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# Awareness of aging: Theoretical considerations on an emerging concept



Manfred Diehl<sup>a,\*</sup>, Hans-Werner Wahl<sup>b</sup>, Anne E. Barrett<sup>c</sup>, Allyson F. Brothers<sup>a</sup>,  
Martina Miche<sup>b</sup>, Joann M. Montepare<sup>d</sup>, Gerben J. Westerhof<sup>e</sup>,  
Susanne Wurm<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychological Aging Research, Heidelberg University, Germany

<sup>c</sup> Department of Sociology, Florida State University, USA

<sup>d</sup> RoseMary B. Fuss Center for Research on Aging and Intergenerational Studies, Lasell College, USA

<sup>e</sup> Department of Psychology, Health, and Technology, University of Twente, The Netherlands

<sup>f</sup> Institute for Psychogerontology, Friedrich-Alexander-University, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Humans are able to reflect on and interpret their own aging. Thus, as individuals grow older, calendar age may become increasingly a subjective variable. This theoretical paper proposes the concept of Awareness of Aging (AoA) as a superordinate construct that can serve an integrative function in developmental research on subjective aging. It is argued that the AoA construct can incorporate the theoretical components of other existing concepts by acknowledging that judgments of subjective aging tend to be made on an awareness continuum ranging from pre-conscious/implicit to conscious/explicit. We also argue that processes of AoA are inherently self-related processes and that AoA is a particular aspect of self-awareness that results in specific aging-related self-knowledge. Over time, aging individuals incorporate this self-knowledge into their self-concept and personal identity. We provide theoretical evidence showing that although all major theories of adult development and aging draw on phenomena related to AoA, the explicit incorporation of aging-related awareness processes has been missing. We also provide an overarching framework to illustrate in a heuristic way how AoA in combination and interaction with other influences affects developmental outcomes. Finally, we argue that attention to AoA-related processes has a number of societal and applied implications and thereby addresses issues of applied developmental psychology.

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 9704917975.

E-mail address: [manfred.diehl@colostate.edu](mailto:manfred.diehl@colostate.edu) (M. Diehl).

## Introduction

Subjective constructions of age and aging have been the topic of developmental psychology, psychological aging research, and related areas, such as the social sciences of aging, for over four decades (e.g., Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Artt, 1972; Montepare, 2009; Settersten, 1999). The primary observation has been that individuals reflect on their own development and interpret their aging as they move across the life span. Although calendar age is a reasonable proxy for developmental status early in life, in adolescence individuals start to perceive their calendar age more flexibly in psychological terms and, indeed, frequently feel significantly older than their calendar age (Galambos, Turner, & Tilton-Weaver, 2005; Montepare, 2009). Starting in early and middle adulthood, however, the subjective experience of age takes a different direction and individuals report feeling younger than their calendar age. Indeed, Rubin and Berntsen (2006) have argued that from midlife on, individuals feel about 20% younger than their actual age (see also Montepare, 2009; Westerhof, Barrett, & Steverink, 2003).

Aside from the traditional approach of assessing subjective age by asking a person the question “How old do you feel?” a host of related concepts has been advanced. For example, in recent years, the concept of *self-perceptions of aging* has increasingly stimulated empirical research. To illustrate the importance of self-perceptions of aging, Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl (2002) provided evidence for the longitudinal association between positive perceptions of aging and extended longevity. Other work has shown substantial positive associations with adults’ health (Wurm, Tesch-Römer, & Tomasik, 2007) and preventive health behaviors (Levy & Myers, 2004; Wurm, Tomasik, & Tesch-Römer, 2010). Conversely, a large body of work documents the robust association between negative age stereotypes and older adults’ maladaptive behavior, such as lower cognitive functioning and poorer functional health—behaviors that are very much associated with the vulnerabilities of old age (Hummert, 2011; Levy, 1996, 2003). In this paper, we build on this extensive background by using the term *Awareness of Aging (AoA)* as a superordinate construct encompassing several related concepts, such as subjective age, age identity, self-perceptions of aging, attitude toward own aging, and awareness of age-related change. Definitions of the key concepts and examples of uni- and multidimensional measures used to assess these concepts are presented in Table 1.

The basic observations from which this paper originates are twofold. First, all of these concepts show robust associations with relevant developmental outcomes across the adult life span and especially for the age range from midlife (i.e., age 40) into old age. For example, feeling younger, reporting more positive perceptions of and attitudes toward one’s own aging, and holding more positive beliefs about aging in general are robust predictors of cognitive and emotional well-being, better functional health, preventive health behavior, disability outcomes, and even mortality (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, & Smith, 2008; Levy, Slade, Murphy, & Gill, 2012; Levy et al., 2002; Levy, Slade, May, & Caracciolo, 2006; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005; Wurm et al., 2007).

Second, the theoretical distinctness of the concepts underlying this vast body of evidence is not well understood. Indeed, for most of these concepts we have little more than short definitions and an intuitive understanding of the phenomena they are supposed to capture. Although some recent attempts have been made (Diehl & Wahl, 2010; Levy, 2009), a well-defined, coherent, and integrative conceptual framework, however, is mostly missing. This state of affairs is rather unfortunate because lack of conceptual clarity not only hinders future research but also prevents a constructive discussion on AoA at the societal level. Such a discussion, however, is crucial, given the multifaceted challenges accompanying the “graying” of our society.

To be specific, we can think of at least four reasons why an examination of the construct of AoA is a worthwhile and needed endeavor in developmental psychology. First, there is sufficient evidence suggesting that AoA is an integral psychological process or condition of the aging self. As active producers of their development (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002), individuals construct, hold, and reconstruct awareness and knowledge of their own aging process. We propose that this awareness is a form of *self-awareness* and the resulting knowledge can be conceived as a form of *self-knowledge*, similar to other forms of self-knowledge,

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