What’s the Latest? II.
Cultural Age Deadlines for Educational and Work Transitions

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In a seminal study from the mid-1960s, Bernice Neugarten and her colleagues at the University of Chicago suggested that a network of age expectations is embedded in the cultural fabric of adult life. 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, Moore, & Lowe, 1965, pp. 22–23; see also Neugarten & Petersen, 1957).

Neugarten penned that passage over 30 years ago. The article from which it comes — a Research Note in the American Journal of Sociology — is one of the most frequently cited articles of our time. The ideas in that article are powerful, as is all of the work that emerged out of the landmark “Kansas City Studies of Adult Life” in the late 1950s. How relevant are these observations in today’s world? One thing is certain: Assumptions about the strength of informal age expectations underlie a great deal of research on the life course, and the age-normative framework has gained widespread acceptance. In that body of research, age timetables for life transitions are thought to be normatively prescribed, supported by consensus, and enforced through various mechanisms of social control. These assumptions are interesting to note, given a paucity of empirical research on this topic since the time of Neugarten’s pioneering study (e.g., Gee, 1990; Passuth & Maines, 1981; Plath & Ikeda, 1975; Zeppelini, Sils, & Heath, 1986).

Recently, investigators have begun to call for new research in this area to determine whether or how these schedules operate in contemporary American society, how schedules in the family sphere might differ from those in the sphere of work and education, and how they might operate differently for men and women or along other important social divisions (e.g., Elder, 1992; George, 1993; Hagestad, 1990; Hogan, 1985; Kertzer, 1989; Marini, 1984; Nydegger, 1986a, 1986b; Riley, 1986; Settersten, 1992). For review of the literature related to age and the life course, see Neugarten and Hagestad (1976), Hagestad and Neugarten (1985), Hagestad (1990), and Moen (1995).

Several of these concerns were raised in a recent symposium in The Gerontologist (“Where are the New Frontiers in Aging Theory?,” April 1996, edited by Jon Hendricks), especially in a series of papers on “Age Norms and the Structuring of Consciousness” (organized by Dale Dannefer). As part of that symposium, we (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996) took a first step toward filling some of the research gaps noted above by offering new evidence on age “deadlines” for a series of family transitions (leaving home, re-
turning home, marrying, entering parenthood, completing childbearing, and entering grandparenthood). In that study, we found that, by and large, the majority of our respondents perceived deadlines for most of the family transitions we 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 family-related deadlines were centered primarily on the development of self and personality, or were linked to concerns about the sequencing of roles and experiences over the lifetime. However, when timing occurred late, it 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 with whom one is interdependent. 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.

The research reported here serves to complement that recent article on age timetables for family transitions by turning our attention to transitions within the sphere of work and education. We will close our article by considering the ways in which our findings inform two lively debates on the nature 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.

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where the time for potential planning is limited, and
is instead influenced more by “nature and deep
cultural rhythms.’” Hernes’ ideas are in line with
those of other scholars who argue that women’s lives
are more intimately tied to the lives of other people
and, as a result, are less predictable (Gilligan, 1982).

Given these fundamental differences between cy-
clical and linear time, it is not so surprising that
different social institutions have been associated
with these two modes of temporal experience. The
family, and therefore the traditional lives of most
women, have been primarily associated with cyclical,
or at least nonlinear, time. The economic and politi-
cal spheres, and therefore the traditional lives of
most men, have instead been primarily associated
with linear time. As a result, women’s lives are
thought to be constrained little by chronological age,
with the exception of pressing biological clocks with
regard to reproduction, whereas men’s lives are
thought to be more rigidly structured by age.

Research Questions

We focus on cultural age “deadlines” for a series
of educational and work transitions — the age by
which people think those transitions ought to occur
in men’s and women’s lives. Do individuals perceive
age deadlines for various educational and work
transitions, and by what ages do they think men and
women ought to 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?

In an effort to begin bridging some of the chasms
noted above, we examine whether general timetables
for educational and work 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 occupa-
tional status). Finally, circling back to the study cited
earlier (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996), we compare the
patterns that emerged for transitions within the family
sphere to those within the sphere of work and educa-
tion. The questions we have posed here require
largely descriptive analyses. These descriptions, how-
ever, shed important light on an idea sparked dec-
dades ago — the idea of informal age norms. This
concept has remained central to research and theory
on the life course, even in the face of dramatic social
change, and it must be rediscussed in light of contem-
porary times. These descriptions also shed important
empirical light on the two important debates we out-
lined at the close of our introduction — debates
about the degree to which various life spheres are
structured by age, and the degree to which men’s and
women’s lives are structured by age.

