CHAPTER 4

# Age Structuring and the Rhythm of the Life Course*

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Age is important from the perspectives of societies, groups, and individuals. For societies, the meanings and uses of age are often formal. For example, age underlies the organization of family, educational, work, and leisure institutions and organizations. Many laws and policies structure rights, responsibilities, and entitlements on the basis of age, whether through explicit age-related rules or implicit judgments about the nature of particular life periods. At the same time, members of a society, or large subgroups of the population, may share informal ideas about the changes that occur between birth and death, and how these changes are significant. For example, age may be tied to common notions about appropriate behavior or the proper timing and progression of experiences and roles.

For individuals and small groups, the meanings and uses of age are often informal. Individuals use age-related ideas to organize their lives, the lives of others, and their general expectations about the life course. Age enters into and shapes everyday social interactions, often in subtle ways, affecting the expectations and evaluations of individuals involved in those exchanges. Age is also often linked to personality attributes and behavioral dispositions, conceptions of the self, and processes of self-regulation, coping, and goal setting.

These meanings and uses of age—ranging from formal to informal, and from macro to micro—are instances of "age structuring", to use Kertzer's (1989) phrase. This chapter begins

*This chapter is dedicated to Bernice L. Neugarten (1916–2001): pioneer, mentor, and friend. "Though lost to sight, to memory dear Thou ever wilt remain" (*Song*, George Linley, 1798–1865). This chapter undoubtedly carries her imprint, along with that of Gunhild Hagestad, with whom I have shared an active conversation, now 15 years strong, about age and age norms. I am indebted to them both.

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by considering some of the formal institutional and societal-level issues related to age structuring in various life spheres, and historical shifts in these forms of age structuring. The bulk of the chapter then explores some of the informal and social-psychological issues related to age norms and expectations. It closes with a discussion of unresolved issues and new directions for scholarship in these areas.

## FORMAL AGE STRUCTURING IN LIFE SPHERES

In most Western societies, the life course is at least partially age-differentiated, with social roles and activities allocated on the basis of age or life period. Indeed, the modern life course is often viewed as rigidly structured into three separate periods related to work: an early segment devoted to *education and training* for work; a middle segment devoted to *continuous work activity*; and a final segment devoted to *leisure and retirement*. This structure is convenient because it creates "orderliness" in the entry to, and exit from, roles and activities; at the same time, it is "ageist" because it restricts opportunities for various roles and activities to specific periods of life (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). This structure is also reinforced through many social policies (for illustrations, see Settersten, 2003).

The degree of age structuring, and the *relative* degree of formal and informal age structuring, may vary by life sphere. For example, age structuring in the spheres of education and work may be especially strong because age and time often formally calibrate movement through these institutions. These more public spheres are heavily regulated by social policies. Primary and secondary educational institutions are strictly age-graded; educational programs require the completion of a specific number of credit hours; courses must be tackled at a specific pace and in a specific sequence; time limits are set for obtaining degrees. Similarly, work institutions often structure promotion opportunities and retirement benefits around age and seniority; organizations operate on specific schedules and shifts; hours are clocked; production is timed; deadlines are set; sick, personal, and holiday time is monitored and negotiated. Experiences in these settings march to the clock, and age is wound up in the clocks that time them.

There is evidence, however, that age structuring in the spheres of work and education is coming undone. Modernization and rapid technological change have prompted the need for adults to update their skills and knowledge, particularly with the erosion of "lifetime" models of employment (Henretta, 2003). (In lifetime models of employment, employers and employees invest in long-term partnerships and there is a strong emphasis on promotion from within organizations.) Individuals may now be forced to alternate between periods of schooling and periods of short-term employment. As a result, individuals may no longer consider age as relevant in these spheres if the possibility of stable work life appears uncertain, especially for young adults in their formative years of occupational training and experience. At the other end of life, the transition to retirement, once a transition from full-time work to full-time leisure, is also loosening, as evidenced by a wide array of contemporary work patterns through midlife and into old age (O'Rand & Henretta, 1999). While the gap between men's and women's educational and occupational attainment has been closing in recent decades, women's experiences in these spheres continue to be heavily conditioned by family roles and responsibilities, resulting in highly variable work trajectories (Moen, 2001).

The sphere of family, on the other hand, may not be as age-structured as the spheres of education and work. Family forms and trajectories seem especially complex and diverse

(Mason, Skolnick, & Sugarman, 1998), and the experience of time in the family is more contingent and less predictable than it is in other spheres (Daly, 1996). The family is also considered relatively private and not as legitimately controlled by the state, though many aspects of family life clearly are subject to regulation and intervention (Moen & Forest, 1999; Settersten, 2003). At the same time, families are clearly age-differentiated, especially because generational position defines an individual's place in the extended family matrix and shapes identities, roles, and responsibilities. Yet families also seem naturally age-integrated in that individuals of a wide variety of ages and cohorts are joined together and family-related roles and activities extend across life, despite the fact that specific roles and activities shift as individuals move up the family matrix over time.

