

# AGE NORMS, INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES, AND THE TIMING OF MARKERS OF TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Jeylan T. Mortimer, Sabrina Oesterle and  
Helga Krüger

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter compares the timing and sequencing of educational completion and first parenthood for samples of U.S. youth and German women. We garner evidence bearing on two hypotheses. The first is that the timing of transition to parenthood is governed by age norms; the second, that this transition is influenced by the incentives posed by distinct school-to-work transition structures. We conclude that strongly institutionalized school-to-work bridges pose greater incentives for the completion of educational programs in Germany and more clearly regulate the timing of parenthood. The more loose connection between school and work in the United States encourages greater variation in the timing of parenthood, and more first births before schooling is complete.*

---

The Structure of the Life Course: Standardized? Individualized? Differentiated?

Advances in Life Course Research, Volume 9, 175–203

Copyright © 2005 by Elsevier Ltd.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved

ISSN: 1040-2608/doi:10.1016/S1040-2608(04)09007-0

The timing and sequencing of markers of adulthood (e.g., the age of leaving home, full-time labor force participation, marriage, and parenthood) have been closely scrutinized by sociologists and demographers (Mortimer, 1992; Mortimer & Aronson, 2000). In the United States and other post-industrial societies, these events have been delayed as the period of adolescence has become extended in response to multiple, interconnected macrostructural conditions (Arnett, 2000; Buchmann, 1989; Heinz, 1999). Of particular note, years in school have increased and youth are increasingly postponing both marriage and parenthood. While the demographic trends are clearly observable (Shanahan, 2000), the forces underlying these patterns are little understood. Do age norms, and related sanctions, govern the transition to adulthood? Or are transitional events mainly responsive to institutional structures and associated material incentives (Marini, 1984)? We address these questions by examining two important transitional events, the completion of formal education and the initiation of parenthood, in the United States and Germany, societies that have markedly different institutional bridges to adulthood (Mortimer & Krüger, 2000).

According to the “age norm” hypothesis (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976; Settersten, 1999, 2003), significant life transitions in educational, occupational, and familial realms are regulated by clear, but informal, understandings about the timing at which such events should occur. These understandings are thought to have moral force with a distinct sense of “right” or “ought” attached to them. Norms may be geared to age itself. For example, a student in Germany who receives a university diploma at the age of 25 or 26 and completes the doctoral dissertation by the age of 28 or 29 is considered excellent, while older students with the same accomplishments are not judged as positively.

Age norms may also refer to particular sequential patterns. For example, one should have a promising position in the labor market before marrying, or one should marry before having children. Persons whose actions are in accord with age-based or sequential norms will feel that they are “on time” and others will provide approval or other positive sanctions for normatively timed transitions. Those who do not abide by the timing norms will feel that they are “early” or “late” and may be subject to more or less subtle sanctions that reinforce feelings of deviance or nonconformity.

A plausible alternative hypothesis, specifying “institutional determination,” is that the timing of transitions is regulated by the material incentives and other consequences that follow from adherence to structured pathways. Institutional determination is most clear with respect to legal constraints. For example, laws in modern societies govern the age at which persons can

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/9643134>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/9643134>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)