Growing up Faster, Feeling Older: Hardship in Childhood and Adolescence*

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ABSTRACT

We examine whether hardship while growing up shapes subjective age identity, as well as three types of experiences through which it may occur. Drawing on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we find that hardship in several domains during childhood and adolescence is associated with feeling relatively older and self-identifying as an adult in the late teens and twenties. Specifically, young people who as adolescents felt unsafe in their schools or neighborhoods, witnessed or were victims of violence, had fewer economic resources in the household, and lived in certain family structures, reported older subjective ages (by one or both measures). We find no evidence that hardship’s association with subjective age is mediated by work responsibilities in adolescence or by anticipating a very curtailed life span, but entering adult roles earlier mediates or partially mediates many of these relationships.
The age one perceives oneself to be is related to chronological age, but not entirely explained by it; indeed "subjective age" has consequences beyond its association with chronological age for a range of phenomena (e.g., Neugarten and Hagestad 1976; Logan, Ward and Spitze 1992). Spurred by the changing demography of adolescence and young adulthood, social scientists are particularly interested in the subjective side of aging during the early life course, including pseudomaturity in adolescence (e.g., Galambos et al. 1999; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986) and young people's understanding of what it means to grow up and be an adult (e.g., Arnett 2000; Shanahan et al. 2005; Macmillan 2007).

Some of this newer research points to important variation in the pace of growing up. The idea that some children or adolescents grow up more quickly than others is not entirely new, however. The literatures on divorce and economic disadvantage both reveal themes of accelerated young lives. For example, Weiss (1979) suggested in the 1970s that divorce makes children “grow up a little faster,” and consistently, recent research indicates that young people in their late teens and twenties from married biological-parent families feel younger and are less likely to consider themselves adults than young people with other family structures (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Johnson, Berg, and Sirotizki 2007a, b). Similarly, consistent with Elder’s ([1974]1999) characterization of adolescents’ lives in economically pressed families during the Great Depression, recent ethnographic accounts of poor inner-city youth suggest children and teenagers age into adulthood very quickly in these settings (Burton, Obeidallah, and Allison 1996; Kotlowitz 1991). Family disruption and poverty, along with other conditions of deprivation or stress like feeling unsafe in daily life, represent key hardships implicated in subjective aging during the early life course.
We argue that hardships in childhood and adolescence are a contributing factor in the pace of aging during the early life course, and that they do so by affecting three bases of age identities, all of which are grounded in age-normative understandings of the life course: earlier timing of entry into age-graded roles, earlier assumption of responsibilities, and expectations for a shorter life span. We draw on nationally representative data from 18-26 year olds in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine whether hardship experienced in several domains during childhood and adolescence is related to the sense of being older than one’s age peers and, for the youngest in our sample, identifying as an adult. We also examine whether these relationships operate through three types of mediating experiences consistent with our argument. Our research helps build an understanding of how the social contexts in which individuals grow up shape their identity, with implications for behavior during the critical transition to adulthood in which so many key life decisions are first made. Our findings also contribute to important debates in the life-course tradition involving the import of adult role transitions and the nature of age norms in contemporary society.

THE LIFE COURSE AND AGE IDENTITIES

As it is a part of the self-concept, scholars seeking to understand subjective age have primarily looked to identity theory (e.g., Kaufman and Elder 2003; Johnson et al. 2007a). Consistent with the conceptualization of identities in identity theory, which specifically views them as internalized role expectations (Stryker and Burke 2000), the roles one occupies shapes the age one perceives oneself to be (e.g., George 1990; Logan, Ward and Spitze 1992).

In order to understand the pace of subjective aging, and in particular why hardships in childhood and adolescence are linked to growing up faster, however, we must pair this conceptualization of identities as based in roles with insights garnered from the life-course
perspective. First, as Macmillan (2007) notes, the life-course perspective emphasizes that many of the roles in which identities are based are age-graded, and normative timetables for the life course indicate the appropriate timing of major role transitions. Age-related cultural meaning attached to roles provides a reference point in understanding one’s age. Being a grandparent is something “older” people do. In fact, transitioning to roles such as grandparent earlier than other people do is associated with older subjective ages (Kaufman and Elder 2003).

