SELF-PERCEIVED AGING AMONG THE SOCIALLY INSULATED: AGE DIFFERENCES AMONG INCARCERATED ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Self-perceived age among 263 incarcerated men and women was studied utilizing regression analysis. Subjective assessments of age were shown to be linked to health and self-esteem but not to length of incarceration as previous research suggests. Social-psychological components of self-perceived age appear differentially for women and men and for minority respondents. Parallels with community based populations are suggested.

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The landmark investigations of Tuckman, Lodge, and their colleagues (1954; 1957; 1961; Zola, 1962) sensitized many social gerontologists to the need to focus their research efforts toward the identification of what has generally been labeled self-perceived age or age-role identity (Neugarten, 1968; Rose, 1971). Much of this research has attempted to explicate those factors which contribute to a person's affective or cognitive feeling of being younger or older than his/her chronological years. Yet considerable debate still surrounds attempts to identify concomitants of chronological age apart from its cultural trappings. It is exactly this question which underlies the present analysis and our attempt to shed some further light on the question of correlates of self-assessed age.

Despite a range of conceptual and methodological difficulties (Larson, 1978; Breytspraak and George, 1979), some consensus has generally emerged: subjectively assessed age is a reflection of health and physiological declines, socioeconomic exigencies, and changes in interaction patterns or social participation. These in turn are alloyed by alterations in domestic arrangements, occupational trajectories, and related factors such as sex or race (Havighurst, 1965; Peters, 1971; Rosow, 1973; Fry, 1976; Ward, 1977; Larson, 1978; Linn and Hunter, 1979). While there is no denying the salience of such variables for how people think of themselves vis-a-vis an idealized "social clock" (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowie, 1965), the issue remains somewhat clouded. Apparently, both affective and cognitive differences in individuals' self-defined

position over the life course are more a consequence of age-related events than the effects of the process of aging in itself (Breytspraak and George, 1979). Since the majority of adults in every culture are firmly ensconced in a web of culturally prescribed responsibilities and obligations, which are in large measure socially sequenced, we are hard pressed to differentiate social-psychological components of self-perceived age from a number of cultural concomitants.

One means of adding to existing knowledge in this area is to attempt to identify correlates of self-assessed age among individuals who are, for one reason or another, insulated from most age determining societal benchmarks. Of course, finding a sizeable number of such people is no easy task; religious orders which impose some distance on the ebb and flow of daily life is one alternative; another are those men and women who reside in what have been termed "total institutions", and therefore are, to a variable degree, constrained from participation in age-defining social involvements. In either instance, self-perceived age might reasonably be assumed to be less a consequence of mainstream, culturally defined transitions and more a function of individual factors and psychological predisposition.

This research is based on extensive study of men and women living out their lives behind prison walls because so little is known about the determinants of subjectively evaluated age when social benchmarks are constrained or attenuated. Previous research by Gillespie and Galliher (1972) found that with imprisonment there is a disjuncture between chronological age and perceived age-role identity. They report that younger inmates maintain prison life has a maturing effect, prompting them to feel more mature and worldly than their non-incarcerated

peers. Paradoxically, among the middle-aged men in their study, Gillespie and Galliher note a retarding effect. In their own eyes, middle-aged prisoners considered themselves not only to be physically more fit than their unincarcerated counterparts but they also felt more mentally competent. In both cases, age-perceptions were attributed to their being spared many of the stresses common to life in the outside community. In contrast, older inmates felt they were aged beyond their years due to the insularity of a routinized life--the very factor seen as beneficial by the younger and middle aged. In another investigation, Reed and Glamser (1979) discovered a similar pattern of age-identification among their 19 male prisoners whose social bonds had become diminished in prison. For these and related reasons they note that much of what is viewed as normal aging does not take place in prison. Cain (1979), in a third study, refers to this phenomenon as a possible outcome of "going on ice"--to use the jargon of the inmates--which insulates prisoners from many of the normative rites of passage used to denote movement through the adult years. Though each of these three studies are constrained by small sample size, they do provide a point of departure for further research.

Accordingly, the primary task of this research is to identify correlates of self-perceived age among the incarcerated. Hopefully, it will contribute to the theoretical debate concerning important issues in the process of aging. Utilizing a multiple regression approach, we attempt to determine the extent to which self-perceived age is the product of actual chronological age, health factors, certain psychological components, or contextual contingencies.

