

# SUBJECTIVE AGE IN THE ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF ALGERIAN STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *Subjective age has been studied in various domains (health, consumption, work), but the works which investigated the subjective age that the students give themselves during their academic development are rare (Pavalache & Rioux, 2014). One-hundred-and-twenty-two Algerian students answered a questionnaire comprising (a) an identification part (b) the subjective age questionnaire by Gana, Alaphilippe and Bailly, (2002) and (c) the questionnaire of subjective age in academic development (Pavalache & Rioux, 2014). The results show that the Algerian students have a tendency to rejuvenate themselves, all the more so if they are of male gender. They show the impact of the societal and cultural factors on subjective age in academic development of university students.*

**Key words:** *Subjective age in academic development, general subjective age, Algerian society.*

## 1. Introduction

Various researches have shown that subjective age, different from the one we attribute to ourselves, is still different from the chronological age (for example, Barak & Stern, 1986; Kaufman & Elder, 2003). It is defined by Kastenbaum, et al., 1972 as a social construct which comprises the age that the individual feels he has deep inside, the age that we attribute to our general appearance, the age which corresponds to our interests and the age which we attribute to our behaviours and means of acting, and it varies depending on the context in which the individual finds himself (Pavalache & Rioux, 2014).

The researches generally admit that the majority of people register a difference between their subjective and their chronological age, in that the people who are less than 25 years old tend to feel older, while those who are over 30-35 tend to feel younger (Öberg & Tornstam, 2001; Galambos, Turner, & Tilton-Weaver, 2005).

This age bias is therefore a phenomenon which affects the individuals, irrespective of their age (Galambos et al., 2005; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). In fact, Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer & Erickson (2005), suggest that our subjective age varies during our lifetime depending on the way in which we experience our life transitions. In other words, the age that we give ourselves allows our personality and our social roles to be congruent (Shanahan et al., 2005).

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Thus, a person feels adult when he assumes the role of an adult, and all the more when he considers himself to be responsible and independent (Cote, 2000; Arnett, 2000). To the same extent, the people who became grandparents sooner than they had wished feel older than those who have a granddaughter or a grandson at an age which seems to conform to the social norms (Kaufman & Elder, 2003).

The 'subjective age' variable was explored in numerous research fields such as consumption (Wilkes, 1992; Guiot, 1999), health (Knoll, et al., 2004; Boehmer, 2007) and work (Mérabet & Rioux, in press; Rioux & Mokoukolo, 2013), and it had many times an explanatory power which was greater than that of chronological age.

However, surprisingly, few researches were conducted on the subjective age that the students give themselves while they are in the process of personal and professional development. We could, nonetheless quote the work of Pavalache and Rioux (2014). Conducted on a sample of 228 students from Transilvania University of Braşov, this research shows that there is a subjective age in the academic development process, which is different from but nevertheless correlated with the chronological age and with the general subjective age.

Our research aims to reproduce the quoted research in Algeria. Just as Romania (Huţu, 2010; Mihaş & Lungescu, 2006), Algeria is a society which is rather collectivist than individualist, but it is based on a Muslim culture, where the predominance of man is a social norm (Pruvost, 2002).

We aim to verify the following two hypotheses:

H1: There exists a subjective age in the academic development context, which is significantly different from the chronological age and from the general subjective age.

H2: The subjective age in the academic development context is different based on the sex variable.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The sample comprises 122 Psychology students from the Constantine 2 University in Algeria. They are aged between 21 and 34 ( $M = 24.22$  years old;  $SD = 2.55$ ) and 68.72% of them are women. 51% study at B.A. level; while 49% study at master's level (20% of them are at M2 level), 85% of them have a professional activity.

### **2.2. Material and Procedure**

The questionnaire comprises four parts:

- an identification part allowing us to collect the socio-demographic variables (age, sex, university discipline, year of study, level of study, employed or unemployed status);

- the subjective age questionnaire (Steitz & McClary, 1988), adapted in French by Gana, Alaphilippe and Bailly (2002). This tool is made of four items which assess the age that people feel to have (*Deep down inside, you feel like somebody who has what age?*), the age that people give to their general appearance (*You think that you generally look like somebody who was what age ?*), the age corresponding to their interests (*Your personal interests are common to someone who has what age ?*). The general subjective

age is calculated for each participant in the research by calculating the age average obtained for the four items. This questionnaire was used by Rioux and Mokoukolo (2013), Merabet and Rioux (2016), and Bouzid and Moffat (2016);

- a scale of attachment to the academic development place (Rioux, 2008), adapted from the workplace attachment scale by Rioux (2006). This uni-dimensional scale comprises seven items and is only present to limit the halo effect;

- the French adaptation of the subjective age in academic development questionnaire by Pavalache and Rioux (2016). This questionnaire comprises four items built based on the items in the subjective age questionnaire by Steintz and McClary, 1988, and adapted to the frame of academic development. For example “*when you are at university, you act like somebody who has what age?*”. The subjective age during academic training is calculated for each participant by calculating the age average obtained for the four items. The questionnaire was filled individually during tutorial sessions. A psychologist was present to answer possible questions.