Second, roles “aggregate to define particular life stages and serve in an almost taken for granted manner as the master statuses of one’s identity” (Macmillan 2007:15). Internalized expectations for what it means to be a child, adolescent, or adult are therefore crucial to identity. Among these expectations are age norms that prescribe appropriate behavior for someone in a particular life stage. The contemporary Western view of childhood, in which children are understood to be priceless, innocent, and in need of protection, idealizes happy, carefree childhoods (Best 1990). Cultural constructions of childhood entail expectations of both innocence and freedom from adult responsibilities, roles, or burdens, and these notions take the form of age norms. Childhood, and to a good extent adolescence, are also organized around a norm of dependence (Macmillan 2007). Again, this limits adolescents’ responsibilities and puts parameters on adolescents’ relationships to parents or those on whom they depend.

We suggest that violating age norms for childhood and adolescence challenges the child or adolescent identity and accelerates subjective aging. A young person’s understanding of herself as relatively older (or younger) emerges as she perceives that her experience violates age norms for someone her age. We first discuss three (nonexhaustive) types of age-norm violations through which young people develop older age identities (assuming adult social roles, accumulating the responsibilities and performing the tasks of an adult, and anticipating a highly
curtailed life span), and then discuss how specific forms of hardship accelerate subjective aging through them.

With respect to the adolescent and young adult life course, earlier entry into the “adult” roles of marriage, parenthood, full-time work, and living independently from parents should, accordingly, foster older subjective ages. Compared to others of one's chronological age, those who have transitioned into these roles should feel older and more adult, and recent studies confirm this expectation (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Johnson et al. 2007a, b), despite arguments that role transitions are no longer used as criteria for defining adulthood (Arnett 2000).

When children and adolescents take on a level of responsibility that is understood as more typical for those at older ages, they are likely to see themselves as older than their age peers. And in taking on adult responsibilities, young people begin to feel like adults. Certain responsibilities during childhood and adolescence can be expected to challenge cultural understandings of these life stages as relatively carefree and dependent upon others. These could include taking on significant responsibility in child or elder care or in household management and housework. It could also include taking on adult-like paid work responsibilities, becoming financially independent, or financially supporting others. Though there is little extant research on the subject, Benson and Furstenberg (2007) show levels of both household and financial responsibilities in late adolescence are associated with identifying as an adult at age 21 in a predominantly working poor and working-class sample. Thus we expect that young people who held greater responsibilities as adolescents will report older subjective age identities.

Another basis for age identities may lie in perceptions of where one is located in the life span, with subjective age representing nearness to the end of life rather than time since it began.
Those who look toward the future and see a sharply curtailed life course (i.e., an early death) may feel older than others their age. Most research on this process has focused on midlife and beyond. Yet any significant sense of being near the end of one's life during childhood and adolescence violates dominant normative timetables that assume living into old age and should also accelerate subjective aging. Thus we expect that young people who anticipate a sharply curtailed life span will report older subjective age identities.

HARDSHIP AND SUBJECTIVE AGE

We now return to the question of why hardship during this period in the life course might be linked to growing up faster in terms of subjective age. We argue that hardships foster older age identities because they tend to propel children and adolescents toward these experiences that challenge cultural norms about childhood and adolescence. Here we focus on three forms of hardship.

Family structure in childhood and adolescence may affect subjective aging because it is linked to responsibilities in the family as well as the timing of entry into adult roles. Children and adolescents in single-parent families, for example, do more housework on average than those in married biological-parent families, with those in stepfamilies falling in between (Cooney and Mortimer 2000; Goldscheider and Waite 1991). If children and adolescents in certain family structures perceive that they do housework and have other responsibilities that are more normative for older ages, they may develop older age identities. Family structure is also related to the average timing of certain adult role transitions, including a tendency to leave school, leave home, and form unions earlier among children in a variety of family patterns other than those headed by married biological parents (e.g., Cooney and Mortimer 2000; Musick and Bumpass
Through participating in adult role relationships and being treated as an adult, the young person begins to feel more like an adult.

