1



Workplace Subjective Age Multidimensionality: Generation, Age, Tenure, Experience (GATE)

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ABSTRACT

Although less subjective age focused than other scholarly fields, organizational behavior (OB) faces a familiar challenge: comprehending an aging, increasingly age-diverse workforce, yet finding chronological age alone to be a limited predictor of key work outcomes (e.g., performance). A recent OB framework posits that going beyond chronological age necessitates disentangling distinct age-based constructs: perceived *Generation* (birth cohort), *Age* (life stage), *Tenure* (length of time with organization), and *Experience* (skill set accumulated over time; GATE). Although this framework originated as a means of enhancing predictions for a rapidly aging workforce, this commentary argues that GATE also provides a framework for understanding bases of subjective age itself, including an important distinction between more subjective elements (generation, life stage) versus more objective elements (tenure, experience). Future research on subjective age might well consider applying GATE elements in order to enhance a multidimensional understanding of subjective age underpinnings.

As the workforce grows increasingly older and multigenerational, a growing number of scholars, spanning multiple disciplines, have begun to question the utility of chronological age as a predictor of workplace identities, perceptions, and outcomes (Kunze, Raes, & Bruch, 2015). This has motivated scholars to seek alternative approaches to understanding how age matters within increasingly age-diverse workplaces (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017a, 2017b), which have also been forced to comprehend increases in "older" workers (North & Fiske, 2015).

An ever-popular scholarly age approach incorporates the concept of subjective age—that is, how old one feels, irrespective of chronological age (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Rubin & Bernsten, 2006). Unlike chronological age per se, which is fraught with contradictions and null findings (Ng & Feldman, 2008), subjective age significantly predicts—above and beyond chronological age—physical and mental health, cognitive functioning, work performance, and longevity (Kotter-Grühn, Kornadt, & Stephan, 2016; Kunze et al., 2015). Rather than characterizing age as an absolute, fixed element, as chronological age does, subjective age generally comprises four different, malleable characteristics: how old people look, feel, behave, and what their interests are (Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Artt, 1972; Schwall, 2012). Thus, for many researchers, incorporating subjective age has become a virtual obligation; in order to maximize age-based predictions, scholars advocate for ascertaining not only how old one is but also how old one feels (Cleveland & Hanscom, 2017; Kunze et al., 2015).

In spite of this rise in subjective age research, critiques do exist, perhaps guiding next steps within this emergent topic. First, researchers in

this domain have emphasized subjective age predominately as a unidimensional construct—as simply, "how old one feels," without substantial focus on nuances shaping why one's subjective age might vary from chronological age in the first place (Diehl et al., 2014). Addressing this, subjective age researchers recently have called for more multidimensional theoretical perspectives (Barrett & Montepare, 2015), such as identifying key life domains that influence how old one feels (e.g., family, friends, leisure, personality, finances, work, and health; Kornadt, Hess, Voss, & Rothermund, 2016). Not only do individuals vary in their subjective age between these different domains (e.g., individuals might feel older than their actual age in their personality but younger in terms of health), but these domains also shape interindividual variance in subjective age overall (e.g., "Person A" might feel subjectively older than "Person B" due to family differences, such as having experienced the "empty nest" transition with grown children moving out of the house, which "Person B" has not yet experienced). Moreover, even within the individual, subjective age identification tends to change over time (Armenta et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, other critiques argue that "subjective age" as a broad construct per se does not explain variance in work outcomes beyond chronological age when accounting for the broader factor of core self-evaluations (Zacher & Rudolph, 2018). Given this, and given the relatively incipient nature of subjective age research to begin with, it is likely that other underlying factors remain to be unearthed. This is particularly the case in organizational behavior (OB), in which the concept of subjective age remains an overlooked topic

of investigation, not to mention worker age more broadly (Kulik, Ryan, Harper, & George, 2014).

GATE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SUBJECTIVE AGE

In some ways, echoing recent subjective age scholarship, a recent OB perspective emphasizes (a) the limitations of chronological age as a predictor, (b) increased focus on subjective age malleability, and (c) calls for increased multidimensionality in understanding how age operates in the workplace (North, 2019). In conceptualizing worker age as a focal predictor, this framework emphasizes accounting for four different workplace-specific components: birth-cohort-based perceived Generation, life-stage-based Age, years-of-service-based Tenure, and years-of-skill-accumulation-based Experience (GATE). Acknowledging these four intertwined components entails appraising the relative impact of each of these factors individually (i.e., ascertaining the impact of perceived generational membership, controlling for life stage, tenure, and experience) but also understanding how the four components add up to form different "compound" wholes (e.g., distinguishing between high-experience, high-tenure, "older incumbents" versus the low-experience, low-tenure "older career switchers"). GATE helps clarify why not all similarly (i.e., chronologically) aged workers would be viewed equally and how research that only captures chronological age does not readily capture this nuance.

