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This article reports findings from two exploratory qualitative studies of the relationship between age norms, family role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in multigeneration African American families. Families defined as having "normative on-time" transitions ($n = 23$) to the roles of mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were compared to families that were classified as having "early non-normative" ($n = 18$), and "early normative" transitions to the respective roles ($n = 20$). Results indicate that both the "on-time" and "early" normative transition families had an equitable distribution of caregiving duties for women across generations. In families where the transitions to mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were considered "early" non-normative, the responsibilities for family caregiving were centered in the young great-grandparent generation. The implications of these findings for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Age norms, Family time, Grandmotherhood, Intergenerational caregiving, Multigeneration African American families, Role transitions

Age Norms, the Timing of Family Role Transitions, and Intergenerational Caregiving Among Aging African American Women¹

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Most role transitions in the family life course are shaped by culturally and contextually defined kin age systems (Hägestad, 1990; Nydegger, 1986). For example, within kin units, family members may be channeled into parental and grandparental roles according to age norms that are grounded in a broader social context, but revised, adapted, and implemented by the kin network (Stack & Burton, 1993). Age norms, the core of kin age systems, are socially governed expectations and sanctions concerning the appropriateness of role acquisitions and behaviors as a function of chronological age (Hägestad & Neugarten, 1985). These expectations form elaborate systems which provide prescriptive timetables for the ordering and sequencing of familial role transitions. Individual family members anticipate certain transitions and the time at which they should occur according to these prescriptions. Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965, p. 711) underscore the relative importance of age norms in the life course:

Age norms and age expectations operate as prods and brakes upon behavior, in some instances hastening an event, in others delaying it. Men and women . . . are aware of their own timing and readily describe themselves as "early," "late," or "on-time" with regard to family . . . events.

In addition to providing temporal markers for role transitions, prevailing kin age systems indirectly influence behavioral expectations concerning particular family practices, responsibilities, and duties (Burton & Sorenson, 1993; Fallo-Mitchell & Ryff, 1982; Hareven & Langenbach, 1978; Nydegger, 1973; Plath, 1980). For example, Stack and Burton (1993), summarizing findings from ethnographic studies of intergenerational caregiving among multigeneration African American families, note that in some cases, the family caregiving responsibilities of men and women are linked to family timetables concerning role transitions. Profiling the case of Henry Evans, a 38-year-old participant in an ethnographic study of African American families in a small northeastern community, Stack and Burton (1993) highlight the role of temporal guidelines and role expectations on the assumption of caregiving duties by family members. In a lengthy interview, Henry offered the following comment on family age norms, role expectations, transitions, and caregiving:

I was designated by my family as a child to provide care for all my family members. My duties read just like a job description. In tandem with my sisters becoming parents at age 26 and my parents aging, the

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job description says the following: (1) you will never marry; (2) you will have no children of your own; (3) at age 22 you will take care of your sisters, their children, your mother and your father in old age, and (4) you will be happy doing it.

Henry went on to discuss how the temporal designation and expectations of his role affected his perceptions and performance as a care provider:

I honestly have never thought about doing anything else with my life other than working and providing care for others in my family. All my choices about life revolve around my responsibilities to provide care. I feel good about what I do and I do it well. That is my family's expectation of me.

As indicated in the profile of Henry, the degree to which individuals adhere to family age norms governing the age at entry to roles and expectations concerning the content of those roles can determine who, within kin networks, will assume primary responsibility for providing care for the family's children and frail elders. Using data from two exploratory qualitative studies of family age systems, intergenerational caregiving, and the transition to parenthood and grandparenthood in multigenerational African American families, this article explores this contention. Specifically, the purpose is to examine the relationship between age norms in families, the timing of transitions to parental and grandparental roles, and the intergenerational caregiving responsibilities of aging African American women. Three questions are addressed: Do families have age norms concerning the transition to parenthood, grandparenthood, and great-grandparenthood? How do these norms influence the timing of the transition to the respective roles? How do familial age norms and the timing of role transitions impact the caregiving responsibilities of aging African American women in these roles?

Age Norms, Family Role Transitions, and the Life-Course Perspective

This exploration of the relationship between age norms, family role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of aging women is conceptually grounded in the life-course perspective (Elder, 1984; Hägestad & Neugarten, 1985). The life-course perspective focuses on the interlocking pathways that individuals and families follow through the age-differentiated life span (Elder, 1978; Hägestad, 1990; Rossi, 1980). Two dimensions of the life-course perspective are salient to this discussion — the timing of family transitions and the interdependent life trajectories of family members.

Families, as cultural units, devise timetables for the movement of individuals through predictable phases of development and changing family structures (Hägestad, 1986; Hareven, 1982). Family timetables, which are comprised of age norms, provide prescriptions concerning when and in what order events such as the transition to parenthood and grandparenthood should occur (Hareven, 1977). Timetables also implicitly provide guidelines as to what consti-

tutes appropriate age- and generationally-linked role expectations and behaviors among family members (Plath, 1980).