Economic hardship is also likely to accelerate subjective aging through the earlier assumption of responsibilities and earlier movement into adult roles. For many youth, economic hardship involves what Elder ([1974]1999) calls a “downward extension of adultlike experience,” including increased contributions to the family via household or paid labor. Young people from lower income families also take on heavier work loads outside the home; they are more likely to work at high intensities of 20 hours per week or more and more likely to work in higher earning, more stressful, adult-like jobs than middle-class youth (Mortimer 2003). Poor youth are also more likely to shoulder a level of financial responsibility that is more normative for older ages (Newman 1999), and more consistent with conceptions of adulthood, all of which may foster a sense of being older, or grown up, at younger ages. In addition to their higher level of responsibilities in their natal families, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also experience more accelerated transitions into adult roles (Buchmann 1989; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999).

Violence and lack of safety in one's daily life can accelerate subjective aging by altering perceptions of where one is in the life span and by pushing young people into more adult-like responsibilities. When young people witness or experience violence and fear for their safety in their daily lives, it can raise the possibility (and sometimes the reality) of the end of one's life being nearer (Burton et al. 1996). Confronting death and living in fear challenge the very notion of childhood (Kotlowitz 1991), and thus those who feel unsafe and who experience non-normative levels of violence growing up should age more quickly in subjective terms.
METHODS

This research uses data drawn from Waves I and III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (see *SPQ* website for additional information on Add Health, www.asanet.org/spq), a nationally representative study of American adolescents in grades 7-12 in 1995 (Wave I), with follow ups in 1996 (Wave II) and 2001-2002 (Wave III).

Subjective age at Wave III was captured by distinguishing respondents who felt “older all of the time” (17 percent) with those who did not (83 percent) and, among younger respondents only (18-22), who felt like an adult “all of the time” (37 percent of those aged 18-22) with those who felt like an adult less often (63 percent). Because feeling like an adult could mean feeling older or not, depending on the age one is, we examine feeling adult only for our younger respondents.

Our measures of hardship during childhood and adolescence (and measured at Wave I) tapped three domains: familial, economic, and safety. We examined family structure in adolescence using five categories, distinguishing married biological parent families, single-mother families, single-father families, other two-parent families (largely stepfamilies), and other family structures. We measured economic hardship through a series of dummy variables that calculate household income during adolescence as a percentage of 1994 federal poverty thresholds (0-100 percent, 101-200 percent, 201-300 percent, 301-400 percent, and greater than 400 percent), which account for the number of people in the household. An additional variable indicates respondents who were missing income information. Adolescents were coded as feeling unsafe if they answered “no” to feeling safe in their neighborhood and/or strongly disagreed that they felt safe at school. Exposure to violence was based on reports of whether adolescents witnessed or experienced violence.
The mediators we examined included adult role transitions that had occurred by Wave III (out of school, working full-time, living away from the familial home, married or cohabiting, and had one or more children), heavy responsibilities in household work (almost daily compared to less frequently involved) and paid work (20 or more hours per week or not) responsibilities at Wave I, and anticipating a shorter life: expecting to be living at age 35 (more than a 50-50 chance) and expecting to be killed by 21 (more than a 50-50 chance) at Wave I. We also controlled for chronological age, gender, race/ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino, non-Latino white, non-Latino Black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/American Indian, and “other race”), nativity, parents’ education level, and residential mobility.

FINDINGS

We summarize our main findings from multivariate analyses including controls in Table 1. Consistent with our expectations, each type of hardship was significantly associated with both feeling relatively older and, for those aged 18-22, feeling adult. Our bivariate analyses showed that those living with both biological parents in adolescence compared to several other family types were more likely to report older subjective ages in young adulthood, and several of these differences continued to be apparent in multivariate models. Compared to respondents from the highest-income families, adolescents from poor or near-poor families were more likely to report older subjective ages. Only the effect of being near-poor remained significant in multivariate models including all of the hardships and controls, however, and only for feeling like an adult. Adolescents who felt unsafe or had experienced violence also had higher odds of reporting older subjective ages as expected.

