

Is Age Just A Number? Perception on Aging and Health Status in China

Juhua Yang

Professor of Social Demography
#1003 West Chongde
Renmin University of China
59 Zhong-guan-cun Street
Institute of Gerontology
Renmin University of China
Beijing 100872, China

Office phone: (86-10) 6251-6213

Cell: 15811206322

Juhua_Yang@ruc.edu.cn

Juhua.Yang00@gmail.com

Yifeng Liu

Renmin University of China

This work explores the relationship between subjective aging and health outcomes in China. Data came from 7313 respondents aged 60 and older who completed the 2018 China Longitudinal Aging Social Survey. The relationship between subjective view on aging and health is assessed using bivariate analysis and multilevel modelling techniques. Respondents who think they are older than their calendar age, feeling old, looking old or have experienced life events signifying aging are all associated with a higher probability of being disabled, worse psychological health and lower capacity to use smart cellphone than otherwise, all else equal. Findings highlight that a positive subjective view on aging is positively associated with older adults' health; however, not every indicator of perception on aging impacts health the same way, nor affects different indicators of health the same way. These findings suggest the importance to comprehensively understand the concept of aging in a more diversify era.

Background and Objectives

Relevant studies on the relationship between subjective aging and health in China has so far been missing. Given the huge size of elderly population (245 million of those aged 60+ or 167 million of those aged 65+ in 2018), such oversight would prevent a better understanding on how perceptions on aging and health are interrelated when China has tried to promote healthy and productive aging. This work explores the relationship between subjective aging, measured comprehensively, and health outcomes in China.

Method

Data came from 7313 respondents aged 60 and older who completed the 2018 China Longitudinal Aging Social Survey. Subjective view on age is gauged in four ways, and health status is operationalized as three indicators, which reflect physical and psychological health, and social adaptation, respectively.

The relationship between subjective view on aging and health status is assessed using bivariate analysis and multilevel logistic regression or OLS, corresponding to the structure of response variables.

Dependent variables

(1) ADL. It is used to reflect physical health. We operationalized it as a categorical one, where 1 stands for severely disabled in daily life, and 4 for being capable to take care of oneself.

(2) Psychological health. It is used to gauge mental health. The survey asked a group of questions that reflect their psychological wellbeing. We apply factor analysis to these items to extract a common factor and use it as the dependent variable. Its value ranges between 0 to 100 and a higher value suggests a lower psychological wellbeing.

(3) Using smart cellphone. It is used to mirror social adaptation of the elderly in the era of technology. In China, people without being able to use a smart cellphone will be largely excluded or isolated from the society. If the respondents are able to use smart cellphone, they can freely communicate with the outside world and others. The variable is dichotomously coded where 1 indicates yes, and 0 otherwise.

Key predictors

(1) Subjective view on aging. The survey asked respondents the question of “how old do you think you are”. We subtract answers to this question from respondents’ calendar age to generate a new variable. If the value is negative, he or she will be defined as view self old.

(2) Feeling old. The survey asked respondents “what do you think your age is, most of the time”. We also combine this variable and their calendar age to see if respondents feeling old. We subtract calendar age from self-perceived age and then divide by calendar age. A higher value suggests an older psychological age.

(3) Looking old. The survey also asked respondents “how old do you think you look, most of the time”. We adopt the same method as feeling old to create this one. We first subtract calendar year from their looking-age and then divide by calendar year. A higher value suggests an older looking age.

(4) Life events signifying aging. The survey asks respondents the question of “what life events (e.g., being widowed, having grandchildren, retirement from the labor market, being disabled, decline of memory) do you think are associated with being old” and if respondents have experienced such events. If their view and experience are consistent, they will be assigned as a value of 1, meaning they have encountered such events that they feel symbolizing aged, and 0 otherwise.

Preliminary Results

Respondents who think they are older than their calendar age, feeling old, looking old or have experienced life events signifying aging are all associated with a higher probability of being disabled, worse psychological health and lower capacity to use smart cellphone than otherwise, all else equal.

Discussion

Findings highlight that a positive subjective view on aging is positively associated with older adults’ health; however, not every indicator of perception on aging impacts health outcomes the same way, nor affects different indicators of health the same way. These findings suggest the importance to comprehensively understand the concept of aging in a more diversify era.