Demographic change in the past century has also dramatically changed the look and feel of contemporary families (Hagestad, 2003). Increases in longevity and decreases in fertility have created "taller and skinnier" family structures in which more generations are alive at once, fewer members exist within each generation, and the age gap between generations is much larger. Children now come to know grandparents, great-grandparents, and even great-great-grandparents; and the lives of parents, spouses, siblings, and children overlap for long periods of time. These new securities also mean that patterns of illness and death among family members have become more predictable. We count on significant periods of joint survival with family members precisely because disease, disability, and death are generally confined to late life. These shifts bring the possibility that family relationships may become more significant now and in the future. At the same time, the new securities of lifetime, and of joint survival for many decades, may lead individuals to invest less in family ties during particular periods under the assumption that family ties can later be renewed. Of course, dramatic decreases in mortality, morbidity, and fertility have also altered spheres outside the family, though life course scholarship is only now beginning to explore these transformations.

## HISTORICAL CHANGES IN FORMAL AGE STRUCTURING

Important historical changes in Western societies have occurred in the structure and content of the education–work–leisure tripartition. The boundaries between the three "boxes" have shifted. The trend toward early retirement at the upper end of work life, coupled with an extension of schooling at the lower end of work life, has made the period of gainful work shorter. Early retirement, coupled with increased longevity, has also lengthened the period of retirement. In addition, life experiences within these boxes have changed rapidly over the past century. Institutions and organizations often fail to keep pace with these changes, creating what Riley, Kahn, and Foner (1994) call "structural lag". The problem of structural lag is so strong, these authors argue, that societies are unable to provide "meaningful opportunities" for people of all ages in the spheres of education, work, family, and leisure. This problem is taken to be a by-product of the heavily age-differentiated life course common to most Western societies. As a result, there is growing interest in how to build age-integrated social settings in which people of a wide variety of ages interact and hold productive roles (see a recent collection of papers edited by Uhlenberg and Riley, 2000).

Three emerging scholarly and policy debates address historical shifts in age structuring: these surround the chronologization, instititutionalization, and standardization of lives (for a complete discussion, see Settersten, 1999). The thesis of *chronologization*, to use Kohli's (1986) term, asserts that age and time are (or have become) salient dimensions of life. Here,

an important turning point occurred in the early part of the 20th century (Chudacoff, 1989; Graff, 1995). Organizations became more bureaucratic. Revolutionary advances took place in science, industry, and communication. Significant shifts occurred in immigration and urbanization. Concerns about efficiency and productivity grew. These and other large-scale developments prompted greater emphases on age and time. *Institutionalization* refers to the ways in which the life course is structured by organizations, institutions, and the state. European scholarship especially has emphasized the ways in which modern nation-states shape the life course via structural arrangements and the allocation of resources. As individuals have been freed from traditional forms of informal social control, the state began to regulate individuals formally and in far-reaching ways, thereby institutionalizing lives (Kohli, 1999; Mayer, 1997). With this shift, age and lifetime became central dimensions of concern for the state. While institutionalization occurs through state regulation and intervention, it also occurs through the structuring of pathways through educational institutions and work organizations. The effects of institutionalization presumably trickle down to the minds of individuals as they set and strive for developmental goals, thereby serving to create and constrain options, and to organize and link life experiences over time (Kohli & Meyer, 1986). *Standardization* refers to the regularity of life patterns and is a direct result of chronologization and institutionalization. When chronologization and institutionalization are high, the standardization of the life course should also be high.

At the same time, there is evidence that lives are (or have become) *de-chronologized, de-institutionalized*, and *de-standardized*.* New opportunities exist for individuals to move between or simultaneously pursue educational, work, and leisure experiences throughout life (rather than restrict them to the first, second, and third ages of life, respectively), and to better meet family demands and responsibilities by adjusting commitments in other spheres. This evidence suggests that the life course is becoming flexibly organized and experienced (for an extended discussion, see Settersten, 1999). For example, shifts in mortality, morbidity, and fertility have brought longer and healthier lives and reduced the period of active child rearing for most couples. Multiple pathways exist into and through retirement. Employers no longer invest in their employees as they once did, and individuals no longer work for a single organization for most of their careers. Educational programs for adults have grown, as has adult enrollment in higher education.

These and other indicators reveal that life course patterns that were once relatively standard are now crumbling. These shifts have led to significant worry, especially in Europe, that current structural arrangements, which are based on outdated models of life, may put at risk those individuals whose lives no longer follow older models (Beck, 2000; Heinz, 1996; Levy, 1996). Trends toward the individualization of the life course clearly bring new freedoms for the pursuit of personal goals, but they also bring new responsibilities and risks. The experimental nature of "do-it-yourself" biographies makes them prone to "biological slippage and collapse" (Beck, 2000). When individuals choose courses that are not widely shared by others and not reinforced by organizations, institutions, and social policies, individuals may lose important sources of informal and formal support along the way. In this scenario, personal failures, in particular, become no one's fault but one's own.

*It is important to note that evidence need not relate exclusively to *either* the chronologization, institutionalization, and standardization theses *or* the de-chronologization, de-institutionalization, and de-standardization theses. Indeed, evidence for both sides may co-exist and even be compatible. For example, while the timing of many life course transitions became more uniform over the course of the 20th century, their sequencing simultaneously became more diverse. This is especially true of transitions typically associated with entry into adulthood (Shanahan, 2000).

For each of these debates, systematic evidence is critically needed to evaluate how life course patterns have shifted in different spheres for successive cohorts of men and women, for subgroups of men and women (especially by race and social class), and across cultures. This and the prior section have explored age structuring in different life spheres at formal institutional and societal levels, and how these patterns have shifted historically. The next section explores age structuring at an informal, social-psychological level by turning attention to age norms and expectations.