The aspect of family timetables pertinent to this discussion concerns role transitions and definitions of role obligations and behaviors in families when individual members either adhere to or violate age norms. Life-course scholars suggest that when family role transitions occur "on-time," that is, in accordance with family timetables, individuals experience less stress during transition and have a clearer sense of what they should be doing in families (Zerubavel, 1981). When role transitions violate family timetables, however, serious stresses often arise for individuals and families because the event upsets the expected cadence of lives (Brim & Ryff, 1980; Elder & Rockwell, 1976; Pearlin, 1982; Seltzer, 1976). Individuals may be "thrown off track" with respect to family obligations and have to dramatically reframe familial role expectations given the existing circumstances. Neugarten (1970, p. 86) states that:

It is the unanticipated, not the anticipated, which is likely to represent the traumatic event. Major stresses are caused by events that upset the sequence and rhythm of the expected life cycle, as when the death of a parent comes in adolescence rather than in middle age; *when the birth of a child is too early or too late; . . . when the empty nest, grandparenthood . . . or widowhood occur off-time* [italics added].

The second component of the life-course perspective — interdependent lives — draws attention to the connectedness of family role transitions (Hägestad & Dixon, 1980; Johnson, 1988; Klein, Jorgensen, & Miller, 1979). Hägestad and Neugarten (1985) have identified two dimensions of life-course interdependence that are applicable to this discussion. The first is career contingencies. Career contingencies refer to the process by which the expectations that individuals have about the trajectories of others influence their own construction of the life course. For example, parents make decisions about their own life course based on the projected life course of their children (Hägestad & Neugarten, 1985). The second is countertransitions (Riley & Waring, 1976). Countertransitions are those changes in life course that are the "ripple effects" of changes in another person's life. For example, the timing of entry to grandparenthood hinges not only upon the ages at which the grandparents themselves became parents, but also upon the ages at which their children reproduce for the first time (Sprey & Matthews, 1982). Consequently, the temporal interdependence of these transitions often creates a domino effect in which the role expectations and performances of one family member can redefine the role expectations and performance of an entire kinship network.

The Timing of Role Transitions and Multigenerational Family Structure

The various forms families take during a woman's lifetime are generated by the timing and sequencing of role transitions (e.g., marriage and parenthood) in

the intergenerational system. The timing of entry to parenthood, particularly, has powerful implications for intergenerational family structure and the roles of aging women. To begin, the birth of the first child to a member of the youngest generation of a family changes intergenerational structure by adding another generational tier to the family line. Also, when those births occur during the young-adult years, families are more likely to have distinctly demarcated generations in which developmental life stages, generational positions, and roles are consistent. For example, a four-generation family in which a new generation has arrived every 22 years produces a structure where there is clearly a child generation (age 1), a young-adult parent generation (age 23), a middle-aged grandparent generation (age 45), and an elderly great-grandparent generation (age 67). Within these distinct generational boundaries, family members are more likely to have clear perceptions of their generational position in the family and the roles that accompany that position.

When entry to parenthood is early, however, as in the case of adolescent childbearing, an age-condensed structure is formed (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Burton, 1990). The boundaries between generations are not necessarily consistent with age, developmental life stage, and role status in these families. A case in point is the situation where a new generation is born every 14 years. This pattern produces a condensed, overlapping intergenerational structure with a child generation comprising both a mother (age 15) and her offspring (age 1), a young-adult generation that includes a 29-year-old grandmother, and a middle-aged generation that includes a 43-year-old great-grandmother. In this example, family roles are chronologically and developmentally "out of synch" with generational position: the adolescent has been propelled into a young-adult role status (parenthood) by virtue of giving birth to a child, but she can technically be classified as a member of the child generation. The young-adult female has moved to the role status of grandmother — a role typically associated with mid-life; and the woman in her middle years has been accelerated to the old age role of great-grandmother.

In addition to affecting the structure of intergenerational families, the timing of entry to parenthood also influences the types of role responsibilities that emerge for women in the family. For example, patterns of on-time parenthood are more likely to produce grandparental roles for women in which they are *not* expected to be the primary caregiver for their grandchildren. A 22-year-old woman who wants to be a parent and has planned the birth of her first child would probably not expect her mother to raise her child unless extreme circumstances prevailed (e.g., in the event of the 22-year-old mother's illness or premature death).

In contrast, early entry to parenthood can propel a woman into early grandparental status accompanied by the role function of surrogate parent to her grandchild (Furstenberg, 1979). The potential for "role

overload" for young grandmothers in this situation is tremendous (Lehr, 1984). For example, a 29-year-old married woman who becomes a grandmother when her 15-year-old daughter becomes a mother might find herself overwhelmed at attempting to integrate the roles of wife, parent to her own young children, surrogate parent to her grandchild, and, quite possibly, employee on a nine-to-five job.

Although timing of family transitions does affect intergenerational structure and roles, not all families share the same perceptions of "on-time" and "off-time" role transitions. Hogan (1978) notes that the timing and sequencing of role transitions in families within different population subgroups may vary as a function of the family's social class, community context, and ethnic ancestry. In fact, what has been delineated as an early transition — adolescent childbearing — is in some cultural enclaves considered to be on-time behavior (Hamburg, 1986). When adolescent childbearing is consistent with family timetables, what happens to family structure and the roles of aging women?

