Several questions about the degree to which cultural schedules exist for the timing of life transitions, as well as the nature of these schedules, remain unexplored. In this article, we examine age timetables for central family transitions. Do individuals perceive age deadlines for these transitions, and by what ages do they think that men or women should have experienced them? How much consensus exists about these deadlines? Why are they considered important, and what consequences are perceived for men or women who miss them? A key theoretical question with which we are concerned is whether contemporary thinking about these deadlines can be considered "normative." A random sample of 319 adults from the Chicago metropolitan area were interviewed about eleven separate life-course transitions, six of which were from the family sphere. By and large, the majority of respondents perceived deadlines for most of the family transitions discussed. While the deadlines cited were quite variable in range, they were also concentrated within a narrow band of ages. The dimensions underlying individuals' thinking about deadlines were centered primarily on the development of self and personality, or were linked to concerns about the sequencing of roles and experiences over lifetime. However, late timing was generally thought to be acceptable, accompanied by little social tension, and without consequences for the individual's life or the lives of other persons to whom one is intimately connected. While a rough, "normal biography" of family life existed in the minds of our respondents, the deadlines attached to that biography were flexible guidelines for the course of family life, not rigid, normative principles. These findings are discussed in light of recent debates about life-course theory and research.

Key Words: Age norms, Age structuring, Age deadlines, Life transitions, Life course, Culture

What's the Latest?
Cultural Age Deadlines for Family Transitions

Richard A. Settersten, Jr., PhD, and Gunhild O. Hægestad, PhD

In every society, individuals and social institutions have distinctive ways of approaching and using chronological age. At a formal level, age may serve as a core dimension of social structure. For example, age rules and preferences are often embedded within the organization of many of our social institutions (Buchmann, 1989; Chudacoff, 1989; Kohli, 1986a, 1986b; Mayer & Müller, 1986; Mayer & Schoepflin, 1989; Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994; Riley & Riley, 1994). Similarly, many of our laws and policies are based on assumptions about chronological age, and many explicitly structure rights and responsibilities on that basis (Cain, 1976; Eglit, 1985; Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1989; Hogan, 1989; Neugarten, 1982).

At an informal level, age is intimately tied to notions about appropriate behavior, notions about the proper timing and progression of events and roles, or the ways in which individuals in a culture go about dividing life into meaningful segments. At this informal level, individuals in a given society may share what Neugarten and Hägestad (1976) have called a "mental map of the life cycle" — common ways of thinking about the changes that occur from birth to death, and how these changes are significant. These cultural constructions of age and the life course give members of a society a sense of what lies ahead in their lives, what Neugarten (1969) has labeled the "normal predictable life cycle." In short, the social structuring of life time may organize our own lives, as well as the lives of others (Fry, 1986, 1988, 1990; Fry & Keith, 1982; Hægestad & Neugarten, 1985; Keith & Associates, 1994; Keith & Kertzner, 1984; Nydegger, 1986a, 1986b; Riley, 1886, 1987; Riley, Foner, Moore, Hess, & Roth, 1968; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972; Neugarten & Datan, 1973; Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986).

Despite a paucity of empirical research (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Neugarten & Petersen, 1957; Gee, 1990; Passuth & Maines, 1981; Plath & Ikeda, 1975), assumptions about the power of cultural age expectations underlie a great deal of research on the life course, and the age-normative framework has gained widespread acceptance. In this body of work, age timetables are thought to be normatively prescribed, supported by consensus, and enforced through various mechanisms of social control. For example, in a seminal study from the mid-1960s, Neugarten and her colleagues at the University of Chicago suggested that "a network of age expecta-
There exists what might be called a prescriptive timetable for major life events. Age norms and expectations operate as prods and brakes on behavior. Men and women are aware not only of the social clocks that operate in their lives, but they are aware of their own timing” (Neugarten et al., 1965, p. 22-23).

Recently, however, investigators have begun to point to the lack of empirical evidence on whether or how these schedules operate in contemporary American society (Elder, 1992; Hägestad, 1990; Hogan, 1985; Marini, 1984; Nydegger, 1986a, 1986b). In fact, Elder (1978, p. 28) has noted that the deficiency of research in this area is ironic, given the “longstanding prominence of cultural norms in social theory,” and that age norms “represent a favored explanation of patterned choice in the life course among sociologists and demographers.” That is, when researchers find regularity in transition patterns at a population level, they often believe that the regularity reflects, and is driven by, informal social norms.