## INFORMAL AGE STRUCTURING: NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS*

### What Are Age "Norms"? Definitions and Theoretical Starting Points

Life course scholarship often begins with the assumption that lives are socially structured, and that age becomes most interesting as a social phenomenon. The life course is conceptualized as a sequence of age-linked transitions, times when social roles change, when new rights, duties, and resources are encountered, and when identities are in flux. As members of groups, we share notions about what Neugarten (1969) called the "normal, expectable life cycle," ideas about the seasons of life and the markers within and between them.

Some age-related expectations are based on formal laws and policies. For example, age-based laws determine when one can vote, drink, marry, have consensual sex, serve the military, be prosecuted, and retire. Other expectations are based on statistical patterns, observed frequencies that reflect general patterns of human development and aging. For example, parents are quick to plot their children's height, weight, intelligence, and other characteristics relative to "normal" curves, and women expect to encounter menopause around age 50. Still other expectations are not closely linked to laws or statistical patterns, but may nonetheless be part of informal and shared ideas about the timing of transitions, such as when schooling or childbearing are to be finished or when children are to have left home. We relate easily to the notion that transitions can come "on time" or "off time," and that untimely transitions often catch us off guard and bring limited support from similarly aged peers.

Age-linked expectations about the life course clearly exist. But of what are they made? The answer, in part, depends on the vantage point from which we approach them. *Demographers* have used the terms "age norm" and "age-normative" to refer to statistical regularity in the actual timing of transitions in the population or for subgroups of the population. If we observe regularity in transition patterns, at least four possible explanations exist. (These explanations need not be mutually exclusive.) First, regularity in the timing of transitions may reflect universal patterns of human growth and maturation found across societies and historical times (though developmental scientists now assume that most of human development is instead

*Several related bodies of research are important to note, though they are outside the purview of this chapter. Life course research will benefit from renewed attention to each of these traditions (for a discussion, see Settersten, 1999). One body of research addresses *subjective age identification*. This research examines how old a person feels, into which age group an individual categorizes her or himself, or how old one would most like to be. A second body of research examines *age-related images and stereotypes*. This research explores commonplace images associated with people of different ages, especially with respect to their personality traits and characteristics. A third but small body of research explores *life phases*. This literature examines how individuals in a society divide the span of life into distinct categories, and the age boundaries and markers that are used to define categories and designate movement from one phase to another.

variable and contingent, not universal). Second, it may reflect shared ideas about the optimal timing of experiences. Third, it may reflect structural conditions that create different types of opportunities and constraints for different age groups. Fourth, it may reflect informal social norms that govern experiences. Research on the demography of life course transitions generally assumes that regularity in behavior reflects, and is driven by, informal social norms. (In contrast, the second explanation is emphasized in psychological approaches, and the third and fourth explanations in sociological approaches, as discussed below.) This assumption is problematic, as Marini (1984) also noted in her classic critique of scholarship on age norms, not only because behavior that is statistically regular need not be socially "normative," but because empirical research has not actually measured social norms (a point which will also be elaborated below).

*Psychologists* have used the terms "age norm" and "age-normative" in conjunction with investigations of the optimal ages ("best," "ideal," or "preferred" ages) at which to experience various transitions. The implicit assumption underlying most psychological theory and research on age norms is that these optimal ages equip individuals with a "mental map" of the life course (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). This map lends individuals a sense of what lies ahead, and gives them a chance to prepare for those experiences. The focus of psychological approaches to age norms is therefore on individuals, and on how these mental maps, as frames of reference for orienting behavior, fulfill important needs for predictability and order.

*Sociologists* have a theoretical interest in how age is central to social organization and the maintenance of social order. The essence of sociological theorizing about age norms is tied to social prescriptions and proscriptions governing the timing of transitions (for a recent multidisciplinary discussion of social norms, see Hechter & Opp, 2001; for further sociological discussion, see Horne, 2001). It is from this perspective that I will later evaluate empirical evidence. For sociologists, informal social norms are defined by three components. First, they are *prescriptions for*, or *proscriptions against*, engaging in certain behaviors and taking on certain roles. Second, there is *consensus* about these rules. And third, these rules are enforced through various mechanisms of *social control*, particularly positive sanctions to keep people "on track," and negative sanctions to bring "back into line" those individuals who stray from these tracks. If an age-normative system is operating, individuals should be aware of the sanctions and consequences for violating norms, and be sensitive to social approval and disapproval. These sanctions may be informal (e.g., interpersonal sanctions in the form of persuasion, encouragement, reinforcement, ridicule, gossip, ostracism) or formal (e.g., political, legal, or economic sanctions). For example, when people deviate from a norm, their behavior is not only evaluated negatively by others, but it is often taken to reflect something problematic about their personalities or abilities (e.g., Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995).

Psychologists and sociologists alike assume that norms are "internalized" through socialization processes that incorporate "collective-cultural" meanings into individual consciousness, meanings which become so ingrained that they seem part of nature itself (Dannefer, 1996; see also Settersten, 2002; Valsiner & Lawrence, 1997). The psychological viewpoint ends once norms are internalized as frames of reference and "brought to life" as individuals do their part. But individuals will not always do their part, and it is here that sociological perspectives continue. For sociologists, deviations from norms become problematic when they jeopardize social order and functioning. Norms become a way to "construct appropriate individuals", to use Meyer's (1986) phrase. When *informal* norms are strong, individuals regulate themselves and others, and the need for *formal* regulation is low. Yet the strong ethos of individualism typical of modern societies may lead individuals to regulate themselves and others only loosely, if at all—which, in turn, may prompt the need for greater *formal* regulation, bringing us full-circle to the institutional and societal concerns that opened the chapter.