Method

Sample

We randomly selected 319 adults, 18 years of age or
older, living in the Chicago metropolitan area. Inter-
views were conducted by telephone from the North-
western 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). About half of the respond-
ants were married (49%), and most of the respond-
ants were white (74%), 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% be-
tween 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.

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 re-
spondent was randomly assigned to one of two inter-
view 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-
en’s Lives” cell, and Response Cells II and IV into a
single “About Men’s Lives” cell.

Instrument

Our interviews explored individuals’ thinking
about age deadlines related to eleven specific life-
course transitions, five of which are from within the
sphere of work and education: (1) exit from full-time
schooling; (2) entry into full-time work; (3) settling
on a career/job area; (4) reaching the peak of the
work trajectory; and (5) entering retirement (see
Appendix 1). For each transition, respondents were
asked to identify the age deadline for each transition
(e.g., “By what age should a man retire?”), and
those respondents who mentioned a specific dead-
line were asked to discuss the reasons why a man or
woman should meet the deadline (e.g., “Why
should a man retire by that age?”). Finally, those respondents who mentioned a specific deadline were also asked to discuss the potential consequences for men or women who fail to meet the deadline (e.g., “Does anything happen to him if he doesn’t retire by that age? Are there any consequences that come to mind?”). Interviewers used a series of open-ended probes to elaborate the discussion, and the respondent’s core responses were noted verbatim.

**Dependent Variables**

For each transition, respondents fell into one of three possible response patterns: One group thought that there was a deadline and were able to designate it. A second group thought that there was a deadline but were uncertain of the specific age attached to the deadline. And a third group stated that a deadline simply did not exist for the transition. On the basis of these three conditions, a dichotomous variable was derived for each transition to designate whether a cultural age deadline was perceived. In addition, a continuous age deadline variable resulted for each transition, valid for the subset of respondents who mentioned a specific deadline.

For each open-ended “reason” and “consequence” section of the interview schedule (see above description of the instrument), up to three responses were coded per individual. These responses were coded with 92% inter-rater reliability. The final set of coding categories was decided upon after several waves of codebook construction and reliability testing. Coding categories were chosen both inductively and deductively. Many of the categories were based upon existing life-course research and theory, while other categories emerged out of our interviews. We now turn to a brief description of each coding category. Further information on these categories, including examples of representative quotes, is provided in Settersten & Hagestad (1996).

**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 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).

**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” (Hagestad, 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.

**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. Physical Development covered biological and health-related concerns.
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.”

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.

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.

Simple Economic Considerations. — This category covered very simple references to financial concerns, including pay, equity, financial stability, pension, mortgage, or tax benefits.

Observed Behavior. — This category included any demographic references to statistical age patterns, usually population means or modes.

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 respondents 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 five transitions that compose the educational and work 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 sphere of work and education 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 educational and work transitions are different for men and women, and whether men and women approach these 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. Of course, members of all of these cohorts have witnessed the dramatic transformations in education and the economy that have occurred in recent decades. At the same time, one might presume that the year one came of age, and the historical conditions associated with that particular time, will 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 postwar 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., 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 American’s standing in the global economy), and the heightened consumerism and materialism of the mid-1980s.

Occupation. — The original occupational cate-
ries were coded following the National Opinion Research Center’s (NORC’s) 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., craftsmen, operatives, physical laborers, and service, transport, and clerical workers).

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.

Are Deadlines Perceived?

The percentage of respondents who perceived cultural age deadlines for each educational and work transition are summarized in Figure 2. For men’s lives, the majority of respondents perceived age deadlines for every transition within the sphere of work and education. Deadlines were perceived most often for reaching the peak of the work career, where 82% of respondents perceived a deadline. Setting on a career came next, where 80% of respondents perceived a deadline. For two transitions — finishing full-time schooling and entering retirement — only a minority of respondents perceived deadlines for women (only 48% perceived a deadline for finishing schooling, and only 47% perceived a deadline for entering retirement).