Drawing on sociological theory, we suggest that cultural (age) norms are marked by three key features: First, they are prescriptions and proscriptions for behavior; second, they are supported by widespread consensus; and third, they are enforced through various mechanisms of social control (Hägestad, 1990; Hägestad & Settersten, 1994; Settersten, 1992).

As Hogan (1985) and others (Hägestad, 1990; Marini, 1984; Riley, 1986; Settersten, 1992; Sherrod & Brim, 1986) have noted, much remains to be learned about (a) cultural age norms (as opposed to age preferences and ideals, or to regularity in transition patterns at a demographic level, which need not be normative; for further discussion of these distinctions, see Marini, 1984, and Hägestad, 1990); (b) perceived or actual sanctions that encourage conformity to cultural age norms; or (c) why individuals think conformity to such norms is desirable. There has been also little discussion of timing norms for family transitions in men’s lives, or of work and educational transitions in women’s lives. In addition, little is known about how timing norms might vary across important social divisions (Kertzer, 1989).

The research reported here represents a first step toward filling those gaps, at least within the domain of family research. (We take up the sphere of work and education in another paper, Settersten & Hägestad, under review). We hope to challenge the assumption that powerful, normative schedules exist for the timing of family transitions.

Research Questions

In this article, we focus on “cultural age deadlines” for family transitions — the age by which people think certain family transitions ought to occur in men’s and women’s lives. Specifically, we ask: Do individuals perceive age deadlines for various family transitions, and by what ages do they think that men or women should have experienced them? How much consensus exists about these deadlines? Why are they considered important, and what consequences are perceived for men or women who miss them?

We are also particularly interested in examining whether timetables for family-related transitions are different for men and women, whether men and women approach these schedules on different terms, and whether these timetables vary along key social dimensions (e.g., by race, cohort, educational level, or occupational status).

Method

Sample

For our sample, we randomly selected 319 adults, 18 years of age or older, in the Chicago metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted by telephone from the Northwestern University Survey Laboratory during the summer of 1989. The sample was split in half by sex (51% men, 49% women) and by residential location (56% suburban, 44% city). The majority of the respondents were white (74%), married (49%), parents (58%), employed full-time in nonprofessional occupations (62%), and had some educational training beyond high school (63%). The sample was also age-diverse (28% between the ages of 18 and 29, 20% between 30 and 39, 19% between 40 and 49, 17% between 50 and 64, and 16% age 65 or older) and income-diverse (32% with household incomes of $20,000 or less, 31% between $20,001 and $40,000, 20% between $40,001 and $60,000, and 17% with household incomes over $60,000). On the above characteristics, the sample closely approximated the population of the Chicago metropolitan area based on the 1990 Census, and was also quite similar in composition to the larger U.S. population.

Procedure

The sampling procedure involved three separate levels of random selection and assignment. First, a random sample of Chicago-area households was generated. Within each household, an individual was then randomly selected. Subsequently, that respondent was randomly assigned to one of two interview conditions: One version of the questionnaire addressed the lives of women, the other addressed the lives of men. The response rate for the survey was 72%, a rate slightly higher than response rates achieved in most other local- and national-level random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys (Lavrakas, 1987).

These procedures yielded a four-cell design: Men discussing women’s lives (n = 80; “Response Cell I”); Men discussing men’s lives (n = 81; “Response Cell II”); Women discussing women’s lives (n = 78; “Response Cell III”); Women discussing men’s lives (n = 80, “Response Cell IV”). Figure 1 diagrams the original study design. After extensive testing early in the project, it became apparent that the kind of life being discussed (that is, a man’s life or a woman’s life) was more important than who did the discussing (that is, a man or a woman). As a result, we collapsed Response Cells I and III into a single “About Wom-
Original Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men About Women’s Lives</th>
<th>Men About Men’s Lives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Response Cell 1” N = 80</td>
<td>“Response Cell 2” N = 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women About Women’s Lives</td>
<td>Women About Men’s Lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Response Cell 3” N = 78</td>
<td>“Response Cell 4” N = 80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Random sample of households
- Respondent within household randomly selected
- Respondent randomly assigned to questionnaire about men or women

Collapsed Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About Women’s Lives</th>
<th>About Men’s Lives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 158</td>
<td>N = 161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the analyses presented here, the original four response cells are collapsed into two cells.