## Earlier Evidence on Optimal Age Norms

Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) conducted the classic study of informal age norms in the late 1950s. The larger project on which their study was based—the Kansas City Study of Adult Life—not only had a profound impact on what was then a "young" field of gerontology, but also on its evolution in the decades since (Hendricks, 1994). Neugarten's landmark study utilized two specific instruments: "Timetables for Men and Women" and the "Age Norm Checklist". The 11-item "Timetables for Men and Women" instrument asked respondents for the "best age" for accomplishing a variety of major life transitions (e.g., "What do you think is the best age for a man to marry?" "What do you think is the best age for most people to leave home?"). For these items, respondents provided a specific age or age band. To address the issue of consensus, Neugarten and her colleagues examined the proportion of individuals who cited an age (or ages) within a small band that "produced the most accurate reflection of the consensus that existed in the data" (pp. 712–713). Depending on the breadth of responses given for any particular item, the age band they used to calculate consensus was widely variable, ranging anywhere from 2 to 15 years.

The issue of sanctions was addressed in a separate "Age Norm Checklist," which tapped feelings about minor lifestyle behaviors. The 48-item checklist asked whether respondents "approve of, feel favorable" or "disapprove of, feel unfavorable" about a variety of behaviors at three specific ages that the investigators deemed inappropriate, marginal, or appropriate (e.g., "A woman who wears bikini on the beach—when she's 45; when she's 30; when she's 18" or "A man who buys himself a red sports car—when he's 60; when he's 45; when he's 25").

Negarten's study supported the notion that a set of age expectations underlie adult life, and that men and women are aware of the social clocks that operate in their lives and of their own timing in relation to them. They demonstrated a high degree of consensus about the age-linked life transitions in the "timetables" instrument, and about the age-appropriate or inappropriate lifestyle behaviors in the "age norm checklist".

Two subsequent studies are direct replications of Neugarten's study: Passuth and Maines' (1981) Chicago study, and Plath and Ikeda's (1975) Japanese study. One other study is a partial replication of Neugarten's study and addresses age timetables for a wide range of transitions and in a broad sample: Zepelin, Sills, and Heath's (1987) study of white- and blue-collar men and women in Michigan, California, and Florida.* Taken together, these subsequent studies supported Neugarten's contentions and demonstrated a rather remarkable consensus on timetables for major life transitions, in particular. Relative to Neugarten's original study, however, data from these later studies suggest that individuals not only advocate later ages for most transitions, but a wider range of ages. Nonetheless, the average values cited for transitions generally reveal an age-based sequence of transitions comparable to that found in Neguarten's study.

## Recent Evidence on Prescriptive-Proscriptive Age Norms

The studies noted above measured optimal ages for accomplishing life transitions, not age norms in a prescriptive-proscriptive sense. While these studies addressed the issue of consensus,

*Several other studies continue the tradition begun by Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965). These include Fallo-Mitchell and Ryff (1982), Gee (1990), Peterson (1996), Rook, Catalano, and Dooley (1989), Roscoe and Peterson (1989), and Veevers, Gee, and Wister (1996). Because these studies have restricted samples or address a limited range of experiences, they are not discussed here.

they largely ignored the issue of whether social sanctions and other consequences exist for violating age-related expectations. The lack of attention to sanctions is troublesome because it is reasonable that consensus can exist without sanctions. To further complicate matters, it is conceivable that individuals can be "punished" without being sanctioned. Being off time can be inconvenient and uncomfortable—and even come with costs for the individual—but these penalties need not result from social sanctioning. Some phenomena may also be statistically regular but inherently cannot be approached on prescriptive or proscriptive terms. For example, this is the case with menopause, widowhood, and the death of parents. These transitions become predictable at certain points in life, but individuals who experience these transitions early or late are not likely to be negatively sanctioned by others.

The age-normative framework has been widely accepted in life course scholarship, despite the many limitations noted above and a paucity of research on the topic. How relevant are these assumptions in today's world? Is there consensus about informal age timetables, and does such consensus, even when it exists, constitute informal cultural "norms"? In response to these questions, let me highlight some recent research with Gunhild Hagestad.

Because prior research on age norms focused on convenient or restricted samples, Hagestad and I studied a random representative sample of 319 adults 18 and older in the Chicago metropolitan area (for further information on the sample and methods, see Settersten & Hagestad, 1996b). The interviews explored individuals' thinking about "age deadlines" for family, educational, and work transitions.* Past research on age norms had been plagued by a host of problems, not the least of which was the ambiguity of items meant to tap "norms" (e.g., items eliciting fuzzy bands of "best" ages for "people" to accomplish various transitions). In an effort to improve the precision of measurement, we not only asked about men and women separately, but clearly targeted inquiry at upper age boundaries. We also developed items that would address the three critical components of norms noted earlier: (a) prescriptive or proscriptive rules that are (b) supported by consensus and (c) enforced through social sanctions.