GATE dovetails with the research movements toward subjective age in at least two key ways: First, much as subjective age argues against fixed, chronological age categorization (Nagy, Froidevaux, & Hirschi, 2018), GATE argues that age is an inherently malleable construct that is not captured by a fixed, chronological metric. Second, GATE offers new, multidimensional pathways for understanding subjective age (Montepare & Lachman, 1989); similar to identifying the different life domains that might shape subjective age, GATE identifies specific work domains that likely shape age malleability.

GATE UNDERSCORES AGE "MALLEABILITY"

As with other fields, the vast majority of age-focused OB research has relied heavily on chronological approaches alone. Unfortunately, this has yielded a high degree of inconclusiveness with respect to what worker age predicts, particularly in three focal domains (North, 2019): First, inconsistent overall effects emerge for how worker age predicts job performance, which could be due to a number of reasons, including nonlinearity of age effects (Sturman, 2003) or "older worker" heterogeneity ruling out one-size-fits-all characterizations (Wang, Olson, & Shultz, 2013). In any case, this observation suggests a need to go beyond chronological age in this domain. Second, it remains unclear why older workers face increased levels of discrimination in spite of generally valued performance. Finally, it is also unclear why research has failed to identify consistent benefits from age diversity, in spite of scholarly consensus that diversity presents some degree of benefit (e.g., in the domain of innovation; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; van Dijk, van Engen, & van Knippenberg, 2012; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

Much as subjective age scholars argue, a GATE approach helps rectify the shortcomings of relying too heavily on chronological age alone in predicting job performance. For instance, consider the viable scenario presented in Table 1, in which a manager must replace retiring "Employee A," an incumbent 69-year old who has worked with the

organization for more than 25 years. Does the manager choose "Older Employee B," who also has worked with the organization for more than 25 years (thus matching in tenure and experience), but as a 55-year old, differs in life stage? Or does the manager choose "Older Employee C," a 69-year old who has considerable industry experience but who has joined the present organization this past year only, thereby differing in tenure but not life stage or experience? A purely chronological age approach to this puzzle would have difficulty differentiating performance predictions between each of these "older" candidates. However, a GATE approach helps disentangle key age-related, differentiating factors, toward stronger predictions, based upon existing, "different" age-related literature on generation, age, tenure, and experience.

By the same token, a GATE approach elucidates why all older workers do not face equal levels of discrimination. Suppose a manager must decide between promoting two employees who differ only in experience: "Older Employee D," who has acquired 20+ years of relevant experience from their current position, versus "Older Employee E," who is looking to transition to a new role requiring new skills. As older workers with considerable organizational tenure, both employees may face similar age discrimination hurdles (perhaps driven in part by being labeled as "Boomers" in the eyes of others). However, unlike "Older Employee D," "Older Employee E" may signal an eagerness to learn through their willingness to switch roles; thus, they may elude the stereotype of the experienced yet difficult-to-train employee (Gioaba & Krings, 2017). Whereas a chronological age-focused approach would not discriminate between these two employees, a GATE approach does.

Lastly, researchers may finally discover hidden benefits of what is proverbially known as "age diversity," by examining more nuanced components comprising "GATE diversity." Consider the sample work group compositions presented in Table 2: Group 1 comprises employees of similar generations, life stages, tenure levels, and experience levels (representing virtually no GATE diversity); Group 2 comprises employees varying in all four GATE components (representing maximum GATE diversity); and Group 3 comprises employees who vary in certain GATE components but not all (representing moderate GATE diversity).

The alignment of subgroup category "faultlines"—that is, social categories (e.g., race and gender) that potentially foster ingroup—outgroup distinctions—predicts the formation of strong subgroups and, thus, increased risk for conflict or innovation (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). The more strongly subcategories align, the greater the potential for group divisions. Because of this, different compositions of "age" groups—differing in how strongly their different GATE categories align—are likely to also differ in their potential for diversity-related costs and benefits. Once again, a GATE approach captures nuances that solely chronological approaches to "age" diversity do not toward stronger (and, with hope, more adaptive) conclusions for record-high levels of workplace age diversity.