Empirical data from two exploratory qualitative studies are presented to illustrate the relationships among age norms, the timing of role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of aging women. Specific attention is given to examining how variable role outcomes for aging women are dependent on the different sociocultural meanings attached to age norms and family timetables. Patterns in three groups of African American families are discussed: urban female lineages where the on-time entry to parenthood is defined by families as a young-adult transition; urban female lineages where adolescents bear children in violation of family age norms; and female rural lineages where early parenthood is deemed a normal, on-time transition.

Methods

Data Collection and Analyses

The data reported here are from two longitudinal qualitative studies conducted in different communities at different points in time. *Study 1* was conducted in a southwestern urban community from December 1983 to March 1984 (Burton, 1985; Burton & Bengtson, 1985; Burton & Martin, 1977; Elder, Caspi, & Burton, 1987; Hågestad & Burton, 1986). The study involved a sample of four-, five-, and six-generation African American female lineages all residing in the community. *Study 2* was conducted from January 1985 to March 1988 in "Gospel Hill," a small rural African American community in the northeast region of the United States (Burton, 1990). This study comprised a sample of four-generation African American female lineages. Data for both studies were collected using three qualitative research strategies: in-depth, open-ended interviews with respondents; participant-observation in the respondents' family activities; and interviews with local ministers, social service providers, and informal community leaders.

Across both research sites, in-depth life history interviews were conducted separately for each of the family members that participated in the studies. Each interview was tape-recorded and ranged from 3 to 7 hours in length. Family members were asked to respond to open-ended questions concerning age norms and family timetables for marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, and the caregiving responsibilities of female family members.

Age norms and family timetables were assessed at two levels: first, by asking respondents to indicate the ages that their families considered appropriate to enter specific family roles, and second, by comparing the respondents' age at entry to the specific role to those family timetables. The degree of consistency between the family age norms and the respondent's age at role entry was used to determine whether the families were classified as "on-time normative," "early non-normative," and "early normative" in their respective role transitions. In establishing the "early non-normative," or "early normative" in their respective role transitions. In establishing the "early" and "on-time" transition categories, current great-grandmothers for the first time were also considered. The modal age for entry to parenthood for African American females is approximately 20 years (Farley & Allen, 1987). Sprey and Matthews (1982) and Troll (1983) identify the median age of contemporary grandmothers at role entry to be in the range of 42–60 years. Current trends in the age at entry to great-grandmotherhood suggest that 65–70 years is the modal pattern (Atchley, 1980; Troll & Bengtson, 1979). To be markedly under these ages when entering the role of mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother is defined in this study as being off-time.

Family caregiving was broadly defined to include the following family-based activities: (a) socializing and parenting of children; (b) providing extensive instrumental (e.g., baby-sitting, financial assistance, and housing) and emotional support to child, adolescent, young-adult, midlife, and elderly family members; and (c) meeting the daily needs (e.g., bathing, feeding) of family members who cannot provide care for themselves. Respondents were asked to delineate the family caregiving duties they provided for family members along these dimensions. In addition, respondents were asked to report whether or not they were the primary or secondary provider of these caregiving services to designated family members.

Participation-observation in family events, such as holiday celebrations, church attendance, baby showers, and weddings yielded data on family rituals, norms, and the provision of intergenerational caregiving. Family events were attended by the principal investigator for all of the respondents that participated in each of the studies.

Interviews with informal community leaders, social service providers, and local ministers offered additional perspectives of community age norms, family timetables, and contextual influences on family caregiving. Two of the community leaders in each research site also examined the preliminary findings of the studies and validated the accuracy of the

qualitative accounts of community and family life.

Across the two sites, five African American interviewers trained in qualitative data collection strategies conducted the in-depth life history interviews with respondents, were participant observers in respondents' family events, and interviewed formal and informal community leaders. The interviewers included the principal investigator and four females who reside in the communities studied. The majority of interviews, however, were conducted by the principal investigator.

The data generated from each of these studies were transcribed and then analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987). The grounded theory approach is a style of analyzing qualitative data using a specific coding paradigm to generate conceptual patterns.

Sample

Forty-one lineage units ($n = 120$), each including the new mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, participated in *Study 1*. Families were recruited through local physicians, churches, and high schools. Twenty-three of the lineages were classified as "on-time normative" units. The age ranges for mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers were 21–26, 42–57, and 60–73, respectively. The median ages for each generation were 21 years for young mothers, 45 years for grandmothers, and 67 years for great-grandmothers.

The remaining 18 lineages were classified as "early non-normative" units. The age ranges of the respondents in these lineages were 11–18 for the young mothers, 25–38 for the grandmothers, and 46–57 for the great-grandmothers. The median ages for generations represented in the early lineages are as follows: for the young mothers, 16 years; for the grandmothers, 32 years; and for the great-grandmothers, 56 years.

Socioeconomic data indicate that, in general, the multigeneration families who participated in this study were upwardly mobile. Less than 15% of the 120 respondents were receiving welfare. In fact, 50% of the respondents were in the work force and 15% were retired. The monthly median income for respondents in the early lineages was \$320 for young mothers, \$1,850 for the grandmothers, and \$650 for the great-grandmothers. The median income for members of the on-time lineages was \$900 for the mothers, \$1,525 for the grandmothers, and \$450 for the great-grandmothers.

