Describing topic and aim

Chronological age forms the basis for most old age policy recommendations and lifestyle expectations – often influenced by dominant discourses on active and healthy ageing. But chronological age has long been rendered insufficient in reflecting individuals' positions in the ageing process (MacDonald et al. 2011; Kornadt et al. 2018) and *subjective age* (SA) – subjective perceptions of one's age – is increasingly acknowledged as a more valid explanation for individuals' choices and ageing experiences (Uotinen 2005). SA is also a common vernacular way of expressing one's individual feelings of age ("Age is just a number!", "You're only as old as you feel!"). Furthermore, research has shown that SA also discloses inequalities; it is associated with health and functionality, work life experiences, retirement decisions, marginalisation and well-being, and differently related to gender and social groups. However, while previous research has acknowledged relations between SA and chronological age, health, functionality gender, it has largely failed to consider how SA co-evolves with space and spatiality (Schwanen et al. 2012); the knowledge about SA is often implicitly biased towards urban experiences and does not necessarily apply to ageing in more rural and sparsely populated areas.

In this newly started project, we study SA as an entrance to new knowledge about the relevance of space and place in people's perceptions of SA. The project is based on the idea that spatial contexts and place identifications affect how age is understood, experienced and lived. The aim is to explore constructions of subjective age as they unfold in relation to geographic space in European, Swedish and rural contexts. Specific foci are directed at how subjective age relates to outcomes and identity.

Theoretical focus

Studies on subjective age have primarily explored consequential outcomes, arguing that SA is an important construct because of its clear relevance to significant outcomes in later life (e.g. Kwak et al. 2018). Results show that subjective age predicts engagement in most behaviours, e.g., personal, social, grooming, body-focused and trend activities (Montepare 2019).

Research has also focused on describing changes in SA over the life span, showing that people generally feel younger than their chronological age, at least from their younger adulthood and onwards, and that SA decreases with age (e.g. Öberg & Tornstam 2001; Rubin & Berntsen 2006; Stephan et al. 2011; Bergland et al. 2014). Feeling younger than one's chronological age has been connected to positive personality development (Stephan et al. 2015), more positive expectations of and better cognitive functioning in older age (Stephan et al. 2014), better psychological (Westerhof & Barrett 2005) and physiological health, and reduced mortality (Westerhof et al. 2014; Uotinen 2005). There is however still a stated lack of knowledge about the factors that contribute to SA (e.g. Kotter-Grühn et al. 2015; Kornadt et al. 2018) and a need to engage in SA as a multidimensional construct (e.g. Diehl et al. 2014; Hess et al. 2017). We contribute to this strand of SA research by focusing on SA as a multidimensional construct, and add important insights into how consequential outcomes of SA are related to the factor of geographic space.

During the last decades, research has begun to acknowledge the significance of place and space in constructions of age, highlighting the turn within human geography towards the way age relations are "socially constructed, embodied, and mutually constitutive of space" (Pain et al. 2000:377). It has not only been recognised that on the grounds of their age, people have different access to and experiences of places, but that people take an active part in creating and resisting particular age identities through their uses of space and place (Hopkins & Pain 2007:288). Changes in rural areas brought about by processes such as demographic ageing, outmigration and cutbacks in service are generally highlighted as important reasons to research the spatial specificities of rural ageing (Phillipson & Sharf 2005). There are also suggestions that subjective age unfolds differently on different national levels (Uotinen 2005).

With the exception of studies from Finland (e.g. Uotinen et al. 2006), Denmark (e.g. Mølholt 2019) and Norway (e.g. Bergland et al. 2014), there is still also a significant lack of knowledge on SA beyond the North-American context (Barak 2009). Early studies on SA in Sweden comprise Öberg and Tornstam's (2001, 2003) studies on the impact of fitness ideals on older people's SA, and Larsson (2021) has written about relations between SA and functionality, but there is a need for more recent studies. The demographic specificities of the spatial contexts of Swedish and Norrlandic rural areas – experiences of ageing populations, withdrawals of welfare services and negatively charged spatial stereotypisations – make them specifically important areas for in-depth study.

Data & method

The project design aims at a multifaceted understanding and measurement of the spatial dimensions of subjective age by collecting information in both narrative and quantitative forms. First, we conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with people aged 50+ and living in the hinterlands of Northern Sweden. Interviews are based on thematic guides, including thoughts and estimations of SA – relating to the facets of SA: feel, ideal, look, and do age – as well as questions about future self-views and spatial context. The thematic questions aim to capture what the interviewees highlight as important for their subjective age. In-depth reflections are encouraged through follow-up questions about what it is about health status, looks, physical ability, everyday activities or work situation that respondents find crucial for their perceived SA. Respondents' narratives are analysed qualitatively using a discourse theoretical approach (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Glynos & Howarth 2007) to how SA is constructed, and what discourses that are evoked in that process. Articulations between respondents' stated SA, the feelings this gives rise to, and the explanations they give are focused in order to gain a deeper understanding of SA from the point of view of the individual. Specific interest is directed at the meanings associated with geographic space, and how the respondents' place of residence is (or is not) made significant for their stated SA.

Second, a project-tailored survey is carried out in order to explore the geographies of subjective ageing in Sweden and to estimate the contribution different spatial contexts make to perceptions of age. A key part entails questions designed to elicit individuals' personal assessment of their age, awareness of age-related change and attitudes towards the ageing

process. To capture the complexity and multidimensionality of SA, we include the four facets: feel, ideal, look and do age. The survey is based on postal questionnaires directed to a sample of 4,000 women and men aged 50+ living in different rural and urban areas in Sweden. First, and to get an overview, SA is calculated by subtracting participants' chronological age from felt age, including calculating proportional discrepancy scores. Descriptive statistic and regression models such as multilevel regression analyses will then be applied to unfold patterns of perceived SA in different spatial contexts in Sweden.

Finally, we extract data on subjective age, health and well-being from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) Corona Survey 2 (Börsch-Supan 2022). The SHARE-data enables us to go beyond the Swedish example and examine cross-national variations of SA perceptions across regions (urban/rural) and countries with different welfare systems in Europe. The SHARE Corona Survey 2 covers data from 27 European countries and about 49,000 individuals over age 50. We will use descriptive statistics and regression models such as multilevel regression analyses to examine the association between SA, health and well-being across regions and countries in Europe.

Expected findings

Our previous studies confirm the importance of cultural notions of age and space for how people structure and understand everyday contexts and situations. Taken together, these studies suggest that intersecting cultural notions of age and space are significant for people's constructions of meaning, and that people's experiences tend to affect how old they feel.

In the interviews conducted thus far, we observe a tendency where experiences of spatial inequities and injustices—resulting from outmigration and cutbacks in healthcare—become intertwined with perceptions and experiences of ageism. For instance, difficulties in securing a doctor's appointment due to healthcare reductions often evoke feelings of being old and neglected, thereby contributing to increased subjective age (SA). There is also a tendency that subjective age is situational, causing variation during people's days, showcasing that the effect of spatial inequalities and injustices on SA becomes more significant for people who are specifically dependent on welfare services – suggesting that SA in not only related to health but also to the organisation of health services.

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