### 3. Results

Table 1 shows that, in their everyday life, the participants have a subjective age during academic development ( $M = 25.43$ ;  $SD = 3.02$ ) which is higher than their chronological age ( $M = 24.22$ ;  $SD = 2.55$ ) ( $p = .002$ ), but is feebler than their general subjective age ( $M = 26.33$ ;  $SD = 3.65$ ) ( $p = .02$ ).

Table 1

*Chronological age, subjective age in everyday life and subjective age during academic development*

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Chronological age	24.22	2.55
Subjective age in everyday life	26.33	3.65
Subjective age during academic development	25.43	3.02

#### 3.1. The age bias during academic development and in general

The first columns of table 2 highlight the existence of three means of perception of the subjective age in the academic development context. Thus, 19.67% of the students present a bias of self-rejuvenation, while 74.59% present a self-aging bias. Only 5.74% do not present any age bias, which demonstrates a concordance between their subjective age during academic development and their chronological age.

Table 2

*Age bias during academic development and in general*

<b>Age bias</b>	Academic development		General	
	Actual number	%	Actual number	%
Self-rejuvenation	24	19.67%	9	7.38%
No bias	7	5.74%	2	1.64%
Self-aging	91	74.59%	111	90.98%

The third and fourth columns of table 2 show that, in their everyday life, more than 90% of the participants present a self-aging bias and only two participants do not present an age bias. We note a significant difference of the perception of subjective age based on the situation (during academic development and in general) ( $X^2 (df=2) = 11.58, p < .001$ ), progressing towards a in everyday life. The students practice self-aging when at university, but not in their everyday life.

### 3.2. The Connections between the Sex Variable and Subjective Age (during Academic Development vs. General)

Table 3 shows that the percentage of rejuvenation and self-aging bias is similar for the men and women, when the students are not at university. In contrast, while at university, although the self-aging bias stays huge, they have rather a tendency towards rejuvenation, which is higher in the case of men ( $X^2 (df = 2) = 6.54, p = .04$ ).

*The age bias during academic development vs. General bias based on the sex* Table 3

Age bias	Academic development				General			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Actual number	%	Actual number	%	Actual number	%	Actual number	%
Self-rejuvenation	9	36%	15	16%	1	4%	6	6%
No bias	0	0%	7	7%	0	0%	2	2%
Self-aging bias	16	64%	75	77%	24	96%	89	92%

## 4. Discussion

Our research points that the subjective age during training is different from subjective age in everyday life. It confirms the works of Shanahan et al. (2005), which indicate that subjective age varies depending on the social context and on the people we surround ourselves with, but it also confirms the research of Pavalache and Rioux (2014), where the same result is found on a sample of Romanian students.

Our research aimed to test two hypotheses. The first one (*H1: There exists a subjective age in the academic development context, which is significantly different from the chronological age and from the general subjective age.*) is confirmed. The students present a self-aging bias when at university, but less so in their everyday life ( $X^2 (df=2) = 11.58, p < .001$ ). The existence of this self-aging bias goes in line with the works of Montepare and Lachman (1989) and Rubin and Berntsen (2006), who show that the young have a tendency to consider themselves older, but it counters the results obtained by Pavalache and Rioux (2014). A possible explanation would be that, as opposed to the Romanian students, most of our students have a professional activity (85%) and it could be said that their studies represent a stage towards their future career. In other words, our students see themselves as future employees, while their Romanian counterparts perceive themselves primarily as students.

The second hypothesis (*H2: The subjective age in the academic development context is different based on the sex variable*) is equally confirmed. To be more specific, the men use rejuvenation more than the women ( $X^2 (df=2) = 6.54, p = .04$ ). The semi-structured interviews which we have conducted in order to better understand this result, show that,

in the academic environment, the men may allow themselves to feel younger in order to relive or extend their adolescence, due to the fact that they take manly responsibilities in their everyday lives. As far as the women are concerned, they have to display a behaviour which is close to their age, in order to maintain their image and reputation of calm and non-frivolous girls.

## 5. Conclusion

Our research brings to attention the importance of societal and cultural factors on the subjective age during the academic development of university students. Even though complementary cross-cultural studies are necessary, this result goes in line with the works of Barak, Guiot, Gould, Lee and Zhang (2006), which show the existence of a subjective age which differs according to the country (China, South-Korea, France, United States of America), in the fashion sector. It also goes in line with the works of Scrima and Rioux (2016), conducted on samples of employees from Algeria, Cameroon and Tunisia.

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