GATE EMPHASIZES WORK DOMAINS THAT INFLUENCE SUBJECTIVE AGE

A GATE perspective goes beyond merely highlighting the malleability of age more broadly. In line with the recent call for multidimensional approaches to subjective age, GATE is also a frame through which alternate underpinnings of subjective age might emerge. In fact, to some

Table 1. Scenario for Predicting Older Worker Performance as a Function of GATE Predictors (Adapted From North, 2019)

	Employee A	Employee B	Employee C	
Age (life stage)	69	55	69	
Tenure	High (25+ years)	High (25+ years)	Low (<1 year)	
Experience	High (25+ years)	High (25+ years)	High (25+ years)	
Key difference from Employee A	N/A	Age (life stage)	Tenure	

Table 2. Scenarios for Determining Work Group "Age" Diversity as a Function of Integrated GATE Predictors (Adapted From North, 2019)

Group No.	GATE Category	Employee A	Employee B	Employee C	Employee D	Diversity
1	Generation	Boomer	Boomer	Boomer	Boomer	None
	Age	68	68	63	65	
	Tenure	26	24	21	25	
	Experience	High	High	High	High	
2	Generation	Silent	Boomer	Gen-X	Millennial	Maximum
	Age	79	65	45	24	
	Tenure	51	36	21	3	
	Experience	55	39	23	4	
3	Generation	Boomer	Boomer	Gen-X	Millennial	Moderate
	Age	65	66	46	24	
	Tenure	3	21	21	3	
	Experience	19	3	21	3	

extent, the literature already shows that not all people identify readily with the generational or life-stage category implied by their chronological age. Moreover, it does not yet show but could be explored in the future, how workers' subjective age is likely shaped by their organizational tenure and general skill-based experience. Putting these GATE pieces together paints a potentially more complete subjective age picture for research going forward (notably, one might argue that generation and life stage are more malleable GATE elements, driven by perceptual factors that yield sometimes ambiguous distinctions ("Boomers" vs. "Gen- Xers"; "young adults" vs. "middle-agers"). By contrast, tenure and experience, which tend to be measured via actual number of years of organizational and skill-based time accumulated, respectively, appear more objective. Regardless, disentangling between more subjective versus objective GATE elements, as well as ascertaining the intersection thereof, presents yet another fruitful direction for studying subjective age through a GATE lens. In other words, future research might reveal that subjective age comprises both subjective and objective underpinnings.

Generation shapes subjective age

Although the concept of generations—the idea that one's birth cohort meaningfully shapes one's outlook—captures popular imagination, scholars debate their true value. Some argue that generational categories meaningfully shape workplace outcomes, citing evidence that significant differences in workplace behaviors and mentalities exist between "Boomers" versus "Millennials" and the like (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011). This line of thought suggests that generations conceptually are "fuzzy, but useful constructs" (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Campbell, Twenge, &

Campbell, 2017). On the other hand, critics of generational identities suggest that the reliance on cross-sectional research approaches inevitably conflates age, period, and cohort effects (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015) and that when controlling for age and period, cohort effects per se are minimal at best (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2009; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010; Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). This line of thought suggests that generations are not rooted in strong empirical basis but rather reinforce confirmation bias, similar to astrological categories (Rauvola, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2018; Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2017).

What is clearer is that people believe strongly enough in generational categories that many generational divisions, real or imagined, persist (Lester, Standifer, Schultz, & Windsor, 2012). Thus, a significant yet often overlooked distinction emerges in the noted generational debate: on the one hand, there exist (a) effects of generational stereotypes that come from perceivers—that is, consequences of generational sense-making heuristics, used to understand human development in a certain point in time (which stem from conflated age and period effects). Meanwhile, on the other hand, there might exist (b) effects of generational identity on the part of the target—that is, generations matter because people develop different viewpoints and behaviors based on their birth and resulting developmental cohort. To date, far greater evidence supports the former element than the latter, rendering generational categories indeed fuzzy and useful but, perhaps, not rooted in objective "accuracy" in the sense that many believe. Nevertheless, unpacking the interaction of generational self-identification and generational stereotypes from others remains a largely unexplored complexity, the reconciliation of which may resolve altogether the concurrent debate over whether "generations are real."

