

Normative timetables of partnership, marriage, parenthood and retirement in contemporary Europe

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Abstract

In contemporary Europe, important life event like parental home leaving, marriage, parenthood, and retirement are undergoing substantial delays. The magnitude of postponement varies not only among different socioeconomic groups within a country but also across different countries. The shift in timing may reflect evolving social norms regarding these life events. Unlike previous research that often focused on the age norms of a certain life event solely, our study takes a comprehensive life course perspective, examining the normative timing of multiple events, including cohabitation, marriage, parenthood, and retirement. We aim to address two research questions: 1) “What is the normative timetable for these life events?” and 2) “How does the normative timetable vary across different socioeconomic groups and different countries?” To shed light on this, we draw upon theories of Second Demographic Transition, economic uncertainty and social welfare. Our primary data source is the 2018 European Social Survey, which includes a module on the actual and normative timing of life events. Employing a latent class analysis, we will identify the patterns in normative timing of partnership, marriage, parenthood and retirement. Subsequently, we will conduct a multilevel analysis to explore the individual and country-level factors associated with these patterns. The findings will present an updated portrayal of normative timetable for key life events across Europe. By exploring variations within and between countries, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex family and population dynamics in Europe.

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Introduction

Nowadays, important life events, such as parental home leaving, marriage, parenthood, and retirement are postponed greatly in European countries. The magnitude of postponement varies not only across sub-groups of the population within a certain country but also across different countries in Europe. According to the life course theory, individuals construct their life course through their choices and actions within constraints of social institutions and cultures (Elder et al., 2003). Social norms, as one of the constraints, create the normative timetables and structure social pathways of education, work, and family. The postponed timing for these important life events could be a behavioral outcome of a changed normative timetable in people's mind. Many studies revealed the existence of age norms for childbearing, parental home leaving, and partnership (Billari et al., 2011; Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Liefbroer et al., 2015). For instance, Billari et al. (2011) documented a social age deadline for childbearing in many European countries, based on the 2006 European Social Survey. Liefbroer and Billari (2010) displayed upper and lower age limits for leaving the parental home, living with a partner, and having a child in Netherland where the individualization process is fairly advanced. However, the previous research failed to link these age norms together. Age norms for different life events are actually embedded in the normative timetables that reflect social expectations on sequence, timing, and ages for important life transitions (Elder et al., 2003). Rather than focusing on a certain life event solely, this study will investigate normative timing of different life events together from a life course perspective, covering events of living with a partner, getting married, becoming parents, getting retirement. The first research question is "What is the normative timetable of these life events?"

A following research question reads: "how does the normative timetable of these life events differ across different socioeconomic groups and between different countries?" There are three theoretical perspectives guiding us to understand these heterogeneities in the normative timetables.

Firstly, Second Demographic Transition (SDT) posits that postponement of partnership, marriage, and childbearing is driven by the post-modern ideology prioritizing self-fulfillment. Studies also showed that people wish to work longer for self-fulfillment (Bratun & Zurc, 2022; Hovbrandt et al., 2019; Sewdas et al., 2017). Individuals with higher education are often more likely to have post-modern ideology. Therefore, **Hypothesis 1a** is that individuals with higher education would have a postponed normative timing of forming first partnership, entry into marriage, transition to parenthood, and retirement. **Hypothesis 1b** is that individuals in countries where SDT is more advanced are more likely to have a postponed normative timing of these four events than those in countries that are in an earlier stage of SDT.

Secondly, from the perspective of New Household Economics, economic uncertainties will reduce the economic gain of partnership formation (Becker, 1991). Specifically, individuals who are unemployed or in insecure economic positions, particularly men, tend to delay partnership and family formation. By doing so, they wish to give themselves more time to build up economic resources to increase their value in the marriage market. Beside, economic security is often seen as a precondition of having children (Fahlén & Oláh, 2015). As a result, when experiencing economic uncertainties, individuals may postpone childbearing until their economic aspirations have been realized (Becker, 1991; Easterlin, 1976). In a similar vein, expectation of delaying retirement could also arise when individuals foresee economic insecurity (Szinovacz et al., 2014). Altogether, **Hypothesis 2a** is that individuals who are in a situation of employment or income insecurity would have a postponed normative timing of forming first partnership, entry into marriage, transition to parenthood, and retirement. **Hypothesis 2b** is that individuals in countries where there is higher economic insecurity

are more likely to have a postponed normative timing of these four events than those in countries where there is less economic uncertainty.

Thirdly, from the perspective of welfare states, the welfare regime is the overarching institution that would shape the life course, affecting transitions from school to first employment, from parental household to independent family formation, from employment to retirement (Anxo et al., 2010; Leisering, 2003). Anxo et al. (2010) also argued that the welfare states have the potential to reduce inequality in opportunity and outcomes, particularly the inequality that is generated by class or family position. Therefore, it is very likely that the difference in normative timing between different socioeconomic groups would be smaller in countries with social democratic welfare regime. **Hypothesis 3** is that individual socioeconomic status would interact with the social welfare regime, specifically that the difference in the normative timing across socioeconomic groups would smallest in countries with social democratic welfare.