As for education, it was determined that the young mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in the early lineages had completed a median of 10, 12, and 10 years of school, respectively. In the on-time lineages the median years of education completed were 13 for the young mothers, 12 for the grandmothers, and 10 for the great-grandmothers.

In the on-time and early lineages approximately 31% of the total sample ($n = 120$) were married. The highest percentage of marriages (50%) was among the on-time mothers ($n = 23$). The largest proportion

of those who had never married was among the early mothers ($n = 18$, 91%), and the on-time grandmothers ($n = 23$) represented the highest percentage (52%) of those divorced.

Subjects involved in *Study 2* were 20 low-income, African American, four-generation maternal lineages ($n = 53$) recruited through referrals from African American churches, social service agencies, and by networking with community residents. Each lineage unit included a young mother (age 14–26), grandmother (age 35–45), and great-grandmother (age 56–68). The median ages of the generations were 18, 37, and 56, respectively. All but three of the respondents gave birth to their first child as teenagers.

Participants in *Study 2* were qualitatively different from those who participated in *Study 1*. All of the *Study 2* participants' primary source of income was welfare. The median household income was \$750. With the exception of two families, all of the participants lived in multigeneration households comprising 4–9 people and headed by respondents in the grandmother generation.

As for education, the median number of years of school completed by the young mothers was 12, the grandmothers, 10 years, and the great-grandmothers, 7 years. Only one of the respondents, a young mother age 21, was married. The remainder had never been married (77%), were divorced (19%), or were widowed (2%).

Results

Study 1

Findings from the two studies indicated some striking differences between the urban on-time normative, urban early non-normative, and Gospel Hill early normative lineages. In the urban on-time lineages, 87% ($n = 66$) of the new mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers welcomed the role transitions that created their four-generation families. Lineage members noted that their comfort with their roles was in large part due to consistency across generations in perceptions of the appropriate age to become a mother and the actual age at which the lineage members entered the role. Figure 1 (On-time Lineages—Urban Sample) indicates that in these lineages both the perceived timetable for childbearing and the actual timing of childbearing was 20–23 years between generations. Consistency of perceptions and behaviors in the timing of marriage (19–21 years of age) and the transition to grandmotherhood (42–45 years of age) was also maintained across generations.

The family timetables for childbearing, marriage, and grandparenthood provided clear directives for these women as they moved from one family role to the next. Lineage members who subscribed to these timetables expected their role transitions when they occurred, were prepared for them, moved systemati-