Figure 1. Study design.

In the analyses presented here, the original four response cells are collapsed into two cells.

Interpersonal Sanctions. — Interpersonal Sanctions was the category directly linked to the sociological concepts of norm and social control. Social sanctions serve to keep people “on track,” or to bring recalcitrant members “back into line”—what Berger (1963, p. 92) once described as the power to “isolate us among our fellow men, subject us to ridicule, deprive us of our sustenance and our liberty, and, in the last result, to deprive us of life itself,” and what Strauss (1959, p. 124) once described as the condition of being “licensed, obligated, sanctioned, and tabooed.”

In the context of our interviews, it was assumed that if a normative age deadline exists for one of our family transitions, then respondents should indicate that there is social “pressure” to meet the deadline and negative social sanctions for missing it. Interpersonal sanctions can be actively directed at the individual him- or herself (e.g., being harassed, teased, excluded, laughed at, or joked about), or they can be more indirect in form (e.g., centered on the individual’s reputation—being gossiped about, secretly labeled or stigmatized). For example, “If she doesn’t marry by then, she becomes an ‘old maid,’ and others will say things about her behind her back,” or, “If he doesn’t marry, people will question his sexuality; they will think he is gay.”

Interdependence of Lives. — Individual lives are intimately connected to the lives of others (Elder, 1985). In the literature on the life course, this basic idea has been discussed under several labels—consider “counter-point transitions” (Riley & Waring, 1976), “consociates” (Plath, 1980), “life-event webs”
(Pruchno, Blow, & Smyer, 1984), “ripple effects” (Hägestad, 1981), and “developmental reciprocities” (Klein, Jorgensen, & Miller, 1979).

One of the aims of our interviews was to assess whether respondents thought the timing of one’s own behavior is affected by, or has consequences for, the lives of other people in the social milieu. These effects could be of different types (for example, other lives could be affected psychologically, socially, or financially). Most of the time, though not exclusively, the other people cited were family members. Examples include, “If she has kids after that, she’s an old parent, and an old parent makes a miserable child,” or “A move home after that age would cause friction in the household; there would be a conflict of interest between the parents and the daughter.”

Development. — This category captured two levels, psychological and physical. Psychological Development captured concerns about the development of the self and personality. These were often references to psychological traits and personality characteristics, personal abilities, needs, goals, and dreams. For example, “If he doesn’t leave home by then, his ability to deal with other people will be stunted, and he becomes very set in his ways,” or “Her self-image will really suffer, and she will become a very dependent, clingy person who can’t stand on her own two feet.”

Physical Development covered biological and health-related concerns. For example: “If she has a child too late, she risks her own health or even her own life,” or “By that age, she still has enough of the energy needed to raise a child.”

Sequencing. — Sequencing comments were concerns about accomplishing life transitions in the proper order and tackling life in smaller steps. Sequencing comments were linked to changing roles, roles in what (Luckmann 1975) has described as “diachronically ordered segments of the life course,” what Buchmann (1989) has described as the “fixed scheduling” of activities, or what Best (1980) has called “lock-step.” Consider these examples from our interviews: “She has finished her education, she [has been] working for a while, so now it’s time for her to start her family,” or “She should get settled financially, without being dependent on a man, then get married, and then have kids.” This example also illustrates the fact that individuals often do not think about transitions in isolation, but often in terms of longer pathways.

Synchrony. — Synchrony concerns were remarks about keeping time with one’s age peers or some other reference group. The most important aspect of this category is that the ideals of a particular group structure one’s own frame of reference, a group whose standards are used as an anchoring point for one’s own life. For example: “Everyone else her age is a mother by then, including many of her friends, and she’ll feel out of touch.”

Opportunities and Chances. — Some responses reflected the idea that cultural age deadlines are linked to opportunity structure, and that one’s future opportunities may be jeopardized by falling off-time. For example: “If she doesn’t marry by then, she’ll end up having to settle for one of the ‘left-overs’ with all their problems. Her choices become slimmer, or she may not have choices at all.”