The structure of the interview schedule emerged directly out of this framework. Respondents were first asked to identify the age deadline for each transition (e.g., "By what age should a man retire?"). Respondents who mentioned a specific deadline were asked to discuss why men or women should meet it (e.g., "Why should a man retire by that age?") and the potential consequences for those who do not (e.g., "Does anything happen to him if he doesn't retire by that age? Are there any consequences that come to mind?"). Respondents' ideas were probed with a series of open-ended questions, the responses to which were noted verbatim and later coded. Three categories of response are central to the findings highlighted below: "interpersonal sanctions" (which tapped social pressures to adhere to deadlines and negative social repercussions for violating deadlines); "development" (which covered concerns about self and personality, as well as physical development and health); and "sequencing" (which captured concerns about the order of multiple transitions). Examples of responses for these and the remaining six categories can be found in Settersten and Hagestad (1996b).

The upper panel of Table 4-1 presents descriptive information on the *family transitions*—leaving home, returning home, marrying, entering parenthood, completing

*Several age expectations related to health and death were also explored: expecting the death of one's spouse, the death of one's parents, and one's own failing health. These transitions are not discussed here. For basic findings, see Settersten (1997).

**TABLE 4-1. Perceived Age Deadlines for Life Course Transitions**

| | About Men's Lives ($n$ = 161) | | | | About Women's Lives ($n$ = 158) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % Perceiving a deadline | Average Age deadline (SD) | % Mode (age) | % 6-year band | % Perceiving a deadline | Average Age deadline (SD) | % Mode (age) | % 6-year band |
| *Family transitions* | | | | | | | | |
| Leave home | 77.6 | 21.70 (2.6) | 20.9 (21) | 72.3 (20–25) | 69.0 | 21.90 (3.3) | 18.9 (18) | 83.4 (18–23) |
| Return home | 38.5 | 27.16 (5.2) | 26.7 (30) | 53.3 (25–30) | 23.4 | 28.20 (5.7) | 32.0 (25) | 56.0 (25–30) |
| Marry | 85.1 | 27.89 (4.3) | 25.8 (25) | 74.2 (25–30) | 82.3 | 25.93 (3.9) | 35.2 (25) | 67.2 (25–30) |
| Enter Parenthood | 75.2 | 29.88 (4.4) | 22.7 (30) | 60.8 (25–30) | 78.5 | 28.84 (5.2) | 28.4 (30) | 66.6 (25–30) |
| Complete childbearing | 70.2 | 44.19 (7.3) | 34.7 (40) | 51.1 (40–45) | 86.1 | 39.08 (4.8) | 37.4 (40) | 72.1 (35–40) |
| Enter Grandparenthood | 75.2 | 52.30 (7.2) | 27.6 (50) | 43.6 (50–55) | 70.9 | 50.96 (7.2) | 31.5 (50) | 52.0 (50–55) |
| *Educational/work transitions* | | | | | | | | |
| Exit full-time schooling | 63.4 | 26.37 (4.5) | 15.5 (25) | 60.8 (25–30) | 48.1 | 25.51 (3.4) | 31.1 (25) | 72.2 (21–26) |
| Enter full-time work | 77.6 | 22.79 (3.3) | 26.7 (22) | 67.4 (20–25) | 75.3 | 21.66 (2.6) | 19.4 (18, 21) | 75.3 (18–23) |
| Settle on career/job | 79.5 | 28.96 (4.8) | 41.4 (30) | 69.3 (25–30) | 69.6 | 28.92 (4.7) | 31.5 (30) | 61.9 (25–30) |
| Peak of work career | 82.0 | 41.69 (7.8) | 21.1 (40) | 43.1 (35–40) | 67.7 | 39.80 (8.4) | 18.4 (40) | 37.8 (40–45) |
| Reach Retirement | 54.7 | 61.31 (5.7) | 29.6 (65) | 62.9 (60–65) | 46.8 | 59.32 (6.7) | 20.0 (65) | 53.8 (60–65) |

*Source*: Settersten and Hagestad, 1996a, 1996b.

childbearing, and entering grandparenthood.* For each transition, information is provided on the percentage of respondents who perceived an age deadline, the average age deadline and standard deviation, the modal age, and the percentage of responses that fell within a 6-year age band (as a measure of the concentration of the distribution).†

The majority of respondents perceived age deadlines for most of these transitions. The only family transition for which age limits were not often cited was for a return to a parental home. Family support of this type was not viewed as something that should be limited by age. Instead, a move home would depend on the needs and circumstances of the child. Deadlines for leaving home and age limits on returning home were cited more often for men than women, whereas deadlines for entering parenthood and, especially, completing childbearing were cited more often for women than men. The latter findings are clearly tied to the fact that women's biological clocks impose significant constraints on their reproduction, despite the fact that recent advances in reproductive technologies bring the potential to extend these possibilities.

While the distributions exhibited significant range, they were also fairly concentrated around modal values. About half or more of the deadlines for each family transition clustered within a six-year span. The range of deadlines was smaller, and the distributions more concentrated, for women's lives than men's. Again, this was linked to the fact that women have pressing biological clocks for several family transitions.