METHODOLOGY

Sample selection--Respondents participating in this investigation were part of a stratified and random sample of 606 men and women drawn from the inmate population of three Federal prisons located in the southeastern United States. In order to insure an adequate number of older inmates, all males over 55 and all females over the age of 50 were included (the lower age for women was necessary due to the limited availability of older women). In addition, a ten percent random sample of all other inmates listed in each institution's central file was drawn. From our total sample, 116 inmates were excused due to court schedules, administrative detention, language or reading deficiencies and so on. Ninety-one failed to appear as scheduled, 82 refused to participate in the study, and finally, 54 questionnaires were unusable due to the large number of questions left unanswered. Ultimately, 263 respondents were included in this portion of our analysis, representing prisons that range from maximum to minimum security; two were sexually segregated with all females or all males and the third was a sexually integrated facility. Inmates cooperating with the research effort were gathered in groups of 12 to 15; the project purpose was explained, illustrations of the 75 minute questionnaire were provided and individual assistance was offered during the actual response period.

Dependent Variable

Self-perceived age is too frequently assessed through a single-item measure, "Do you feel older or younger than your age?" While such a technique begins to address the nature of personal perceptions, it may not adequately represent the complexity of this construct.

Accordingly, the present analysis employed a four-item Likert-type scale consisting of the following self-descriptive items (adapted from Kastenbaum et al., 1972): 1. How do you feel lately...; 2. Most of the time I feel...; 3. Most of the time I look...; and, 4. People who know me well regard me as... All items, with the exception of one, have five response categories. The response "quite a bit younger, a little younger, neither, a little older, and quite a bit older" were scored one through five, respectively. Item one has three response categories: "full of life" scored one, "ok" scored three, and "bored and tired" scored five. This scoring was necessitated in order to give equal weight to all items in the scale. Conceptually, it was felt that this scale taps four dimensions of self-perceived age. It includes a subjective evaluation of current energy level, relative age, physical appearance, and a judgment of others' perceptions of one's age. Scale scores range from 4 to 20. The higher the score, the greater the respondent's tendency to perceive themselves to be older than their calender years.

Independent Variables

Independent variables consist of a battery of measures of anomie, self-esteem, life satisfaction, plus self reports of chronological age, length of incarceration, and number of health conditions. Anomie was measured using Srole's (1956) unidimensional anomie scale, designed to indicate "self-to-other alienation" within a particular social context. Our assessment of self-esteem relied on Rosenberg's (1965) widely used 10-item scale (see for example, Atchley, 1976; Ward, 1977), while life satisfaction was measured via the well-known life-satisfaction index constructed by Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1961). Although the

independence of anomie, self-esteem, and life satisfaction has been questioned (Larson, 1978; Dobson, Powers, Keith, and Goudy, 1979), we employed them because their widespread utilization in gerontological research makes for broad comparability.

As noted above, the research by Gillespie and Galliher, Reed and Glamser, and Cain indicates that a causal relationship exists between imprisonment and subjectively perceived age. However, these studies fail to specify the precise nature of this relationship. For example, is self-evaluated age a direct function of length of incarceration? If it is not a direct function, what are the intervening variables which mediate the relationship? It is even possible that both a direct and indirect relationship exists, and function independently of one another. To assess whether time spent in prison and self-perceived age are directly related, length of incarceration is first introduced as an indpendent variable in our analysis. It is then used as a control variable to determine its indirect effect and to identify those factors which mediate the relationship between it and subjective age.

Control Variables

Control variables included in our analysis consist of sex, race, and length of incarceration. Sex and race were entered since many social-psychological characteristics are known to differ not only between men and women but between whites and blacks as well. Length of incarceration was utilized as a control because the primary thesis of this paper is that the determinants of subjective age differ as individuals are increasingly isolated from the normal ebb and flow of social interactions and, consequently, the benchmarks available for assessing one's relative position on the trajectory of youth to old age.

ANALYSIS

As may be seen in Table I, length of incarceration and chronological age are poor predictors of self-perceived age for the total sample as well as for the sub-group classifications by sex and race. However, as was pointed out above, Gillespie and Galliher assert a positive association between incarceration and subjective age for younger inmates but a negative relationship between those variables for older prisoners. If they are indeed correct, the absence of an association between length of incarceration and the dependent variable in Table I may be due to a negative association at one end of the age continuum and a positive relationship at the other, cancelling one another out. Examination of this relationship by age categories (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 and older), however, reveals that this is not the case. In fact, the association between length of imprisonment and subjectively perceived age is not significant at the .05 level for any of these age categories.