Simple Economic Considerations. — This category covered very simple references to financial concerns, including pay, equity, financial stability, pension, mortgage, or tax benefits. For example, “There are tax benefits to marriage.”

Observed Behavior. — This category included any demographic references to statistical age patterns, usually population means or modes. For example, “A man should be married by then because that’s the average age where most men get married.” This category also included references to personal experience. For example: “Well, I married at that age, and I think that’s the age when it should happen for everybody.”

Other, Uncertain, No Consequences. — An Other category was used for responses that did not fit into the categories described above. An Uncertain category was used when respondents could not explain why the age deadline they gave was important or whether there were consequences for men or women who miss the deadline. Finally, a No Consequences code was used when the respondent argued that an age deadline did not exist, or when a respondent could give a deadline, but explicitly stated that there were no consequences for men or women who failed to meet it.

Once responses to questions were coded at the transition level, we cumulated responses across the relevant transitions to the sphere level (in this case, across the six transitions that compose the family sphere).

Independent Variables

An individual’s social location is likely to structure the way the life course is defined and experienced. How does thinking about cultural age deadlines within the family sphere vary across important social dimensions? To address this question, the following independent variables are used in analyses: Gender, race, cohort, occupation, and education.

Gender. — A key question of concern is whether timetables for family-related transitions are different for men and women, and whether men and women approach family schedules on different terms. As a result, two sets of perceptions are examined: (1) Men’s and women’s thinking about age deadlines in women’s lives; and (2) Men’s and women’s thinking about age deadlines in men’s lives.
Race. — The original race variable had six categories: Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Native American, or Other. However, the number of respondents in each of the nonwhite categories was too small to warrant retaining the six original categories in statistical analyses. Instead, a dichotomous variable was constructed to simply capture whether the respondent is white or nonwhite.

Cohort. — Following Elder and Caspi (1989), we constructed a variable to capture meaningful cohort groups based upon the year in which the respondent came of age (age 18): 1920–1934; 1935–1945; 1946–1959; 1960–1973; and after 1973. One might presume that the year one came of age, and the historical conditions associated with that time, would shape one's world-view. Those entering adulthood between 1920–1934 came of age during a time of both changing sexual mores and swings in economic stability (a general economic boom from 1923–1929, the onset of the Great Depression during 1929 and 1930, and the depth of the Great Depression during 1932–1933). Those entering adulthood between 1935–1945 came of age during partial recovery from the depression, an economic slump, the incipient stage of wartime mobilization, and World War II; men who returned home after the war had new opportunities (particularly educational) provided by the G.I. bill. Those entering adulthood between 1946–1959 came of age during post-war economic growth, the Korean war, the McCarthy Era, the onset of the civil rights movement, and new family patterns of the 1950s. Those entering adulthood between 1960–1973 came of age during the mobilization of civil rights, civil strife, the Vietnam War, and changing patterns of labor force participation for women. Those entering adulthood after 1974 came of age during a time of growing disillusionment about the role that government could play in instituting social change (e.g., what some policy analysts have described as the failures of the Great Society), disillusionment about faith and trust in the government (e.g., Watergate, questions about the role of the United States in the Vietnam War), growing problems in the economy (e.g., restricted employment opportunities, the oil embargo of 1974, the stock market crash of 1987, the expansion of the service economy, and America's standing in the global economy), and heightened consumerism and materialism of the mid-1980s.

Occupation. — The original occupational categories were coded following National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) General Social Survey (GSS) codebooks. These original categories were then collapsed into a simple dichotomous professional/nonprofessional variable. “Professional” includes professional, technical, management, and administrative; “Nonprofessional” includes all others (e.g., clerical, craftsmen, operatives, transport, laborers, service).

Education. — Education was coded along the following levels: Whether respondents have a high school education or less, have some post-high school education, are college graduates, or have some post-college education.

Results

Are Deadlines Perceived?

The percentage of respondents who perceived cultural age deadlines for each family transition are summarized in Figure 2. For men's lives, the only transition for which deadlines were clearly not perceived was for a potential move back into his parents' home: Only 39% of respondents perceived an age limit. For all other transitions, the bulk of respondents perceived deadlines. The highest percentage was for marriage, where over 85% of respondents perceived deadlines. Marriage was followed by leaving home, where 78% perceived deadlines; next came entering fatherhood and grandfatherhood, where 75% perceived deadlines; and, finally, completing childbearing, where 70% of respondents perceived deadlines.