A number of other future directions also exist. For instance, researchers might explore the idea that being on the older (or younger) side of a proverbial generational bracket might produce feelings of subjective oldness (or youth). For instance, a 70-year-old Boomer might feel subjectively older than a 54-year-old Boomer, given the group-based comparison. Factoring in individual differences in generational identification in the first place also promises future work: Some either do not identify with a generational grouping or are uncertain altogether as to which generational category they belong (Gardiner, Grace, & King, 2013; Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017), whereas generational identification integrally shapes the experience of older adults who tend to identify more strongly with their generation over later life stage as a means of maintaining self-esteem and physical health (Weiss, 2014; Weiss & Lang, 2012a, 2012b). Thus, understanding how subjective generational identification intersects with subjective age (and vice versa) seems all the more central, as generational narratives, and resulting scholarly debates, continue to swirl within an increasingly multigenerational workplace.

Age (life stage) shapes subjective age

Arguably, of the four GATE dimensions, age, or life stage, is the one that contains the greatest amount of existing support from subjective age scholarship. Given that life stage is based upon one's point in the (mostly chronology based) life span (i.e., childhood, adolescence, and so on), it thus underlies the dominant perspective in subjective age. Ascertaining how old one feels, relative to chronological age, is in many ways asking whether someone feels like a true member of his/her life stage (Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Cotsta, & Brown, 2011).

The impact of life-stage identity on subjective age is well documented. As noted, older adult age identification tends to shift away from life stage toward a more generational basis as a means of maintaining well-being (Weiss & Lang, 2012b). On the other side of the spectrum, chronologically younger adults differ from one another in their subjective age, driven by psychosocial maturity (Galambos, Turner, & Tilton-Weaver, 2005), early childhood stressors (Foster, Hagan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), and racial, ethnical, and socioeconomic status (Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007) among other factors.

In spite of the focus on life-stage effects in subjective age research, future work might unpack how subjective life-stage effects manifest in the workplace. For instance, in the field of OB, a growing amount of research attention focuses on subjective age of late-career employees, such as how—even among workers who would be categorized as "older" in chronological terms—subjective age forms meaningful subcategories (i.e., feeling-younger-than-chronological-age "youthfuls" versus subjectively older "veterans" and "matures"; Nagy, Fasbender, & North, 2019). Unpacking how subjective ages manifest across different life stages is prudent for understanding a workforce that is increasingly multigenerational.

Tenure and experience (almost certainly) shape subjective age, but future research must ascertain how so

Although often conflated with one another, organizational tenure refers to the amount of time within an organization only, whereas experience refers to knowledge of tasks that has developed from practice and task fulfillment (North, 2019; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Each of these age-related work domains predicts unique outcomes in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the influence of these elements on subjective age per se, to our knowledge, is scant.

Various findings lend indirect reason to believe that tenure and experience should significantly influence subjective age. Broadly speaking, both tenure and experience predict high feelings of mastery at work (Klein, Fan, & Preacher, 2006; Paloniemi, 2006), and high levels of personal mastery predict a youthful subjective age (Bergland, Nicolaisen, & Thorsen, 2014). Thus, one might expect that tenure and experience should predict a more youthful subjective age. Moreover, with time (which factors heavily into tenure and experience), older adults tend to feel progressively younger than their actual age (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008). These findings suggest that, generally speaking, increased time in the workplace might predict a more youthful subjective age.

At the same time, however, an equally viable prediction might argue that feeling like the "old guard" among younger coworkers increases one's subjective age. Given that group-based relative age—that is, one's perceived age compared to a normative group (Lawrence, 1984)—is strongly correlated with subjective age (Cleveland & Shore, 1992), it is possible that, over time, as younger cohorts enter the immediate work environment with increasing frequency, older workers come to feel subjectively older (i.e., due to the comparison with these younger cohorts). Therefore, these two competing hypotheses—that is, over time, older workers might come to feel subjectively older or younger—emblemize how the precise impact of tenure and experience on subjective age remains a key puzzle to be disentangled.

CONCLUSION

A burgeoning area of research within a rapidly aging workforce, the subdomain of subjective age scholarship, nonetheless, faces critiques of theoretical unidimensionality, as well as doubts about predicting outcomes consistently above and beyond chronological age and other plausible psychological mechanisms. Clearly much work remains to be done in this still-growing but ever-significant area, as a larger number of older workers and workplace generations inherently signals increased heterogeneity in later career stages and age identities, respectively. To this end, GATE offers an additional lens through which subjective age research might achieve further multidimensional nuance. Ultimately, a GATE approach helps unpack precisely why different subjective age profiles might emerge, as well as the multiple dimensions that underlie these differences, all toward a more comprehensive view of subjective age in the workplace.

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