We then examined whether the effects of hardship were mediated by adolescents’ involvement in frequent housework or intensive paid work, anticipating a curtailed life course,
and making adult role transitions. Frequent housework in adolescence predicted feeling adult and feeling older in young adulthood, and intensive paid work predicted feeling older in young adulthood. Neither measure reduced any of the estimated hardship effects, however, so they did not act as mediators. Neither measure of expecting a very curtailed life course predicted subjective age in the multivariate models and consequently did not mediate any of the hardship effects. Experiencing some types of adult role transitions by Wave III, however, was not only strongly associated with having an older subjective age, but also mediated some of the hardship effects. Having a child, not being a student, and being married or cohabiting predicted both feeling older and feeling adult. Living on one’s own only predicted feeling older, while being a full-time worker only predicted feeling adult.

In conjunction with supplemental analyses (see note 6 and Model 3 of supplemental table A2 provided at SPQ website), the analyses show that the significant effects of hardships from each of the three domains were fully mediated by role transitions: “other” family structures for both dependent variables, “other two-parent family” structures for feeling older only, and 100-200 percent of the poverty line and experience of violence for feeling adult only. The associations of having a single mother and experience of violence with feeling older were partially mediated by role transitions, and “other two-parent family” structures were partially mediated by feeling adult. Of the hardships that were statistically significant in the multivariate models, only the effect of feeling unsafe on feeling older was not at least partially mediated by role transitions.

The cumulative effects of hardship across domains are evident in Figure 1, in which we present the predicted probabilities of feeling older and feeling adult all the time for different hypothetical respondents. The first set of predictions is based on a model which includes all
hardship measures and controls. In these predictions, we set the value of continuous measures to their mean and categorical measures to their mode. We manipulated the values of several hardship measures systematically.

At the far left, we present the predicted probability of feeling older for an advantaged hypothetical respondent whose household income was in the highest category, who had two biological parents in the household, and did not feel unsafe or experience violence (with average values for all other variables). This hypothetical respondent had a low predicted probability of feeling older all the time at Wave III, at 0.12 (or a 12 percent likelihood of feeling older). His predicted probability of feeling adult all the time was 0.35, or a 35 percent likelihood of feeling adult. In comparison, 17 percent of all respondents felt older all the time and 37 percent felt adult all the time (weighted means). Figure 1 added different types of hardships systematically, and the hypothetical respondent’s predicted probability of feeling older or adult went up each time. As hardships compounded across the figure, the predicted probability of feeling older tripled and the predicted probability of feeling adult increased by 63 percent.

For the second comparison in Figure 1, we used the models including the mediators as well, and manipulated the number of adult role transitions made by a hypothetical respondent who has experienced hardship across all domains. When he experienced no adult role transitions, his predicted probabilities of feeling older and feeling adult were 0.17 and 0.30, respectively, compared to 0.40 and 0.70 when he made all five transitions.

DISCUSSION

The process of growing up, and aging more broadly, varies in pace across individuals. We combine insights from the life-course perspective, which draws our attention to age norms, the age-grading of roles, and how life stages can serve as master statuses, with existing
conceptualizations of identity to understand individuals’ subjective understanding of age. What we argue and find in this study has implications for understanding age identities as well as identities more broadly, and contributes to several important life-course debates.

The current study generally supports our argument that hardship in childhood and adolescence fosters an older subjective age in early adulthood. Indicators within each of the family, economic, and safety domains predicted older subjective age. These hardships share a challenge to contemporary cultural expectations for childhood or adolescence that lead to the sense that one is older than one’s age peers. We do not measure those age-related expectations directly, but instead identify a set of experiences we hypothesize are age non-normative, each stemming from one or more hardships. We grouped these age non-normative experiences into three (nonexhaustive) types, including transitioning into adult roles earlier than one’s age peers, having had a lot of early responsibilities, and perceiving one’s life expectancy as highly curtailed.