For women's lives, a slightly different pattern emerged. Completing childbearing was the transition for which most respondents perceived a deadline (86%). Completing childbearing was followed by marriage, where 82% perceived deadlines; then entering motherhood, where 79% perceived dead-

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who perceived age deadlines for various family transitions. **p < .01; ***p < .001.
lines; entering grandmotherhood, where 71% perceived deadlines; and, finally, leaving home, where 69% perceived deadlines. As with men’s lives, the only transition within the family sphere for which age deadlines were not perceived was for a potential return home, where only 23% of respondents mentioned an age limit.

For two family transitions — returning home and completing childbearing — there were significant differences in the degree to which deadlines were perceived for men and women. For returning home, age limits were perceived more often for men. For completing childbearing, age limits were perceived more often for women, a constraint obviously linked to reproductive physiology. For the remaining family transitions — marrying, leaving home, entering parenthood, and entering grandparenthood — no significant differences existed in the proportion of respondents who perceive age deadlines for men or women.

By and large, few differences were found across the independent variables in the degree to which deadlines were perceived. For men’s lives, no differences were found across cohort or occupational groups. Differences by race were found only for marriage and for entering grandparenthood (where nonwhites perceived deadlines more often). A difference across educational levels was found only for entering grandparenthood (where respondents with lower educational levels perceived deadlines more often). And a gender difference was found only for leaving home (where men perceived deadlines more often).

Similarly, for women’s lives, no differences were found by gender, race, or occupational groups. Cohort differences were found only for leaving home (where a greater proportion of respondents from each successive cohort perceived deadlines) and entering grandparenthood (where an opposite pattern was witnessed). A difference across educational levels was found only for returning home (where a higher proportion of those with higher educational levels perceived deadlines).

When Is It Too Late?

For this set of family transitions, there were few differences in average deadlines given for men’s and women’s lives. The average and the standard deviation for each distribution are displayed in Figure 3. The deadlines for men’s lives were significantly later for only two transitions — marrying and completing childbearing. While the differences between men’s and women’s lives for the other transitions were not significant, the deadlines for marrying, entering parenthood, and entering grandparenthood were, on average, slightly later for men’s lives. In contrast, the average deadline for leaving home was slightly later for women’s lives.

Again, few consistent patterns existed across our key independent variables. For men’s lives, the strongest patterns emerge by educational level and race. Differences by educational level were found for marrying, entering fatherhood, and entering grandparenthood — in each case, deadlines were later with increasing education. Differences by race were found for leaving home, entering fatherhood, and entering grandparenthood — in each instance, whites gave later deadlines. Gender differences were found only for leaving home and completing childbearing — in both cases, women gave later deadlines. An occupational difference was found only for leaving home, where nonprofessionals gave later deadlines. Finally, a cohort difference was found only for entering fatherhood, where age deadlines were later for each successive cohort, peaked for those coming of age between 1946 and 1959, and then declined slightly for more recent cohort groups.

Still fewer patterns were found for women’s lives. Differences across educational level were found only for marrying and entering motherhood — in both instances, deadlines were later with increasing educational level. Differences by race were found only for leaving home, entering motherhood, and entering grandmotherhood — in each case, whites gave later deadlines. Differences by occupation were found only for leaving home (where nonprofessionals gave later deadlines) and entering motherhood (where professionals gave later deadlines). Finally, a cohort difference was found only for marriage, where each successive cohort gave later deadlines.
How Much Consensus Exists About Deadlines?

For men's lives, the two most variable distributions, completing childbearing and entering grandfatherhood, spanned over 41 years, from 30 to 70. The distribution for marriage followed in degree of variability, spanning 33 years, from 18 to 50. Returning home followed, spanning 23 years, from 18 to 40. Entering parenthood came next, spanning 18 years, from 23 to 40. Finally, leaving home, the distribution with the least variability, spanned only 11 years, from 18 to 28.

