



## Rewriting age to overcome misaligned age and gender norms in later life<sup>☆</sup>



Jeremiah C. Morelock<sup>\*,1</sup>, Jeffrey E. Stokes<sup>2</sup>, Sara M. Moorman<sup>3</sup>

Boston College United States

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### 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.

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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.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [morelocj@bc.edu](mailto:morelocj@bc.edu) (J.C. Morelock).

<sup>1</sup> 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*.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

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

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