The bottom panel of Table 4-1 presents parallel information on the *educational and work transitions*—exiting full-time schooling, entering full-time work, settling on a career/job area, reaching the peak of the work trajectory, and entering retirement.‡ For men's lives, the majority of respondents cited deadlines for all five transitions, though the proportions were low for exiting full-time schooling and entering retirement. For women's lives, exiting full-time schooling and entering retirement were not even viewed by the majority as being age-dependent. Across the board, deadlines were cited more often for men than women. The distributions for most transitions were also fairly clustered around modal values, with the exception of reaching the peak of the work trajectory, which had an especially large range and was the least concentrated distribution for men and women alike. These data are consistent with Kohli's (1994) suggestion that once individuals enter the workforce, there are no normative transitions until retirement—though our findings suggest that even entering the workforce and retirement may not be truly normative (i.e., culturally prescribed and socially regulated). Nonetheless, there may be enough regularity in work trajectories to speak of the organization of the life course *through* work, particularly at the firm level and as part of the education–work–leisure tripartition (Kohli, 1994).

Two trends emerge when these spheres are compared. First, deadlines are generally mentioned more often in relation to family transitions than to educational and work transitions, and for both men and women. This supports the hypothesis that a greater degree of *informal*

*Two family-related items address age *proscriptions* rather than prescriptions: Returning home (the age after which a man or woman should not be allowed to return to his or her parents' home) and completing childbearing (the age after which a man or woman should no longer have a child). For a more complete discussion of the family transitions as a set, see Settersten and Hagestad (1996b). For an in-depth look at leaving and returning home, see Settersten (1998b). For similar Canadian data, see Veevers, Gee, and Wister (1996).

†To determine the 6-year band, we took the modal value and that set of values on either side of the mode that maximized the degree of concentration within 6 years. This band served as a crude anchor with which to compare distributions.

‡For a more complete discussion of the educational and work transitions as a set, and of how they compare to the family transitions, see Settersten and Hagestad (1996a). For an in-depth look at the transition to retirement, see Settersten (1998a).

age structuring may exist in spheres for which the degree of *formal* age structuring is not likely as strong. Second, deadlines are generally perceived more often for men than women, regardless of sphere (with the exception of childbearing). This supports the hypothesis that men's lives are (or are perceived as) more rigidly structured by age, while women's lives are (or are perceived as) more fluid, unpredictable, and discontinuous.

In analyses not shown here, non-whites, non-professionals, and those with lower educational levels cited age deadlines more often than their counterparts. These trends may be understood in terms of prevalent perceptions—and realities—of limited opportunities for minorities, the underclass, and the working class, and the fact that advantage or disadvantage cumulate over time, heightening the importance of age and early experiences. Members of these same subgroups also gave earlier deadlines than their counterparts. These trends support the notion that clocks of many types—especially those related to social roles and physical health—may tick faster for members of these groups, what Burton, Allison, and Obeidallah (1995) describe as an "accelerated life course." The pace of these timetables may be especially pronounced in adolescence, as young people from these groups often move quickly into adult roles and responsibilities and face (or feel themselves to have) foreclosed futures (Geronimus, 1996).

Also in analyses not shown here, the central dimensions underlying individuals' thinking about the importance of age deadlines overwhelmingly related to concerns about individual growth and potential, and then to concerns about the place of particular transitions within a larger sequence. This was true of both the sphere of family and the sphere of education and work. At the same time, consequences were seldom perceived for men or women who miss deadlines. Late timing of transitions was generally viewed as being acceptable, accompanied by little social tension, and without major consequences for the individual or significant others.

These findings seem paradoxical. On the one hand, individuals are able to cite deadlines for many transitions and discuss the developmental gains associated with meeting those deadlines. On the other hand, they do not automatically associate an *inability* to achieve deadlines with significant developmental losses. Developmental benefits and losses are not simply viewed as two sides of the same coin. Individuals' visions of the life course are complex, diverse, and flexible. Above all, they find it imperative to "live a life of their own," to paraphrase Beck (2000). Timetables that are self-constructed and self-imposed prevail over general cultural timetables. What is crucial to individuals' thinking, however, is that when personal timetables mesh with cultural timetables, the process of navigating life is easier—and when life is easier to navigate, development comes more easily. Crafting a life of one's own, especially when it goes against the grain, is viewed as a difficult enterprise. But this need not mean that one's development is compromised in the process. To the contrary, developmental gains may even be greater, especially over the long run, when individuals must rely on themselves and even endure hardships as they go about composing their lives as they wish. Individuals approach age deadlines as flexible developmental markers that guide the life course, not as widely shared and firmly enforced age norms that dictate it, as scholars once assumed.

The tremendous emphasis on individual growth and potential in our interviews is in line with what Meyer (1986) calls the dominant "cultural theory of the individual" in the United States. This "theory" emphasizes self-esteem and an internal locus of control, and takes life to be a continuous journey and discovery of personhood. The high degree of "psychologizing" reflects the rapid and deep penetration of psychology into most aspects of American life, evident in popular television talk shows, self-help books, magazines, and newspaper advice columns. The ever-present language of "therapeutic culture" (Karp, 1996) has risen conjointly with the ideology of individualism. While these forces emphasize self-esteem and an internal

locus of control, they have, paradoxically, also produced an "age of melancholy" characterized by the erosion of significant social attachments and unprecedented levels of alienation, depression, and mental "dis-ease" (Karp, 1996).