For women's lives, the distribution with greatest variability was for entering grandparenthood, which spanned 36 years, from 35 to 70. Parenthood followed in degree of variability, ranging from 18 to age 45; then completing childbearing, which ranged from 27 to 50. Marrying and returning home came next, each spanning 23 years, from 18 to 40. Finally, leaving home, the distribution with least variability, spanned 18 years between 18 and 35. Comparatively, the distributions for women's lives were less variable than those for men, particularly for marrying, completing childbearing, and entering grandparenthood.

In most cases, however, the distributions for each family transition were concentrated within a narrow age band. The percentage of responses clustered at the modal value, as well as the percentage of responses falling within a 6-year age band, are compiled in Table 1. To determine the 6-year band, we took the mode and that set of values on either side of the mode that maximized the degree of concentration within 6 years. This band, though somewhat arbitrary, served as an anchor with which to compare distributions. For both men's and women's lives, half or more of deadlines for each family transition were clustered within a 6-year span. In general, the degree of age concentration in the deadline distributions for family transitions was higher for women's lives.

For men's lives, the highest concentration occurred for marrying and leaving home, where about three-quarters of deadlines were clustered within a 6-year span. About two-thirds of the deadlines for entering fatherhood, and about half of the deadlines for returning home, completing childbearing, and entering grandfatherhood were clustered within a 6-year span.

For women's lives, the highest degree of concentration occurred for leaving home and completing childbearing, where about three-quarters of the deadlines were clustered within a 6-year span. About two-thirds of the deadlines for marrying and entering motherhood, and about half of the deadlines for returning home and entering grandmotherhood, were clustered within a 6-year range.

Reasons for Age Deadlines Within the Family Sphere

A striking pattern was found when we examined the reasons given for following age deadlines for each transition. These distributions are presented in Table 2. Developmental reasons were cited most often, accounting for 52% of responses for men's lives, and about 60% of responses for women's lives. Sequencing issues made up the next largest category of responses, comprising 22% of responses for men's lives, and 20% of responses for women's lives. Interdependence of Lives was the third-largest category, though accounting for only 11% of responses for men's lives, and only 7% of responses for women's lives. Interestingly, many of the categories that scholars of the life course have deemed as important concepts for the study of lives — Interpersonal Sanctions, Economics, Synchrony, Opportunity Structures, and Observed Behavior — did not emerge often in our discussions about the timing of important transitions within the sphere of the family. In addition, few differences were found between men's and women's lives, or by the background characteristics of the respondent (sex, race, cohort, occupational status, or educational level).

Perceived Consequences of Missing Age Deadlines Within the Family Sphere

Responses to questions of possible consequences also revealed surprising trends. For both men's and women's lives, about half of responses within the family sphere were that absolutely no consequences exist for those who miss age deadlines (47% for men's lives, and 50% for women's lives). Developmental consequences accounted for 21% of responses for men's lives, and 25% of responses for women's lives. Few responses were classified into the remaining categories. Interdependence of Lives consequences accounted for only a fraction of responses, 9% for men's lives and 6% for women's lives. Interpersonal sanctions and consequences related to financial status, sequencing, synchrony, or opportunity structures were rarely mentioned. Again, responses about the consequences of missing deadlines did not differ for men's and women's lives.

Table 1. Percent at Modal Age and Percent Within 6-Year Age-Band for Each Family Transition (Age value in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>About Men's Lives</th>
<th>About Women's Lives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Mode</td>
<td>% 6-Year Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving home</td>
<td>26.9 (21)</td>
<td>72.3 (20–25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning home</td>
<td>26.7 (30)</td>
<td>53.3 (25–30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td>22.7 (30)</td>
<td>60.8 (25–30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing childbearing</td>
<td>34.7 (40)</td>
<td>51.1 (40–45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparenthood</td>
<td>27.6 (50)</td>
<td>43.6 (50–55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Individuals thought about cultural age deadlines as

nor did they differ significantly by other respondent characteristics.

Discussion and Conclusion

Circling back to our initial questions, how do individuals think about cultural age deadlines for family transitions? By and large, the majority of respondents perceived deadlines for most of the family transitions discussed. Individuals in contemporary American society do find chronological age a sensible dimension for organizing their thinking about central family transitions in the lives of men and women.

The only family transition for which most respondents did not think an age limit existed was for a potential return to the parental home. From their point of view, family support is not limited by age but is instead tailored along the dimensions of need and circumstance.