For two transitions — finishing schooling and reaching the peak of the work career — deadlines were perceived more often for men than they were for women (respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 319) = 6.92, p < .01$; and $\chi^2(1, N = 319) = 7.90, p < .01$). Significant differences aside, however, uniformly higher percentages of respondents perceived deadlines for men’s lives around all of these transitions.

By and large, few differences were found across the independent variables in the proportion of respondents who perceived cultural age deadlines. For men’s lives, differences by race were found for finishing schooling and for settling on a career (where nonwhites were more likely to perceive deadlines; respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 4.50, p < .05$; $\chi^2(1, N = 161) = 4.54, p < .05$); and a difference across educational levels was found only for retirement (where deadlines were perceived less often with increasing education; $\chi^2(3, N = 161) = 8.07, p < .05$). No differences were found across gender, occupational, or cohort groups.

For women’s lives, there were also no differences across occupational or cohort groups in the degree to which deadlines were perceived. However, differences by race were found for finishing schooling, settling on a career, and entering retirement (for each of these transitions, nonwhites were again more likely to perceive deadlines; respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 5.51, p < .05$; $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 5.03, p < .05$; $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 6.37, p < .01$). Differences across educational levels were found only for finishing schooling and for settling on a career (where
deadlines were again perceived less often with increasingly higher level of education; respectively, \( \chi^2(3, N = 156) = 10.05, p < .05; \chi^2(3, N = 156) = 8.54, p < .05 \). Finally, a gender difference was found only for entering retirement (where men were more likely to perceive deadlines; \( \chi^2(1, N = 158) = 8.29, p < .01 \)). No differences were found across occupational or cohort groups.

**When is it Too Late?**

For this set of educational and work transitions, there were few differences in average age deadlines given for men’s and women’s lives. The average and the standard deviation for each distribution are displayed in Figure 3. Deadlines for men were significantly later than those for women only for entering the labor force and for entering retirement (respectively, \( t(192) = -2.65, p < .01 \); and \( t(144) = -1.94, p < .05 \)).

What about patterning across our key independent variables? For men’s lives, the most striking pattern emerged by race — for four of the five transitions: Entering the labor market, settling on a career, reaching the peak of the work career, and retiring (for each of these transitions, whites gave later deadlines; respectively, \( F[1,99] = 8.99, p < .01; F[1,109] = 6.89, p < .01; F[1,112] = 8.06, p < .01; F[1,79] = 7.83, p < .01 \)). There were also a couple differences where educational level and gender were concerned. Differences across educational level were found for finishing schooling and for entering the labor force (where deadlines were later with increasingly higher levels of education; respectively, \( F[3,80] = 3.39, p < .05; F[3,97] = 7.59, p < .001 \)). A gender difference was found for settling on a career and entering retirement (where women gave later deadlines; respectively, \( F[1,109] = 6.26, p < .05; F[1,79] = 3.96, p < .05 \)), though this gender difference disappeared once we controlled for the other independent variables (see Appendix 2). No significant patterns were found across occupational or cohort groups.

Still fewer differences existed for women’s lives. Differences by race were found only for entering the labor force and for reaching the peak of the work career (where whites gave later deadlines; respectively, \( F[1,91] = 4.71, p < .05; F[1,112] = 8.06, p < .01 \)); the race difference for reaching the peak at the work trajectory, however, vanished after we controlled for the remaining independent variables (see Appendix 2). A difference across educational level was found only for reaching the peak of the work career (where deadlines were later with increasing education; \( F[3,83] = 2.96, p < .05 \)). No differences were found by gender or across occupational or cohort groups.

**How Much Consensus Exists About Deadlines?**

For men’s lives, the widest range of age deadlines was for reaching the peak of the work career, which spanned over 41 years from 20 to 60. The distributions for finishing schooling and settling on a career followed in degree of variability, each spanning 33 years from 18 to 50. Retirement followed, spanning 28 years from 48 to 75. Finally, the distribution with
least variability, entering the labor force, spanned 18 years from 18 to 35.

For women's lives, the distribution with greatest variability was for entering retirement, which spanned 35 years from 40 to 75. Settling on a career followed in degree of variability, ranging 23 years from 18 to 40, and then reaching the peak of the work career, which ranged 21 years from 24 to 65. Finally, finishing schooling and entering the labor force emerged as the two distributions with least variability, both spanned 18 years from 18 to 35.