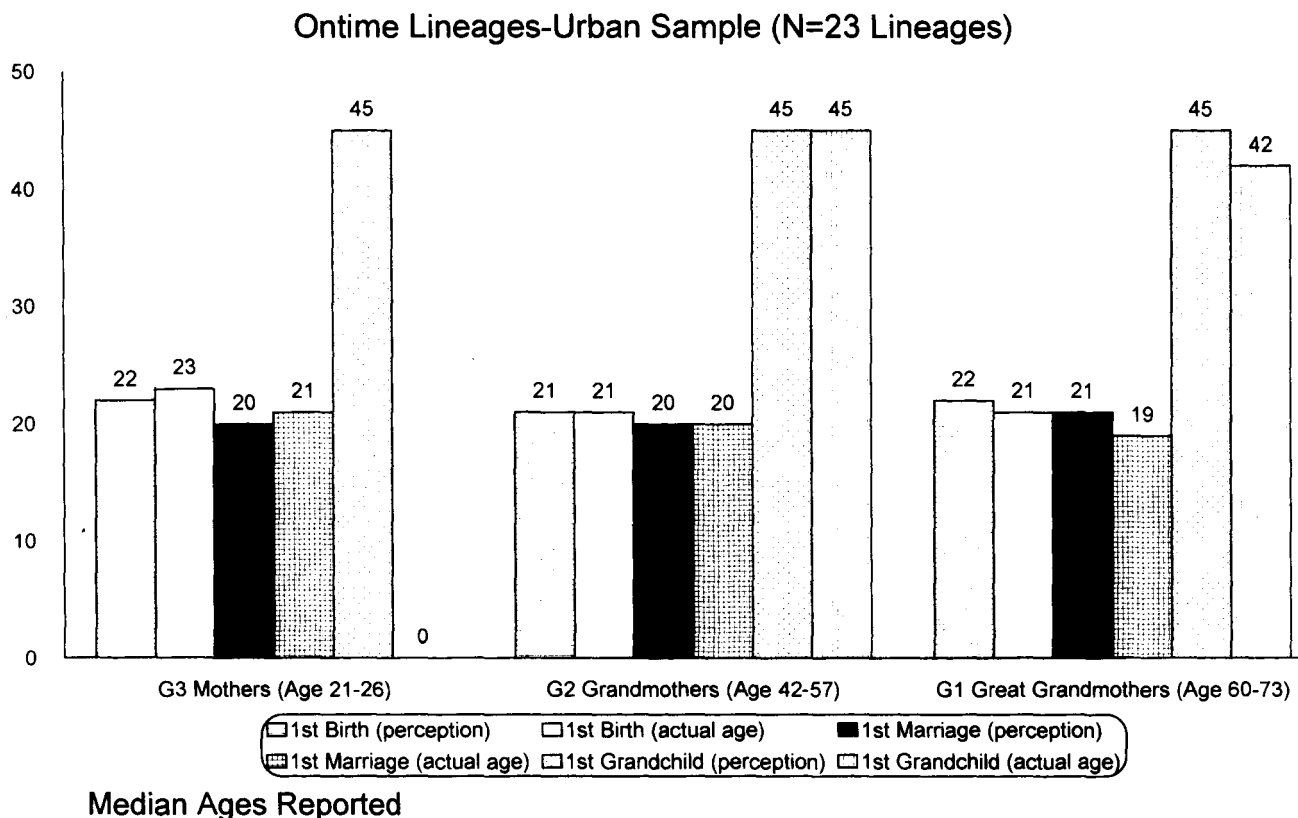


Figure 1. Perceptions of appropriate and actual age at role entry; on-time lineages—urban sample ($n = 23$ lineages).

cally to their "generational stations," and assumed their attendant role responsibilities willingly. The comments of one 22-year-old mother illustrate:

I became a mother at the right time. . . . I was ready, my husband was ready, my mother was ready, my father was ready, my grandmother couldn't wait.

The role responsibilities for the majority of women in these lineages were as clearly delineated as the norms that governed the timing of childbearing. In 87% ($n = 23$) of the on-time lineages, a system of adjacent generational role responsibilities was in operation. Basically, this system was composed of patterns of mutual assistance where independent generations (the young-adult and mid-life adult generations) served as primary and secondary caregivers to adjacent dependent generations (the child and older adult generations). This system of mutual assistance is graphically presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 illustrates that in the five-generation structures of the on-time lineages, there were two dependent generations — the children and the great-great-grandmothers. Primary care for the child was the responsibility of the new mother in the lineage. The majority of mothers, however, did receive secondary support for the care of their children from their own mothers and grandmothers, usually in the form of economic assistance or baby-sitting. One 23-year-old mother noted:

I had my son because I knew I was ready to take care of a child. My mother and grandmother don't bother me very much about how to raise him. They let me do it on my own. . . . What's nice about them, though, is that they know that I get tired sometimes and need a break. At least three times a week, one of them will take my son for the whole day so I can get some rest.

The great-grandmothers and grandmothers in the lineage shared the task of taking primary care of the great-great-grandmother generation. In 65% of the cases ($n = 20$), the great-great-grandmother or other elderly relative was physically unable to care for herself. In such cases the grandmothers and great-grandmothers attended to the needs of the oldest generation by performing the daily tasks of bathing, dressing, and feeding them, and also less regular tasks such as taking them to the doctor. The new mothers in the lineages were backup caregivers for the great-great-grandmother generation. In this role, the new mothers often provided relief services for their mothers and grandmothers. A 45-year-old grandmother commented about the help she received from her daughter:

I don't know what we would do without Sandra. Even though she has a baby, my grandchild, she still helps me and my mother with Granny Bee [great-great-grandmother in the lineage]. . . . Sometimes I take care of my grandchild and Sandra takes care of Granny. . . . It's like we are trading babies.