TABLE I HERE

While length of incarceration apparently has little, if any, direct impact on subjective age, the relationship between three other variables and self assessments of age is statistically significant. For the aggregated sample, a three-variable model comprised of number of health conditions, self-esteem, and alienation is correlated with subjective age ($r = .33$).

Interestingly enough, this relationship remains basically unchanged for males and minority group respondents. The only differences are that the association is increased from $r = .33$ for the total sample to $r = .37$ for the two sub-categories. Furthermore, the order of entrance of

variables into the multiple variable model is altered. For male respondents, the first variable entered is alienation (r = .24), followed by self-esteem (r = -.33), and finally, health (r = .37). The amount of variance explained by these three variables among male respondents is exactly the same among ethnic minorities. However, for minority respondents, the sequence of entry into the regression equation and the amount of variance explained by each differs. In the later instance, the first variable is health, then alienation, and lastly self-esteem. As each successive variable is entered the association with subjective age is increased from r = .25 to r = .33 and r = -.37, respectively.

The relationships outlined above for the total sample and for male and minority group respondents is altered slightly for white inmates. For this group, only two variables are significant at the .05 level: h e a l t h a n d s e l f - e s t e e m. Health is correlated with self-perceived age r = .23; addition of self-esteem to the model increases the association to r = -.29.

While all sub-group classifications produced findings that differ somewhat from the analysis based on the total aggregated sample, it is among females where this difference is most evident. Among women, unlike any other group, life satisfaction is the best predictor of subjective age, r = -.22. Number of health conditions is the only other variable entered into the regression equation and it increases the degree of association to r = .32.

TABLE 2 HERE

Data presented thus far suggest that length of imprisonment does not have a direct impact on respondents' self-perceived age. On the

other hand, the data presented in Table 2 indicate the relationship between length of incarceration and subjective assessments of age may be indirect. Such an assertion is supported by the finding that when the sample is stratified by length of incarceration, the relationships between the independent and dependent variables are appreciably altered. The single best predictor of subjective age included in Table 2 is self-esteem. For those respondents incarcerated 15 months or less, the relationship is correlated $r = -.37$. For those individuals imprisoned at least 16 but less than 36 months, two variables, health and life satisfaction, are statistically significant predictors of subjective age. Health brings the correlation to $r = .36$ and the inclusion of life satisfaction increases it to $r = -.44$. For those inmates imprisoned 37 to 54 months, none of the five independent variables were significant at the .05 level. Finally, for those inmates who have been incarcerated 55 months or longer, health is once again significant, being correlated ($r = .29$) with a sense of their own age.

SUMMARY

Congruent with previous research derived from various non-incarcerated populations, the present study of 263 men and women found self-evaluated health to be an important predictor of perceived age (Palmore and Luikart, 1972; Spreitzer, 1974). In fact, the most consistent predictor of subjectively determined age included in Table 1 is number of health conditions. As the number of health conditions increases, the more likely inmates are to conceive of themselves as older than their chronological age. The second most consistent predictor is self-esteem,

with the exception of female prisoners; the lower a respondent's self-esteem, the greater their propensity to consider themselves to be older than their calender years. Alienation presents an unexplained paradox; it is positively associated with subjective age for the total sample, for males, and minority group members, but it is not a predictor of self-perceived age for female white respondents. Finally, as is apparent from Table 1, the inverse association between our measure of life satisfaction and self-evaluted age is unique to female respondents. Those women who express satisfaction with their lives are more likely than their dissatisfied associates to consider themselves to be younger than their chronological age.

Contrary to findings reported by previous research dealing with inmates, stratification of our sample by length of incarceration produced findings (Table 2) which suggest that imprisonment has an indirect, as opposed to a direct, effect on subjectively assessed age. Health factors, self-esteem and life satisfaction were shown to be more or less salient as determinants of self-perceived age as length of incarceration increases. It would seem imprisonment has a two-pronged effect on age role identity. It isolates individuals from many of the social benchmarks which denote passage through various age-specific life stages. Also the resulting instability in prisoners' self-perceived age takes on added significance in light of the fact that incarceration also alters social-psychological dimensions of age perception. In short, for most people there are few experiences during the adult years which simultaneously disrupt both cultural and social-psychological conponents of age role identity--prisoners appear to encounter both. In fact, commitment to a total institution may well be one of the only such experiences common to large numbers of people in modern industrial societies.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to differentiate social-psychological components of self-perceived age from cultural concomitants have been hampered because, with few exceptions, from early childhood until death individuals are immersed in their cultural surroundings. One group denied such fullfledged participation, however, is inmates residing in archtypal "total institution". Consequently, they are one of the few populations to which social scientists can turn in their efforts to unravel the complex relationships between the various constitutive elements of self-assessed age.