For most of these transitions, the deadline distributions for women's lives were generally less variable, particularly the distributions for finishing schooling, settling on a career, and reaching the peak of the work career. The amount of variability in deadlines for entering the labor market was similar for men's and women's lives. An important exception, however, was the distribution for entering retirement, which was notably more variable for women's lives.

At the same time, most of the distributions were concentrated within a fairly narrow age band. To illustrate this, we show in Table 1 the percentage of responses clustered at the modal value for each educational and work transition, as well as the percentage of responses falling within a 6-year age band. 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, at least half or more of the deadlines for each transition were clustered within a 6-year span (except for reaching the peak of the work career). Surprisingly, the degree of concentration was similar for women's and men's lives. In fact, for two transitions, finishing schooling and entering the labor force, the degree of concentration was actually higher for women's lives.

For men's lives, the highest concentration occurred for settling on a career, followed by entering the labor force, entering retirement, and finishing schooling. For each of these transitions, between 60% and 70% of deadlines were clustered within a 6-year age span. The least concentrated distribution for men was for reaching the peak of the work career, where only 43% of deadlines were clustered within a 6-year span.

For women's lives, the highest degree of concentration occurred for entering the labor force and finishing schooling, where about three quarters of responses were clustered within a 6-year span. Setting on a career followed in degree of concentration, where about two thirds of deadlines were concentrated within a 6-year span. About half of deadlines for entering retirement, and only about a third of deadlines for reaching the peak of the work career, were clustered within a 6-year range.

Reasons for Age Deadlines Within the Educational and Work Sphere

A striking pattern was found when the reasons given for following age deadlines were cumulated across the five transitions. These distributions are presented in Table 2. Together, two categories accounted for about three quarters of responses for both men's and women's educational and work lives: Concerns about the proper order of education and work-related experiences (Sequencing) and concerns about the growth of the self and personality (Development). As a result, the remaining categories pale in comparison to Sequencing and Development. What makes this especially interesting is that many of the concepts that scholars of the life course have deemed as important concepts for the study of lives rarely emerged in individuals' thinking about reasons for following age deadlines within the sphere of work and education. It is also interesting to note the degree of uncertainty that existed about why age deadlines were considered important, even for individuals who held definite markers in their minds. Given these distributions, it is clear that men's and women's lives were generally approached on similar terms, regardless of the background characteristics of the respondents (sex, race, cohort, educational level, or occupational status).

Perceived Consequences of Missing Age Deadlines Within the Educational and Work Sphere

A striking pattern was found when consequence responses were cumulated across the work transitions. These distributions are summarized in Table 3. Most importantly, about half of responses were that no consequences exist for missing cultural age deadlines within the sphere of work and education (43% for men's lives, and 57% for women's lives). Developmental consequences were the next-largest category, accounting for 20% of responses for men's lives, and only 13% of responses for women's lives. Lost Opportunities accounted for 12% of responses for men's lives, and 9% of responses for women's lives. Again, it is interesting to note the degree of

Table 1. Percent at Modal Age and Percent within 6-Year Age Band for Each Educational and Work 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>Exit full-time schooling</td>
<td>15.5 (25)</td>
<td>60.8 (25–30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter full-time work</td>
<td>26.7 (22)</td>
<td>67.4 (20–25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settle on career/job</td>
<td>41.4 (30)</td>
<td>69.3 (23–30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak of work career</td>
<td>21.1 (40)</td>
<td>43.1 (35–40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>29.6 (65)</td>
<td>62.9 (60–65)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
uncertainty about whether there are consequences for missing cultural age deadlines.

As before, many of the categories that scholars of the life course have deemed as important concepts for the study of lives did not emerge often in individuals' thinking about age timetables for these general transitions related to education and work. In addition, we again see that men's and women's lives were approached on similar terms, regardless of the characteristics of our respondents.

Discussion

By and large, the majority of our respondents perceived cultural age deadlines for most of the educational and work transitions we discussed. The participants in our study did find chronological age a sensible dimension to think about for most of these educational and work transitions, and they did use chronological age as a means for mapping these transitions over a lifetime.