Data and methods

This study is based on European Social Survey in 2018, in which there is a special module about timing of life, including attitudes toward ideal age of key life events. In total, 49,519 respondents aged 15 and over from 29 countries in Europe were interviewed. Table 1 shows the measurements for ideal age to start partnership, get married, become parents, and retire permanently. Respondents were randomly assigned to the male or female version of these questions. Currently, we restricted our attention to those who provided numeric answer to these questions. While 16,516 respondents provided numeric answer to the female version of questions, 16,817 provided numeric answer to the male version questions. Numeric answer to the ideal age to start partnership, getting married and becoming parents were classified into 6 categories: 1=age <20, 2=age 20-24, 3=age 25-29, 4=age 30-34, 5=age 35-39, and 6=age 40-44. Numeric answer to the ideal age to retire permanently was classed into 6 categories: 1=age<50, 2=age 50-54, 3=age 55-59, 4= 60-64, 5=65-69, and 6=>70.

Independent variables at the individual level. Education level was used as a proxy measuring the post-modern ideology of individuals. Employment status, the type of work contract (open-ended vs fixed-term), and perception of income were used as proxies measuring economic uncertainty of individuals. Birth cohort, gender and religiousness will be controlled.

Independent variables at the macro level. Second Demographic Transition index and attitudinal index of Second Demographic Transition will be calculated based on OECD family database, Eurostat, and European Value Survey. The two index are used as proxy measuring each country's stage of Second Demographic Transition. National unemployment rate, percentage of precarious employment, and percentage of employed persons expecting a job loss in 2015-2018 obtained from Eurostat will be used to measure the economic uncertainty at the macro level. Regarding the classification of the welfare regime, we will adopt four types of welfare regimes (i.e. Socio-democratic, conservative, liberal, and Southern European) put forward by Esping-Andersen (1999).

To identify the patterns of normative timing of the four life events, a latent class analysis (LCA) will be applied to the two sub-samples answering the female and male versions of questions separately. Model fit will be evaluated using the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), with lower values denoting a better fit. The Lo-Mendall-Rubin (LMR) likelihood ratio test is used to compare k-1 and k class LCA models. A low p-value of less than 0.05 indicates rejection of the k-1 class model in favor of the k class model. The LCA models will be evaluated based on the entropy measure, with a high value (> 0.8) representing adequate classification quality of the mixture model. After LCA, the multilevel multinomial regression will be applied to examine the individual-level and macro-level predictors of memberships of different classes.

Preliminary results

Figure 1 and 2 show the results from LCA. As Figure 1 shows, there are four patterns regarding the ideal ages for women to experience the four life events. These four types of normative timetables mainly

differ in the ideal age for partnership, marriage, and parenthood. Regarding Class1, majority of respondents in this class believe that the ideal ages for a women to start partnership and get married are both age<20 while becoming parents is ideal to take place in age<20 and age 20-24. As for Class 2, it is ideal to experience partnership and marriage when a woman is aged 20-24 and best to become a mother when she is aged 20-29. For Class 3, age 20-24 and age 25-29 are the periods reported by the majority of respondents in this class as an ideal age for a woman to start partnership, while age 25-29 is the best age to get married and become parents. Class 4 has a later normative timing for partnership (age 25-29), marriage (age 30-34) and parenthood (age 30-34). The four classes are more similar when it comes to the ideal age for retirement with age 60-64 being the most popular category. Class 3 is the largest group, consisting of 51% of respondents, next to that is Class 2. Class 4 is also a non-negligible group, accounting for 16% of the respondents.

As shown in Figure 2, there are five patterns of normative timetables for men. Again, the five patterns differ most in the ideal age for partnership, marriage and parenthood. Class1, 2, 3 and 4 are very similar to the patterns identified for women. Class 5 is a unique pattern where the age 25-29 and age 30-34 are reported by the majority as an ideal period for starting partnership. Age 35-39 are the ideal period for getting married and parenthood. 52% of the respondents belong to Class 3 while Class 4 is the second largest, accounting for 28% of the respondents.

Further analysis will investigate the characteristic of members belonging to different classes, with special focus on testing the five hypotheses.

Table 1 Measurement for the ideal age for the four events

Variable and question used for measurement	Answer
Ideal age for starting partnership • In your opinion, what is the ideal age for <u>a boy or man</u> / <u>a girl or woman</u> to start living with a partner he is not married to?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numeric answer • No ideal age • Should never live with partner not married to • Refusal • Don't know
Ideal age for getting married • In your opinion, what is the ideal age for <u>a boy or man</u> / <u>a girl or woman</u> to get married?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numeric answer • No ideal age • Should never get married • Refusal • Don't know
Ideal age for becoming parents • In your opinion, what is the ideal age for <u>a boy or man</u> / <u>a girl or woman</u> a father / mother?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numeric answer • No ideal age • Refusal • Don't know
Ideal age for retiring permanently • In your opinion, what is the ideal age for <u>a man</u> / <u>a woman</u> to retire permanently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numeric answer • No ideal age • Should never retire permanently • Should never in paid work • Refusal • Don't know