Respondents who had made adult role transitions held older subjective ages than those who had not yet done so. Moreover, all but one of the significant hardships was either fully or partially mediated by role transitions. In terms of taking on responsibilities, frequent housework in adolescence was associated with feeling older and feeling adult and intensive paid work in adolescence was associated with feeling older. Neither, however, mediated the effects of hardship on subjective age. It would be desirable to investigate this idea further with measures we lacked—such as very high levels of involvement in housework and of financial responsibilities, contributing income to the family, and significant involvement in caring for siblings or older family members—that may mediate the effects of hardship we observe. Finally, contrary to our hypotheses, anticipating a sharply curtailed life span during adolescence was not
associated with an older subjective age in multivariate models. Previous consideration of this process has focused on older populations. It may be that nearness to the end of life only shapes subjective age in middle and late adulthood, when physical decline from age and specific health conditions serve as a constant reminder of one’s mortality.

Our findings affirm the importance of roles for understanding identities, but also suggest the value of continued consideration of the bases of identities. Age-graded responsibilities, lack of safety, and exposure to violence had important effects on subjective age. With respect to self-perceived adulthood, our multivariate analyses found that race/ethnicity and parental education levels also shaped age identity in ways not fully accounted for by differential acquisition of adult social roles, nor by exposure to hardship or our theorized mediators. These findings suggest that the social context of growing up also directs one’s understanding of whether one has reached adult status.

Our findings also speak to several ongoing discussions in the life-course tradition. First, findings from this study support a key distinction from this tradition: statistical age normativity and social age norms are not one and the same (Settersten 2003). The distribution of responses to our measure of relative age indicates this most clearly: 59 percent of respondents feel older than others their age most or all of the time. It is thus statistically normative to feel non-normative. Our findings suggest that comparisons are made to cultural understandings of the behaviors one engages in at different ages, rather than to the actual behaviors of others one’s age. Like the children of Lake Wobegon who are all above average, young people in the United States disproportionately feel older than others their age. Previous studies indicate this changes as people get older. Adults in their thirties and beyond tend to report younger subjective ages compared to their chronological age (Montepare and Lachman 1989; Galambos, Turner, and
Tilton-Weaver 2005). Our findings on the predictors of subjective age also support that it is not what adolescents’ age peers are doing (i.e., what is statistically normative), but ideas about what one should be doing at a given age (social norms) that shapes subjective age.

Second, rapid change in the demography of the transition to adulthood has led to an important debate on the relevance of adult social roles in understanding the contemporary nature of adulthood in Western societies (e.g., Arnett 2000; Furstenberg et al. 2003; Shanahan et al. 2005). For example, Arnett has argued that role transitions are no longer used as criteria for defining adulthood and “have very little salience for young people in their own conceptions of the transition to adulthood” (1997:16-17). We find in a nationally representative sample that entry into adult roles is associated with age identity in a way that affirms their importance in defining and signifying adulthood for today’s young people. Our multivariate analyses find that these role transitions also partially mediate the effect of chronological age on feeling adult, showing that social processes, more than just advancing years, influence young adults’ subjective sense of their own age.

Finally, the effect of early hardship on the self-concept has long been of interest to life-course social psychologists, and the findings of this study expand the scope of consideration beyond typical dimensions (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy) to include age identity. The ways that young people interpret their place in the life course and the temporal dimensions of their lives, including the pace of aging, are linked to early hardship.

Much work is still needed on the implications of older subjective ages during adolescence and young adulthood. Our contributions in the current study do not hinge on whether older age identities in this stage of the life course are detrimental or beneficial, but that question deserves additional attention. Because the level of control over these experiences afforded adolescents
varies, the level of support provided adolescents varies, and whether genuine maturity develops alongside older subjective ages or not varies, we will likely need to examine the context of “growing up faster” if we are to understand its implications for the life course.
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**Figure 1.** Predicted Probabilities of Older Subjective Age for Hypothetical Respondents by Levels of Hardship and Adult Role Transitions


Notes: The first 5 predictions are based on Table 2, Model 2.

The “advantaged” hypothetical respondent has no hardships (for household income we selected > 400% of poverty line) and average or modal values for other variables. The last 2 predictions are based on Table 2, Model 3. The hypothetical respondent is the same as immediately previous (other 2-parent family, poor, unsafe and violence exposure, and otherwise “average”). “Other 2-parent family” means living with two parents, but both are not biological parents.