While deadlines were mentioned more often for men than for women, the range of deadlines given for men's lives was especially large. And while a good deal of variability existed in the deadlines given for both men and women, there was generally a fair amount of concentration within a short range of ages, with the exception of reaching the peak of the work trajectory, which was large in range and least concentrated in both cases. The especially large degree of variation witnessed for work-related transitions may indicate that a general cultural timetable for worklife does not exist. Instead, work-related timetables are undoubtedly very "specialized" (Nydegger, 1986b), exhibiting substantial variation not only between occupations, but also between organizations within a specific occupation.

In addition, once an individual has made the transition into the workforce, adult life may not be punctuated by any normative (that is, culturally prescribed and socially regulated) events or transitions until retirement (Kohli, 1986b). However, our findings suggest that even entry into the workforce and entry into retirement may not be truly normative. This seems especially true for women, given that their occupational trajectories are typically much more disorderly than those of men, due in large part to the fact that their work decisions are shaped directly by family demands and concerns (Moen, 1986, 1994; Sorensen, 1991; Treiman, 1985). This fact underscores the importance of considering the ways in which lives are intimately tied together when trying to understand women's life trajectories, especially their occupational trajectories. Discontinuous labor force participation places women at a disadvantage when competing for jobs, and at least partially accounts for the fact that many women experience downward mobility over the course of their careers. Still, Kohli (1986b) reminds us that there is "enough social regularity to warrant speaking of the social organization of the life course through work," particularly at the firm level (p. 276, emphasis added).

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 educational and work 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

<table>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>About Mens' Lives (N = 149)</th>
<th>About Womens' Lives (N = 138)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal sanctions</td>
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<td>0.2</td>
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<td>Interdependence of lives</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<td>Economic</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Observed behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>12.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
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Total number of responses 774 654

Notes: See text for an explanation of coding categories.

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<td>57.3</td>
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Total number of responses 1,005 887

Notes: See text for an explanation of coding categories.
what we know about the actual experiences of those groups. Yet even our knowledge about behavioral patterns is sketchy: Existing research on educational and work patterns is much more extensive for some transitions (e.g., retirement) than for others, and transitions patterns have been studied more for men than for women (Hogan, 1985).

Considerations of the individual's development and considerations of accomplishing life transitions in the proper order (sequencing) emerged as the primary dimensions underlying individuals' thinking about why cultural age deadlines are important. Within the educational and work sphere, concerns about development were the most frequently-cited reasons for following cultural age deadlines; sequencing concerns were also mentioned often. 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 educational and work sphere. When consequences were perceived, they were usually focused on the developmental impact of missing cultural age deadlines. In general, late timing of educational and work 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.

Individuals thought about cultural age deadlines as "target dates" that carry a great deal of flexibility with them. This leverage is reflected in the fact that the majority of respondents claimed there were no consequences for missing cultural age deadlines. This finding supports a view of the educational and work course as complex and diverse. In the minds of our respondents, Nydegger's (1986a) "personal timetables"—timetables that are self-constructed, self-imposed, and not shared — and "specialized timetables" (noted above) certainly prevailed over general, overarching cultural timetables.

A major force behind individuals' thinking about cultural age deadlines within the educational and work sphere appeared to be primarily grounded in "folk" or popular conceptions of human development, and included a heavy "psychologizing" component. As we (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996) have discussed, this finding is easily understood when placed within the contexts of both individualism and a burgeoning interest in psychology throughout the United States (see also Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Buchmann, 1989; Kohli, 1986a; Meyer, 1986a, 1986b).

As a result, it is not so surprising that concepts that move beyond the developmental concerns of the self 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. This is reflected in the fact that several theoretical concepts deemed important by scholars 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 life course, individuals in this study rarely thought in these terms. In our previous article, we charted out several plausible explanations for why this might be so. One explanation worth repeating here, since it has direct bearing on the sphere of education and work, concerns opportunity structures and institutional constraints. Individuals are not always aware of institutional structures, or of practices operating within those structures, that directly affect their lives (e.g., Rosenbaum, 1984, 1987, 1989). 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 educational and work transitions. These, too, are part of the formal organization of the life course, and they 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 educational and work events, focus on minimum age requirements, and discussions about age deadlines are discussions about upper age boundaries.

