Is it true that you are only as old as you feel? Is age really just a number? Is 40 the new 30?

In this episode, Under the Cortex hosts Markus Wettstein of Humboldt University of Berlin. Wettstein’s research explores the perception of subjective age in adulthood and gender, as well as generational differences in feeling young.

The conversation with APS’s Özge G. Fischer-Baum evolves into implications for health benefits, general well-being, and possible cross-cultural differences. Wettstein also published on this topic in APS’s flagship journal, Psychological Science. The article is titled Younger Than Ever? Subjective Age is Becoming Younger and Remains More Stable in Middle-Age and Older Adults Today.

Unedited Transcript

[00:00:12.210] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

Is it true that you are only as old as you feel? Are there generational differences in feeling subjective age? This is under the cortex. I am Özge Gürcan? Fischer-Baum with the Association for Psychological
Science. To answer these questions, I have with me Dr. Markus Wettstein from Humboldt University of Berlin. He is the author of an article published in APS’s journal Psychological Science. Markus, thank you for joining me today. Welcome to under the cortex.

[00:00:45.710] – Markus Wettstein

Thank you, and thank you for inviting me.

[00:00:48.300] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

Yeah, we are excited to have you. And I’m going to dive in right into my questions. Your research is on measuring subjective age. How did you first get interested in this topic?

[00:01:00.950] – Markus Wettstein

Well, I think it’s a very interesting concept just to ask people how old they feel and most individuals can give you an answer right away. So it seems to be a quite intuitive concept. And the interesting thing about subjective age is that feeling younger seems to come with various benefits. So individuals who feel younger are healthier, they live longer, they have a lower dementia risk and so on. So this is why I think it’s worthwhile investigating research in this subjective age concept.

[00:01:31.390] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

So there are definitely individual differences, right?

[00:01:34.380] – Markus Wettstein

Exactly.

[00:01:35.010] – Markus Wettstein

There are both individuals feeling younger than they are and that’s the majority, at least in middle aged and older adults. So most people feel actually younger than they are, but there are also some who feel older. And we do not only see individual difference, we also see differences from day to day. In diary studies, for example. So on days when we wake up with headache, with pain, or when there are stressors, very stressful days, we typically feel older than on days with less stressors and when we have less health complaints.

[00:02:05.370] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

That’s interesting. For your particular study that you published in Psychological Science, you tested people who are 40 and older. Why did you make this choice?

[00:02:17.770] – Markus Wettstein

Well, we use data from the German Aging survey. So this was kind of a secondary data analysis. And
the German Aging survey started already in the 1990s and it started with individuals aged 40 years and older. So somehow we were forced to focus on this age group. But it also makes sense. So this is a survey on the second half of life, which typically starts around age 40. But also with regard to subjective age, it might be reasonable to focus on this middle aged and older adults because among adolescents, among children, we usually find the opposite trend. They feel older because they want to be more mature. So there are different dynamics going on with regard to subjective age in early life and in later life.

[00:03:03.210] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

Yeah, I’m glad you say that. There is always that little kid who thinks that they are a big girl or a big boy now. Right. And it is meaningful to me, your choice of age, because it is around the time that some people have midlife crisis and it is interesting to see what is going on around those times.

[00:03:23.490] – Markus Wettstein

Yeah, the age 40 might be, or maybe even a little earlier when we start to get aware of our aging more that we think more about aging and so on. So this might be a good starting point to also investigate subjective age and how it changes.

[00:03:40.630] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

And there was another piece of interesting finding coming from your study. Your results show that later born cohorts signal some generational differences. Why do you think generations differ in terms of subjective age?

[00:03:56.890] – Markus Wettstein

Yeah, there might be various factors contributing to such cohort difference or generation difference. For example, life expectancy has increased within the past 150 years. So what has been old, let’s say 20 years ago or 40 years ago might not be longer considered as old nowadays because our entire lifespan has expanded and has increased. So this might also have implications for how old we feel. And we also know regarding generational differences in other factors, for example health. We see some evidence that health has improved across historical time due to medical progress. Maybe not all kind of health factors, but in Germany one study found that cardiovascular health for example, has improved. Might not be the case with regard to other health risk factors such as obesity or pain and so on. But at least some health aspects might have improved. And if we are healthier nowadays than where our peers ten or 20 years ago, we might also feel younger. So this might be another factor contributing to these generation differences. And there’s yet another line of research which relatively consistently have shown that older adults nowadays have for example, better well being than those who were old ten or 20 years ago.