The opening sections of this chapter focused on institutional and societal-level processes, while this section has focused on individual-level processes. Both sets of processes are simultaneously at work and clearly influence each other. For example, formal laws and policies may reflect, create, or be reshaped by patterns of behavior. As noted earlier, laws and policies are often explicitly based on age or implicitly based on judgments about the nature of particular periods of life. Consider the shifting boundary of retirement discussed earlier. Organizational policies and practices have often encouraged individuals to retire early or take "bridge jobs," while Social Security and Medicare rules have reinforced age 65 as the appropriate age for retirement. In the case of Social Security, however, later age-eligibility thresholds are now being phased in. In addition, longstanding earnings penalties to Social Security recipients were also recently lifted. These changes not only bring to an end a policy that has, since the time of the Depression, devalued and discouraged the work of older adults. They are interventions meant to actively redirect the course of behavioral patterns, which in turn will undoubtedly affect informal age-related expectations about work and retirement. (Questions about social policy and the life course are addressed elsewhere in this volume. For additional discussion, see Settersten, 2003.)

## UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP

The biggest challenges confronting this area of study are to clarify what is meant by "age norms," explicate the levels at and units with which age norms are studied, and specify their form and content. Do age-related expectations constitute "norms" or are they simply "cognitive maps"? As Modell (1997, p. 286) also asks, "do age norms dispose or do they just propose, or do they perhaps dispose for others but only propose for oneself? Or are they instead hopes, or mere verbal nods to a set of rules thrown off by the activities of the state and institutions, well-known but hollow?" If age-related expectations are really norms, we must approach them as prescriptive and proscriptive phenomena, demonstrate consensus, and find evidence of sanctions for departures from these rules. This is tricky theoretically and empirically because norms and sanctions cannot really be separated: Identifying an age norm requires observing a sanction, so age norms cannot be studied independently of their enforcement mechanism (Lawrence, 1996).

In contrast, if we take age-related expectations to be cognitive maps, we must approach them differently. From this standpoint, we need not care whether they are truly normative (i.e., "oughts" backed by consensus and sanctions). We need only recognize that these expectations help guide and evaluate our behavior and that of others. Life course scholarship also generally assumes that age expectations are clear. In reality, however, individuals are often unaware of these expectations, either because the expectations are unclear or because they are part of the taken-for-granted world (Lawrence, 1996). For this reason, age expectations are especially challenging to study. It is difficult to get people to discuss things they take for granted, and because age is so commonplace, it may produce indifference or be invisible. Worse still, when people are asked direct questions about the taken-for-granted, they may feel "ridicule, discomfort, embarrassment, or even hostility" (Lawrence, 1996, p. 210). To study these phenomena effectively, we must use methods that make conscious information that is

difficult to access. Innovative methods, such as those developed as part of Project A.G.E. (Keith et al., 1994), help us do so.

Another definitional problem relates to the fact that norms are necessarily group-level phenomena. Whose norms are they, and how clearly defined are the parameters of the group? In addition, how do individuals, as members of many groups, manage multiple, and even conflicting, norms? These questions relate to how broadly or specifically norms operate, and whether they operate at varying strengths for different types of experiences. For example, "national" norms may exist for "highly institutionalized" age-linked transitions, such as the transition into school or retirement (Dannefer, 1996). Other norms may operate locally, such as work-related norms, which may vary by occupation and organizational context (Lashbrook, 1996; Lawrence, 1996), or childbearing norms, which may vary across families or across ethnic communities (Burton, 1996; Geronimus, 1996). These examples also beg a larger question: Where do norms have their greatest strength and create their greatest meaning? Action at the "meso" level—in the central settings of everyday life—seems especially important to understand, especially that which occurs in families, peer and friendship groups, school settings, work organizations, and neighborhoods. It is in these settings that the meanings and uses of age are directly encountered and experienced, and in which age norms, if they exist, will be clearest and strongest. Little research to date has been aimed at understanding the form and content of age expectations in these settings.

Life maps in individuals' minds often cover whole sequences or pathways. But empirically, research has focused on separate transitions, sometimes piled on top of each other to create synthetic pathways. This type of inquiry misses important questions about how multiple transitions are *sequenced* and even *interdependent* (e.g., timing of school completion often conditions the timing of marriage, which in turn often conditions the timing of parenthood). It also misses important questions about the *distance* between multiple transitions (e.g., the spacing of subsequent children in relation to the timing of the first birth), the *density* of transitions (e.g., the number of children born to an individual within a particular period of time), and the *duration* of transitions (e.g., the time spent in a relationship before marriage, and the time spent in a marriage before the birth of a first child).

Much remains to be learned about the repercussions of "timely" and "untimely" behavior. The effects of timing likely depend on the degree to which it constrains or promotes later opportunities, whether it accelerates or delays subsequent experiences, and how well it fits within, or gives shape to, a trajectory or set of trajectories. Sociologists, in particular, assume that negative consequences result for individuals who deviate from norms, and that positive rewards come to those who conform to norms. Neither of these propositions has been well explored. For example, we know little about how adherence or non-adherence to norms might have positive or negative effects on opportunities in education, work, family, or leisure, or on the physical and psychological development of individuals. It is entirely possible that being on time may not bring the advantages, and being off time the disadvantages, that earlier work on age norms has assumed. Indeed, being off time may even carry positive effects. For example, managers who are viewed by their superiors as being ahead of schedule are given higher performance evaluations; those who are behind schedule are penalized with lower evaluations (Lawrence, 1996). Consider, too, a 12-year-old who attends college and a 20-year-old who receives an Academy Award nomination (Lawrence, 1996). In these cases, the individual receives high status because these accomplishments come early. (Of course, the larger cultural context conditions such evaluations. In the United States, early achievements are especially likely to be rewarded.) Another possible positive effect of being "off time" is that individuals who might otherwise be dealing with multiple role transitions are able to avoid that strain by hastening or delaying one or more of these transitions.