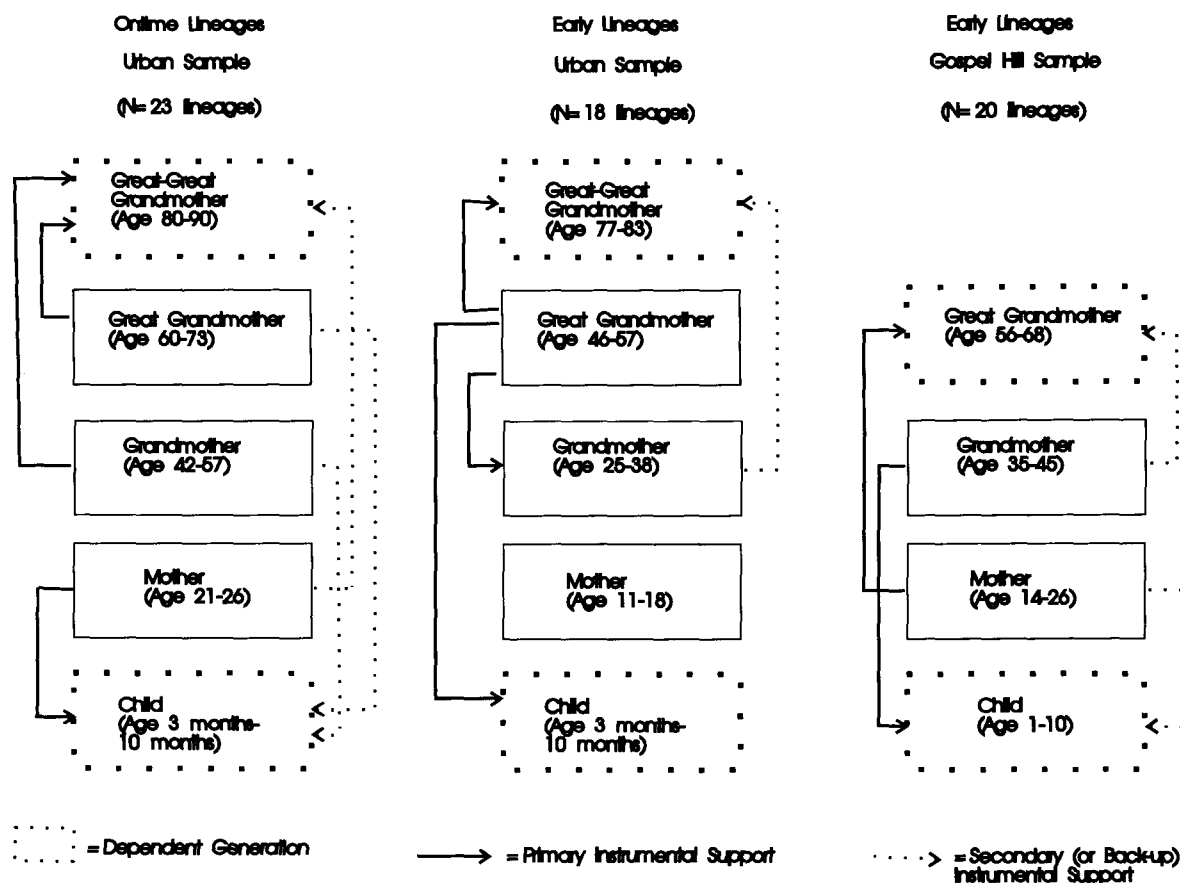


Figure 2. Intergenerational paths of role responsibilities in the on-time and early lineages.

In the on-time lineages, the timing of entry to parenthood from one generation to the next, coupled with a mutual aid system of adjacent generational role responsibilities, created an intergenerational family context in which the older women were not expected to take care of more than one generation at a time. Sarah, a 64-year-old great-grandmother, commented:

All the women in my family didn't have children until they're at least 21. That's what we were taught. It makes it easier for everyone else. All I really have to be concerned with is taking care of my mother. My daughter and granddaughter even help me with that.

The early lineages, however, were quite different. An initial distinction between the early and on-time lineages is the disparity in the early lineages between perceptions of family timetables and the actual timing of transitions to parenthood and grandparenthood, particularly. As indicated in Figure 3 (Early Lineages—Urban Sample), the young mothers thought the appropriate time to become a parent was age 16, although both the grandmother and great-grandmother generation perceived the appropriate age to be in the early 20's. The young mothers' perceptions challenged the perceptions of their mothers and grandmothers, but were consistent with the median age at which 60% of them and 55% of their mothers became mothers themselves for the first time. One 17-year-old stated, as did several of the other young mothers, "I'm only following in my mother's footsteps. She was a teenage mother too."

Inconsistencies between generations are also noted in timing perceptions and actual ages at role entry for marriage and grandparenthood. The me-

dian age for marriage that the mother and grandmother generations perceived as appropriate was 25, while the majority of great-grandmothers felt that the appropriate age for a young woman to marry was 21. It is important to emphasize that this inconsistency also prevailed in perceptions concerning the sequencing of marriage in the life course. The two youngest generations felt that marriage should occur after the birth of the first child, but women of the great-grandmother generation felt that one should marry before having children.

For entry to grandparenthood, both the grandmother and great-grandmother generations perceived 50 years as timely. The young mother generation, however, felt that 34 was more appropriate. The young mothers were therefore satisfied with the actual ages (32–35 years) at which their mothers and grandmothers had become grandparents. The grandmothers and great-grandmothers, however, were not quite as positive about being grandparents. What happened in the early lineages was that accelerated childbearing sparked a series of quickened transitions to grandmotherhood and great-grandmotherhood that violated family timetables. These lineages were "thrown off track" because they did not expect, nor were they prepared for, the roles into which they had been propelled. The reaction to these early transitions, particularly by the two youngest generations, was a behavior that is figuratively known as "passing the buck." This behavior had overwhelming consequences for the role responsibilities of the great-grandmothers in these families.

Essentially, the adolescent mothers in these lineages, although they said that the appropriate age to

