity. Subjective age can be seen as one facet in determining how age/agedness figures within such self-schema, how it is integrated with other aspects of the self-schema and how its articulation depends upon the settings in which age is realized within the individual's social relations and more broadly their social world.

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Onorato and Turner have drawn a distinction between personal identity (the personal self) and social self (the collectively represented self). They argue that "personal identity refers to 'me' versus 'not me' categorizations—all the attributes that come to the fore when the perceiver makes interpersonal comparisons with other ingroup members. Social identity, on the other hand, refers to 'us' versus 'them' categorizations—all the attributes that come to the fore when the perceiver compares his or her group (as a collective) to a psychologically relevant outgroup" (Onorato and Turner, 2004: 259). Research exploring how age functions as both a core element of an individual's personal and of their social identity is relatively thin on the ground, in contrast to the ever-growing literature on 'subjective age'. This is unfortunate because it risks reifying subjective age not as an issue of identity but as a 'me-experience' (which I have argued it is not) while preventing further analysis of age's role in the more general phenomena of identity, self-schema and self-categorization.

The aim of this paper has been to critique the term 'subjective age' and promote its re-interpretation as an issue of identity and self-characterisation, distinct from any notions of age's phenomenological subjectivity – its 'for-me' ness. The former position represents the objectification of the self, using first person identificatory knowledge, and is capable of being empirically researched. The latter expresses the forever incomplete realization of age in me-experiences, where subjectivity as a mode of experience is less easily studied, empirically and less easily reflected upon without in the process objectifying that experience. Attempts to employ 'phenomenological analysis' in social psychological research have been severely

criticized by philosophers as fundamentally misrepresenting what phenomenal consciousness is (Zahavi, 2019). Although it seems perfectly possible to conduct phenomenological research, thus far such research has been confined largely to the general study of consciousness and the embodied self rather than what are the objects of consciousness.

Subjective age may be better re-named as 'age-identity', and treated more productively, within the psychological and social sciences, through the processes of self-categorization, and the interplay of social selves, much as Gecas, Gergen, Goffman and Gubrium, in different ways, have done (Gecas, 1982; Gergen, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). Given the variable circumstances in which age is rendered salient in social interactions, however, it seems likely that (a) subjective age/age identity reflects at least in part personal well-being and not simply self-identity and (b) it functions as a relational categorisation depending upon how age is contextualised (for example, contrasting age entering a hospital with age entering a nightclub). Rather than seeking to link it to phenomenological me-experiences, thus re-named, it might better be understood as a socially mediated self-narrative, which in the research setting might involve little more than a response mediating between individuals 'not wishing to appear old' at the same time 'not wishing to appear irrational'.

In contrast, there remains the often 'uncanny' experience of both being and not being 'old'- with such 'messy' experiences better conveyed, as Freud did in his essay on the uncanny, in the form of first-person stories and reflections upon such everyday conflicts between the real and the imaginary, the conscious and the unconscious, the interiority and exteriority of our being-in-the-world. This plurality of experiences might, as Gadow has noted, more usefully be captured in literature, analysed in philosophy and, arguably, interrogated psychoanalytically. They are poorly if at all examined and objectified as disputes

between first and third person perspectives of, in Heidegger's terms, our selves as 'they-selves' (Freud, 2003; Royle, 2003).

While it is true that a number of writers working within the broad framework of aging studies have explored what might be termed the inner life of aging, most have done so within the context of philosophical, historical and literary studies (for example, Barry and Skagen, 2020; Small, 2007; 2020). A different, if related approach, explores interior experience in later life through concepts of 'gero-transcendance' and 'spirituality' (Sherman, 2011; Tornstam, 1997). Nothing in this paper is intended to descry such cross-disciplinary approaches; indeed, I applaud them, although I feel that the call for a more contemplative, spiritually oriented later life is more a prescription than an exploration of the 'for-me' experience of age. It is primarily within the humanities and human sciences that insights and understandings are most likely to arise concerning the variety of me-experiences reflecting the subjectivity of age, such as are reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's and May Sarton's autobiographical and fictional writings. Such narrative accounts do not of course offer prescriptions of how to live better, longer or indeed more happily in later life, but they do help convert some of the 'for-me' experiences associated with age into potential 'for-us' experiences, rendering ageing, not as a 'they-experience' but as a 'we-experience'. Empirical analyses of self-reported 'subjective age' and its correlates do not perform this function, not because they are badly conducted but because they address identity not subjectivity. Making that clear, by abandoning the term 'subjective age', might in the end benefit those studying age on both sides of this divide.

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