An additional explanation for why many of the more sociological categories do not emerge in our respondents' discussions is also worth reemphasizing. Sociological concepts are pitched at a higher level of abstraction — they require a move away from the immediate concerns of the self and personality toward primary groups, secondary groups, and larger elements of social structure. In part, the magnitude of "psychologizing" about lives, and the virtual absence of "sociologizing," is also a function of our measurement approach. We asked about what should be true for most people, most of the time. These questions accessed respondents' generalized notions about age timetables. Had our measurement strategy instead focused on more micro-level processes — for example, asking respondents to anchor their discussion in their own experiences or those of important others — social themes may have emerged more often.

Taken together, the findings from this study do not support the assumption that a strong set of general cultural timing norms exists for educational and work transitions, or that these timetables are enforced through informal mechanisms of social control. Instead, cultural thinking about age timetables,
here with respect to educational and work transitions, seems relatively loose and flexible. The findings from this study echo Mayer and Tuma's (1990) suggestion that we rethink the primacy assigned to cultural age "norms." To be sure, cultural age timetables may be an important force shaping the life course, but their influence may instead be secondary in nature and much more flexible than researchers have assumed.

Many of the patterns we discerned here with respect to educational and work transitions are similar to those we discerned in the family sphere (for detail, see Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). However, two very striking trends emerge when we compare the two spheres. These two trends inform the two lively debates on the life course that were noted in our introduction.

The first debate concerned the degree to which various life spheres (work, education, family) are more or less age-structured. We have found that deadlines were generally mentioned more often in the sphere of family than in the sphere of work and education, and for men and women alike. This finding lends some support to the hypothesis that a greater degree of informal age structuring exists within the family sphere to compensate for the fact that the degree of formal age structuring is not as strong within that sphere. The second debate concerned the degree to which men's lives are more or less age-structured than women's lives. We have found that a higher proportion of respondents perceived deadlines for men within both spheres. This finding lends support to the hypothesis that men's lives are more rigidly structured by chronological age, and that women's lives are more fluid, unpredictable, and discontinuous.

References
Appendix 1

Readers may be interested in knowing how the approach taken in the pioneering work of Neugarten and her colleagues (mentioned at the opening of this article) differs from our approach. Two instruments used in their landmark Kansas City Study of Adult Life are most relevant here: “Timetables for Men and Women” and the “Age Norm Checklist.”

The “Age Norm Checklist” asked whether respondents “approve of, feel favorable about” or “disapprove of, feel unfavorable about” a variety of behaviors at different ages (e.g., “A woman who wears a bikini on the beach — when she’s 45; when she’s 30; when she’s 18”). Responses were then scored to “reflect the degree of refinement with which the respondent makes age discriminations,” with higher scores indicating greater age constraint.

Our items are based upon, but are quite different from, the 11-item “Timetables for Men and Women.” Their instrument generally asked respondents about the optimal time to experience a variety of life transitions (e.g., “What is the best age for most people to finish schooling and go to work?”). Instead, our instrument was generally oriented around the upper limits on behavior (the age “deadline”), and we asked about age prescriptions or “shoulds” (e.g., “By what age should a man finish schooling?”). Note, too, that we always asked separate questions about men and women (that is, we never combined them into “people”), and that we always discussed one transition at a time (e.g., we asked about finishing school in one question, and about entering the labor force in a separate question). In addition, we asked a series of follow-up questions to further understand why respondents feel it is important to adhere to age deadlines (when deadlines are given), and what kinds of consequences they think might exist for those who do not meet such deadlines. Our interviews also covered a series of family transitions (see Settersten & Hagestad, 1996), but the five in this article are obviously restricted to the sphere of education and work.

Appendix 2

Because we are integrating data on five separate transitions in this article, we thought it best to present the reader with the general patterns that emerged for each independent variable across the entire set of transitions (based on simple analysis of variance). However, in an effort to reinforce our confidence in the bivariate results, we also examined two basic multivariate models for each transition, one for men’s lives and one for women’s lives. The formal analysis-of-variance model tested was the same for each transition, and included main effects for each independent variable. In addition, each model was structured so that the effects of each of the five independent variables could be examined after controlling for the other four factors. Among other things, the formal model indicated whether any of the significant differences detected in the bivariate analysis disappeared after controlling for other important background characteristics. Readers concerned about this will be happy to know that only two of the bivariate findings noted in this section vanish after controlling for the other factors: In the case of men’s lives, the gender difference noted for entering retirement; and in the case of women’s lives, the race difference noted for reaching the peak of the work trajectory.