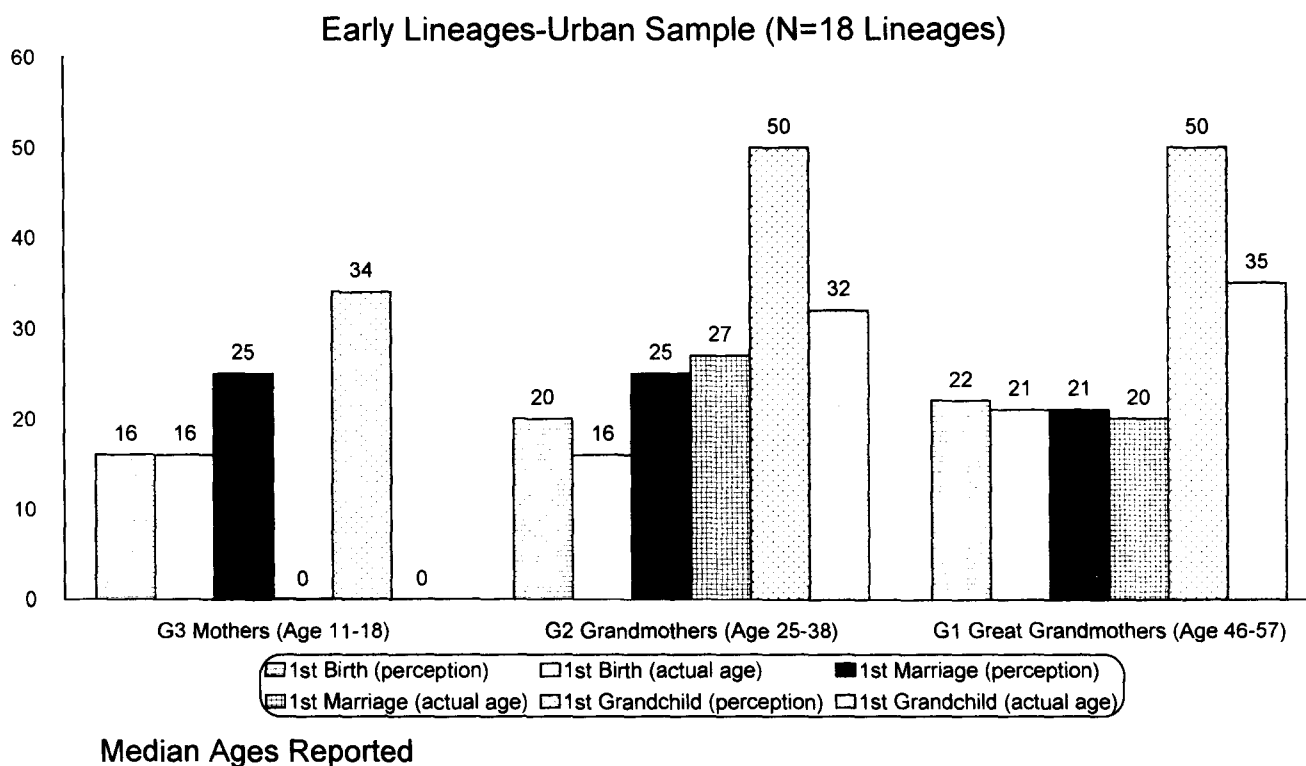


Figure 3. Perceptions of appropriate and actual age at role entry; early lineages—urban sample ($n = 18$ lineages).

become a mother was 16, really wanted to continue their lives as teenagers. Thus they expected their mothers to assume the primary role in the care of their children. Eighty-three percent of the young grandmothers ($n = 18$), however, refused to assume an active surrogate parent role for the baby. For the majority of early grandmothers the role of grandmotherhood conflicted with their own developmental agenda — an agenda that included a variety of “young adult” roles related to work, education, friendship, romance, and even their own continued childbearing.

When the mother and grandmother abdicate their roles, responsibility for the care of the new family member is pushed up the generational ladder to the great-grandmother in the lineage. Indeed, it was in the role of great-grandmother that the impact of accelerated transitions and dependent generations was most strongly realized. The relinquishing of roles by two generations — the teenage mothers and the young grandmothers — resulted in 57% of the great-grandmothers ($n = 18$) being responsible for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Forty-two percent of those great-grandmothers were responsible for primary care of at least three generations: their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and their own aging mothers or elderly relatives as well. The triple duty of these great-grandmothers is presented in Figure 2, which outlines the paths of intergenerational role responsibilities in the early lineages.

As one might expect, many of the great-grandmothers in the early lineages experienced the strain of role overload. Julia, a 53-year-old great-grandmother stated:

My girl and grandgirl had these babies young. Now, they keep on rushing me, expectin' me to do this and that trying to make me old [be]fore my time. I ain't got no time for myself. I takes care of babies, grown children, and the old peoples. I work too. I get so tired. I don't know if I'll ever get to do somethin' for myself.

Julia's circumstances demonstrate not only the effects of role overload but also the effects of off-time transitions on the creation of a dependent intergenerational family structure. What becomes important, in understanding the dependencies in these families, is that they were the result of the lineage members feeling that their early transitions were not consistent with what they “ought” to be doing at a particular time in their lives.

Study 2

Age norms, family role transitions, and patterns of intergenerational caregiving were quite different for the Gospel Hill families as compared to the urban African American lineages. First, in contrast to the preference of the urban respondents for an on-time entry to parenthood, family norms in these lineages suggested that designated females in the family become early childbearers. The basis for this mandate was the lineage members' identification of the association between the timing of entry to parenthood and the transition to grandparenthood. Figure 4 (Early Lineages—Gospel Hill) indicates that in these families the perceived timetable for childbearing and the actual timing of childbearing were 15–18 years between generations. Consistency of perceptions and behaviors regarding timing of grandparenthood (35–36 years of age) was also maintained across generations.