Much remains to be learned about how age-related expectations matter in developmental decision-making: in shaping the types of goals individuals set at different points in life, the strategies and resources individuals use to pursue them, and the conditions under which they engage or disengage goals, especially in the face of age-based opportunities and constraints. The "life-span theory of control" and corresponding OPS (optimization in primary and secondary control) models developed by Heckhausen and her colleagues are particularly fruitful areas for future scholarship in this area (e.g., Heckhausen, 1997, 2000; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1999). These authors suggest that individuals, as they grow older, express an awareness of a reduced potential for growth in themselves and control over their environments. In response, individuals narrow their goals to those that are most age-appropriate. They select fewer goals aimed at achieving developmental gains and more goals aimed at minimizing developmental losses. And they compensate for losses in primary control (altering the external world to fit one's needs and desires) by more often relying on secondary control strategies (which instead target internal processes and therefore free up resources for more limited attempts to establish primary control). (For empirical illustrations related to intimate relationships, childbearing, and health and financial stress, see, respectively, Wrosch & Heckhausen [1999], Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson [2001], and Wrosch, Heckhausen, & Lachman [2000].) These ideas are also in line with the work of Brandtstädter (e.g., 1998), who suggests that individuals naturally shift from "assimilative" to "accommodative" coping strategies as they age.

Similarly, it is important to examine how individuals regulate their development in the face of "non-normative" demands (Wrosch & Freund, 2001).* When developmental demands are non-normative, individuals must play more active roles to compensate for the lack of structure, such as when historical events or periods of social change disturb existing norms, or as life experiences become de-standardized (see also Beck, 2000; Heinz, 2002). As Heinz (2002) argues, "doing biography" in post-traditional societies means relying less on institutionalized criteria, conventionalized behaviors, and organizational routines, and relying more on self-initiated sequences. Multiple options exist for family and other social relationships, and for navigating the spheres of education and work. These now seem more weakly defined by cultural age norms than in the past—though the degree to which biographies have been freed from norms related to participation in social roles and institutions, and have become less dependent on social class and gender inequalities, remain open empirical questions.

Finally, several specific types of timetables must be explored: "general timetables," "specialized timetables," "personal timetables," and "interdependent timetables" (Nydegger, 1986; Settersten, 1999). *General timetables* are widely shared timetables for major transitions that most individuals experience. In contrast, *specialized timetables* exist for specific populations or for specific kinds of experiences. For example, there is a critical need to systematically document and explain variability in age expectations and in actual behavioral patterns across divisions such as cohort, sex, race, and social class. We also have much to learn about "deep structure" cultural differences in understandings and experiences of age and the life course, and how these have shifted historically (Fry, 2003).

*Personal timetables* are those timetables that are "not shared and not normative" (Nydegger, 1986, p. 145). Little is known about personal timetables, and the degree to which they mesh with specialized or generalized timetables. Perhaps the most complicated type of

*"Non-normative" experiences are understood to be those experiences that (1) are not generally expected by individuals (such as divorce or the death of a child) and only loosely coupled with age, if at all; or (2) occur much earlier or later than expected (such as when the death of a spouse happens in early adulthood, or when the birth of a child occurs during adolescence or midlife).

personal timetable is the *interdependent timetable*. The lives of individuals are intimately woven together, and little is known about how the timetables of intimates fit together or are jointly negotiated, and the consequences of good or bad fits. Several recent papers begin to reveal the importance of interdependent timetables. Hagestad's (1996) "personal ethnography" of illness examines how an unexpected illness for an individual causes "ripple effects" throughout familial and social networks. Similarly, Cohler, Pickett, and Cook (1996) describe how schizophrenic adults and their families live "outside of time" as their lives are disrupted by episodes of hospitalization, discharge, and re-hospitalization. Tobin (1996), too, shows how parents of mentally retarded children become "perpetual parents," faced with the responsibility of actively caring for their children all their lives, even into advanced old age.

In closing, it is interesting to note that two major principles in developmental science—one stressing the "normative," and one stressing "heterogeneity"—are at odds with one another (Dannefer, 1996). Too great an emphasis on the normative brings the risk of neglecting diversity, but too great an emphasis on diversity brings the risk of overlooking important shared experiences within and between groups. As Dannefer (2003 and in this volume) notes, many of our descriptions and explanations of life course patterns are irrelevant to the everyday reality of many groups of individuals worldwide. (Dannefer provides interesting illustrations related to the lives of child laborers in Pakistan, gang members in New York and Los Angeles, and Amazonian Shamans.) What, then, can we expect of life course scholarship if it does not reflect the range of actual patterns globally?

Over 25 years ago, Neugarten and Hagestad (1976) asked whether age had become more or less significant for individuals, groups, and societies. Their question had no simple answers, for in some ways age had become more important, and in other ways age had become less important. "It is the mark of a complex society," they remarked, "that both pictures [may be] true. It is also a reasonable prediction that in the decades that lie ahead, the pictures are likely to become neither more stable nor more coherent" (p. 51). Their prediction has come true, for now, decades later, the pictures seem more complicated than ever before.

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