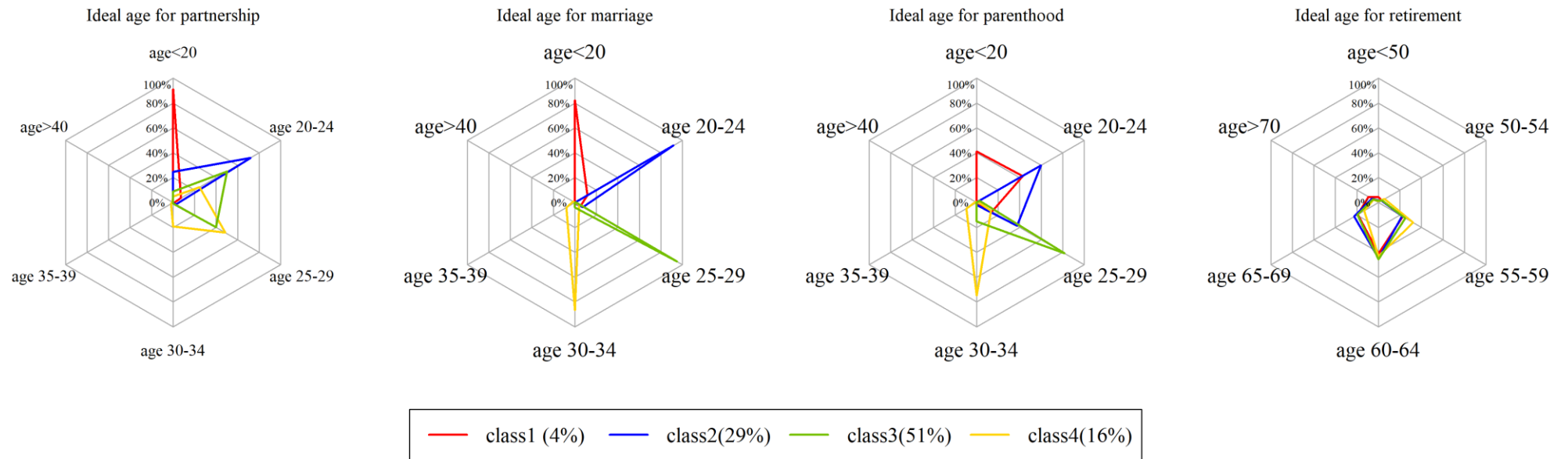


Figure 1 Four classes identified from LAC for ideal ages of four events, based on the female version of questions

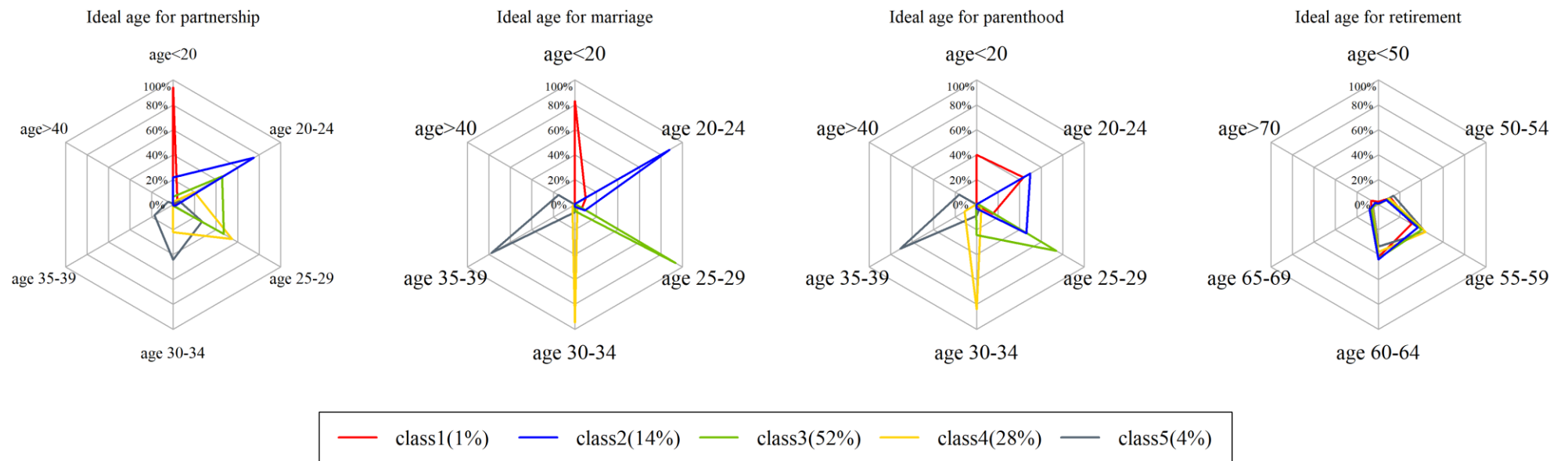


Figure 2 Five classes identified from LAC for ideal ages of four events, based on the male version of questions

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