The data presented here are in some respects congruent with previous findings based on community populations. As is apparent from Table 1, number of health conditions is the most consistent predictor of subjective age in our regression analysis. Based on this finding, one might expect this association to hold true despite length of incarceration. After all, regardless of the presence of other factors, good health almost certainly contributes to feelings of youthfulness, and poor health to feeling older. Interestingly, this is not the case; health is not a statistically significant predictor of subjective age for these inmates incarcerated 15 months or less or for those imprisoned 37-54 months. In short, given the almost certain relevance of health factors as determinants of whether persons feel younger or older than their chronological age, there must be a strong suppressor variable (Rosenberg, 1968) operative in the penal setting which negates this association for certain segments of the inmate population. It may be that subsequent identification of this suppressor variable would add significantly to our knowledge of aging in general and especially behind prison walls.

Obviously, this unidentified suppressor variable, as well as a number of other plausible factors in subjective age, were not included in this study. The largest degree of association for any multiple variable model was $r = -.44$, and $r = -.37$ for any single variable. Nevertheless, a comparison of Tables 1 and 2 indicates that length of incarceration mediates the relationship between the independent variables and subjective age. In essence, for prison inmates the saliency of various factors as determinants of subjective age shifts as length of incarceration increases. This is an important finding in and of itself, for it demonstrates that while length of incarceration per se does not directly influence self-perceived age, it is important in its indirect impact. Of course, the fact that the categories for length of incarceration (introduced in Table 2) were selected to provide an adequate number of respondents in each group in order to facilitate statistical analysis may mitigate the results. Had these categories been constructed on the basis of some appropriate theoretical criterion, the associations presented in Table 2 would no doubt have been altered.

In summary, the attempt of the present study to isolate social-psychological components of self-perceived age through an examination of incarcerated adults produced a number of intriguing leads to be pursued in further aging research. For example, in Table 2, the association between self-esteem and subjectively perceived age decreases as length of incarceration increases. This suggests that the pivotal nature of the "degradation" crises associated with arrest, trial, conviction, and imprisonment serves to lower an individual's self-esteem, which, in turn, functions to make them feel older than their actual years. As inmates adjust to imprisonment and are temporarily separated from the initial negative impact

of arrest and trial, the close association between self-esteem and subjective age is attenuated. A parallel phenomenon among the non-institutionalized may account for the reported negative association between identity crises and subjective age (Ward, 1977). As individuals grow older, the "degradations" associated with declining health, impaired social functioning, and decreased social acceptance serve to undermine their self-esteem, which in turn, prompts them to perceive themselves as older than their actual years. Unfortunately, unlike the transitory displacements associated with imprisonment, these latter forms of degradation often become more pernicious with advancing years and are cumulative in their impact on self-esteem. Consequently, the elderly in the larger society are unlikely to experience the "recovery of self-esteem" evidently experienced by many prison inmates.

TABLE 1

STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND SUBJECTIVE AGE. ZERO ORDER RELATIONSHIPS AND CONTROLS FOR SEX AND RACE

	Total Sample	Male	Female	White	Non-White
Number of Health Conditions	.24*	.37*	.32*	.23*	.25*
Alienation	.33*	.24*	.05	.05	.33*
Self-Esteem	-.30*	-.33*	-.09	-.29*	-.37*
Life Satisfaction	-.12	-.09	-.22*	-.08	-.14
Length of Incarceration	-.05	-.03	-.07	-.01	-.10
Chronological Age	-.09	-.08	-.11	-.12	-.01

*Variables significant at the .05 level when considered as components of a multiple variable model.

TABLE 2

STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND SUBJECTIVE AGE WITH CONTROL FOR LENGTH OF INCARCERATION BY QUANTITIES

	1-15 Mos.	16-36 Mos.	37-54 Mos.	55 Mos. & Over
Health	.04	.36*	.16	.29**
Alienation	.04	.15	.25	.23
Self-Esteem	-.37**	-.19	-.14	-.02
Life Satisfaction	-.12	-.44*	-.07	-.10
Chronological Age	-.20	-.20	-.09	-.11

*Variables significant at the .05 level when considered as components of a multiple variable model.

**Variables significant at the .05 level for a single variable model.

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