[00:05:17.720] – Markus Wettstein

And this could also drive changes toward younger subjective ages because if I feel better, I might also feel younger. So to say.
So you are saying what I’m hearing is physical health also affects how we feel about our subjective age?

Yes so it’s actually a mutual relationship so subjective age predicts how healthy we will be later on but at the same time subjective age is to some extent influenced by whether we are affected by pain for example by what kind of health complaints we have and so.

On and are there any gender differences in your research?

Yes. What we found is that women feel younger than men. So that was a gender difference. And interestingly, this is a gender gap, a gender difference that has even increased across the generations or the cohorts that we studied. So this difference is larger nowadays than it was before.

Also, women now in our age feel younger than women who lived like 20 years ago.

Yes, it’s the same for men, but the difference so the subjective rejuvenation over time, so to say, is larger for the women than for the men.

Well, great for women, I guess.

There are different kind of interpretations. So it could be women still live longer than men. So it could simply be that, okay, if they live longer, then an 80 year old woman might feel younger than an 80 year old man because she somehow feels that she has more life ahead of her compared to the men. But another interpretation would be that maybe the stereotypes we have about older women are still more negative than the one we have about older men. So there’s this double standard of aging, and usually older women are less favorably evaluated than older men. So maybe women also feel to some extent more forced to feel younger to psychologically distance themselves from the group of older adults. This could also be the case.
Yeah, many possible reasons. So do you think there are cultural differences in this? And also a follow up question to that. Do you think your results are applicable to all cultures?

[00:07:36.850] – Markus Wettstein

I would say probably not. So there are studies on how old people feel in different cultures, and this trend that people feel younger than they are, at least middle aged and older adults. This is maybe uniform across the so called weird cultures, the Western educated, industrialized rich and democratic cultures. But there is, for example, a recent study that was in Burkina Faso, a quite poor country in Africa, where life expectancy is as high as 65 or even lower. And there they found that people feel only very slightly younger than they are on average. So this is different to the Western culture. And I guess in these cultures with existential problems, they might not have this antiaging industry, which we have, for example, or these kind of age stereotypes. So I’m not sure if we would see in these cultures as well that people feel increasingly younger across historical time. Maybe not.

[00:08:36.470] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

So the economic conditions, the cultural conditions and other things affect us?

[00:08:41.940] – Markus Wettstein

Yes.

[00:08:42.380] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

So it is not one size fits all feeling that new generations have about their age.

[00:08:49.720] – Markus Wettstein

Yeah, I would expect that there are cultural differences. Indeed.

[00:08:54.970] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

So is there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners?

[00:09:00.430] – Markus Wettstein

Yeah, maybe what we investigated is subjective age. And this is of course only one aspect of how we think about aging our older adults. So another important aspect is, I would say, for example, age stereotypes. So how do we think about older adults? And that’s quite important to be aware of how we think about older adults, because sooner or later we will be older adults ourselves. So in that case, we become target of our own age stereotypes. So if our perceptions are very negative in this regard, sooner or later they will affect ourselves. And there are findings showing that there’s something going on, like a self fulfilling prophecy. So if we expect that with aging everything gets worse and we get sick and so on, there’s a high likelihood that this will really happen. So this is why it’s important to always question our own age stereotypes. How justified are they? Are they maybe too negative? I would say yes, they
are. And this could have negative consequences for our own aging. So, yeah, I would just recommend everybody to be aware of his or her own.

[00:10:06.930] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

Uh huh. All right. Yeah. Markus, thank you very much. So this was a lovely conversation.

[00:10:12.890] – Markus Wettstein

Thank you.

[00:10:14.450] – APS Özge G. Fischer-Baum

This is, Özge Gürcanlı Fischer-Baum with APS and I have been speaking to Dr. Markus Wettstein from Humboldt University of Berlin. If you want to know more about this research, visit psychologicalscience.org.