Surprisingly, cultural age deadlines within the sphere of family were thought to exist slightly more often for men than for women. The exceptions to this trend — entering parenthood and completing childbearing — relate to biological clocks, which set ultimate limits on women’s reproduction.

While a good deal of variability existed in the deadlines given, there was generally a fair amount of concentration within a short range of ages. The range of cultural age deadlines was greater for men’s lives than for women’s. About half or more of the deadlines for each family transition were clustered within a six-year span, though the degree of concentration was generally greater for women’s lives than for men’s. Again, this is clearly linked to the fact that women have pressing biological clocks for several family transitions.

Several differences in cultural age deadlines also existed across the background characteristics of respondents, lending some support to the notion that contemporary American society may have multiple cultural age timetables within it regarding family transitions. For both men’s and women’s lives, nonwhites, nonprofessionals, and those with lower educational levels not only mentioned cultural age deadlines more often, but also generally gave earlier deadlines.

An interesting question one might ask is how closely the deadlines that people cite mirror transition patterns at a demographic level. By and large, the average deadlines cited by respondents in this study are slightly later than what most people actually experience. This pattern is, of course, a byproduct of asking about age deadlines: We have asked respondents to talk about upper age limits for accomplishing transitions. As a result, the deadlines cited usually correspond to the upper quartile of actual behavior at a demographic level. However, the variation we have noted along key social dimensions is also quite consistent with what we know about the behavioral patterns of those groups at a demographic level.

Considerations of the individual’s development and considerations related to accomplishing life transitions in the proper order emerged as the primary dimensions underlying individuals’ thinking about why deadlines are important. Reasons for age deadlines did not differ for men’s and women’s lives, nor did they differ by respondent characteristics.

Consequences were seldom perceived for men or women who miss cultural age deadlines in the family sphere. When consequences were perceived, they were usually focused on the developmental impact of missing cultural age deadlines. In general, late timing of family transitions was viewed as completely acceptable, accompanied by little social tension, without major consequences for the individual’s life course, and without major consequences for others in the immediate social milieu. The perceived consequences of missing age deadlines were not different for men’s and women’s lives, nor were they different across background characteristics of respondents.

Table 2. Reasons for Age Deadlines Within the Family Sphere: Proportion of Responses in Each Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>About Men’s Lives (N = 150)</th>
<th>About Women’s Lives (N = 152)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal sanctions</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependence of lives</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchrony</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed behavior</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of responses</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: See text for an explanation of coding categories.

Table 3. Consequences of Missing Informal Age Deadlines Within the Family Sphere: Proportion of Responses in Each Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>About Men’s Lives (N = 161)</th>
<th>About Women’s Lives (N = 158)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal sanctions</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependence of lives</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchrony</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No consequence</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of responses</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: See text for an explanation of coding categories.
rough developmental markers. However, these developmental “target dates” were not viewed as fixed. In fact, flexibility around cultural age deadlines was often a baseline assumption. We also see this reflected in the fact that the majority of respondents — and often even those who quickly cited deadlines — claimed there were no consequences for missing deadlines. This finding supports a view of the life course as complex and diverse. While a rough, “normal biography” of family life may exist in individuals’ minds as a ruler against which to orient their lives, the developmental and sequencing target dates that compose it do not dictate the course of family life, but instead guide it. In individuals’ minds, Nydegger’s (1986b) “personal timetables” — timetables that are self-constructed, self-imposed, and not shared — may prevail over cultural timetables. Individuals are thought to be on a pilgrimage of the self (Frankenberg, 1987), actively composing their own lives, to borrow Bateson’s (1989) phrase. If personal timetables happen to mesh with cultural timetables, the composing process simply becomes a little easier. These findings echo Levy’s (1991) distinction between “life-course programs,” general, cultural models about how the life course should unfold, and “life-course projects,” an individual’s personal plans. An individual’s life-course “project” may be informed by cultural “programs,” but is never determined by it.

The driving force behind individuals’ thinking about age deadlines appeared to be primarily grounded in popular conceptions of human development and characterized by a great deal of “psychologizing” about human lives. This finding is better understood when placed within the contexts of both individualism and a burgeoning interest in psychology throughout the United States. Meyer (1986a, 1986b) has suggested that the United States has its own cultural theory of the individual (see also Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Buchmann, 1989). This theory portrays the self as well-bounded, but not out of touch with others; it emphasizes self-esteem, an internal locus of control and a celebration of human potential; it views the individual as a competent actor, and its metaphor is that life is a continuing journey of discovery, a discovery of personhood. As Kohli (1986a, p. 293) has noted, in contemporary society, “personal development is projected to continue all through the life course. The key metaphor here is ‘growth.’ We want to grow until we fall apart.”

In addition, Meyer (1986b) has described the rapid development of American psychology during the 20th century, a perspective with an unusual concentration on personality, human development, and socialization. The degree to which psychology has penetrated all aspects of American life is evident on a number of planes. Several more scholarly books on related topics have also had tremendous success in the popular press market (e.g., Bateson, 1989; Cszkentmihalyi, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Levinson, 1978). Popular television talk shows routinely cover topics related to the developmental concerns of men and women, and even shows related to the timing of life transitions. Newspaper advice columns, too, are filled with similar accounts. Jokes about persons who are “off-time” with respect to life transitions are frequently heard on television sitcoms and seen on greeting cards. The language of psychology has become a natural part of our vocabulary. Everywhere, the educated layman is heard using words like “co-dependent,” “dysfunctional,” “bonding,” and “motivation.” Phrases such as “midlife crisis,” “fear of intimacy,” and “breaking away from dependency” have also become incorporated into the language of daily life.

It is not so surprising, then, that concepts that move beyond the self and personality are not a major part of individuals’ constructions of age. In fact, individual lives are often discussed as if they exist in isolation of social contexts. As a result, there are marked differences between the ways in which academics, particularly sociologists and anthropologists, have traditionally thought about age, and the ways in which the individuals in this study think about age.

Several concepts deemed as important by sociologists of the life course were rarely echoed in individuals’ responses. These include interpersonal sanctions, interdependence of lives, synchrony (including reference groups and cohorts), legal age norms, statistical age patterns, and opportunity structures. While these forces may truly be important in shaping the life course, individuals in this study rarely thought in these terms.

In some instances, individuals may be unaware of the influence of these forces. Opportunity structures and dynamic markets are good examples of this. Individuals are not always aware of institutional structures, or of the practices operating within those structures, that directly affect their lives. Even if individuals are aware of these institutional structures and how they operate, institutional constraints may simply not be mentioned because these constraints are taken for granted. Similarly, comments about legal age thresholds and the formal role of the state were rarely echoed in individuals’ thinking about age and family transitions. These, too, are part of the formal organization of the life course, and may simply be assumed. It is also possible that the transitions discussed in these interviews may not be transitions for which state policies and legal restrictions regulate timing. In addition, many age-related policies and laws, especially those related to family events, focus on minimum age requirements, whereas discussions about age deadlines are discussions about upper age boundaries.

If age is embedded in an informal system of social control, respondents in this study were either unaware of that system, or they did not think that system of social control was very rigid. As a result, few responses indicated that social pressure is exerted on individuals to meet cultural age deadlines.

The notion that the timing of an individual’s transitions are affected by, or dependent upon, the timing of transitions in others’ lives was also seldom men-
tioned. This may be linked to the fact that the ways in which interdependent life courses impact each other are often unpredictable, idiosyncratic, and complex. Regardless of whether these timetables mesh with the general cultural timetables, transitions in the lives of others are generally outside of an individual’s immediate control. As a result, interdependent timetables are likely to prevail over cultural timetables — that is, when the “bumping and grinding of interdependent life courses are in action,” age itself becomes less important. Concerns about the interdependence of lives may have emerged more often in this study if individuals who thought cultural age deadlines were not important would have been interviewed more extensively about these views. Surprisingly, when concerns about the interdependence of lives were raised, they were not voiced more often for women’s lives, nor were they voiced more often by women themselves.

Similarly, there were few comments about keeping in time with one’s age peers or with some significant reference group. Again, this is probably the result of individuals’ construction of the life course as a developmental pilgrimage. Each person is thought to have a unique developmental biography, and the general characteristics of this biography are not shared by a larger group, whether a primary group or a macrolevel birth cohort.

One possible reason why many of the more socio-

cultural age timetables are but one of many possible

References