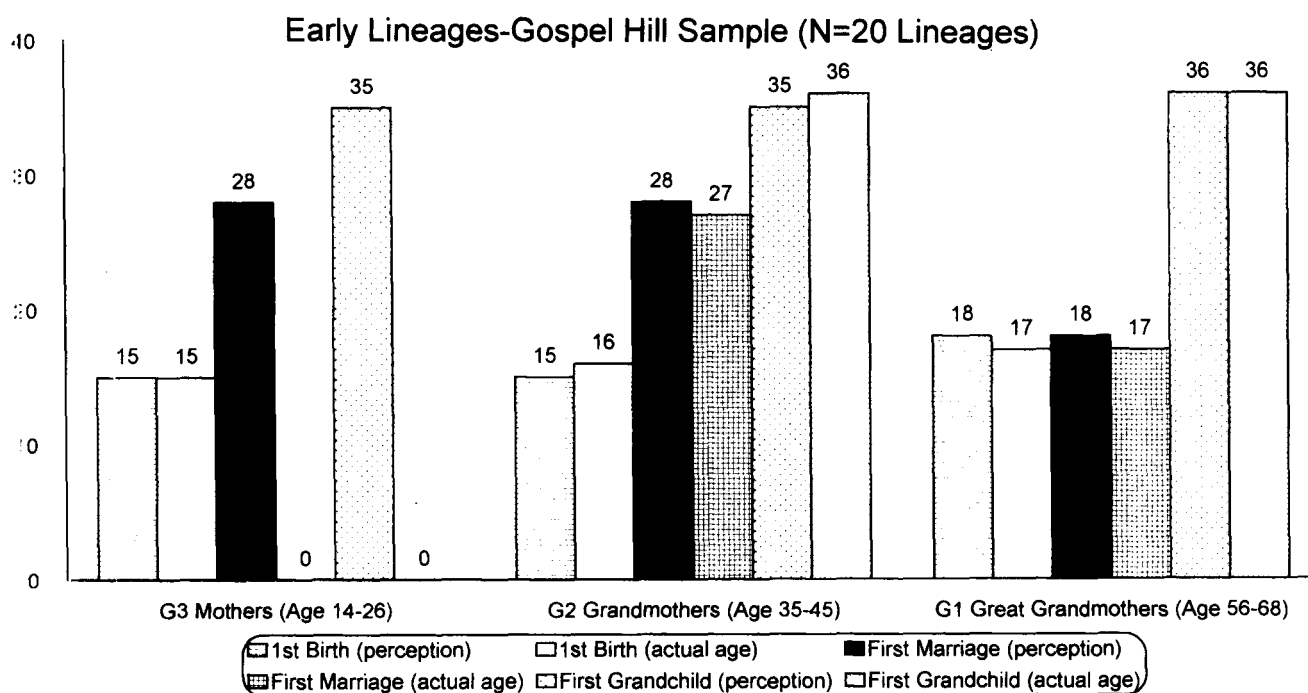


Figure 4. Perceptions of appropriate and actual age at role entry; early lineages—Gospel Hill sample ($n = 20$ lineages).

Early childbearing was considered a necessary activity in these families to ensure that older women would have the opportunity to experience the parental role. The role of parent in these families was not behaviorally experienced until a woman became a grandmother. Mothers did not raise their children. The tradition is that grandmothers raise the grandchildren. Because of the physical demands that rearing young children places on females, these women believed that it was important to become a grandmother as young as possible so that they would have the "energy" to engage in parental behavior. Comments from a 37-year-old grandmother illustrate:

I never really raised a child before until Sharon [her granddaughter] was born. I was 31 when she came. I still had my health. I could chase after her and play with her. I couldn't have done that if I was 40 when she came. You start being old when you're 40.

These lineages' preference for accelerated transitions was in many ways also a product of the socio-cultural context in which they lived. Unlike the urban working-class African American families, these women, having lived in limited resource environments, had a very truncated view of the individual life course. Ninety-five percent of the women interviewed ($n = 53$) estimated their life expectancy to be 60 years. The majority of respondents noted that if they were going to live life to the fullest, slower-paced role transitions, like those of the on-time urban lineages, made little sense.

Another factor that influenced the perpetuation of accelerated female lineages concerned the shortage of marriageable African American males in the community (Staples, 1985). This shortage was not solely a matter of numbers, but rather, as 100% of the females interviewed indicated, African American males were not able to find stable long-term employment in this community because of its depressed economy and few labor market opportunities. Given the tenuous nature of employment for males, many of the respondents noted that they only committed to short-term relationships with men in their community and consequently relied more heavily on the long-term support they received from female family members.

A second significant difference between the Gospel Hill lineages and the urban families was indicated in patterns of generational role responsibilities. As noted in the discussion of the urban study, the on-time lineages had a mutual aid system of adjacent role responsibilities, and in the early lineages there was a dependent intergenerational family structure in which the "care of generations" was the responsibility of one woman — the great-grandmother. In the Gospel Hill lineages, however, a pattern of a mutual aid system with nonadjacent role responsibilities emerged.

As indicated in Figure 2 (Early Lineages-Gospel Hill), the primary role responsibility for grandmothers in the lineages was the care of their grandchildren, while the principal duty for their daughters (the mothers of their grandchildren) was the care of the great-grandmothers. Jesse, a 56-year-old great-grandmother, said:

Yeah, it's true, we had children young. But I don't have to be worried with them now. I'm old and tired and have done my time with my family. Now I can just take it easy and let them take care of me. This is what I waited for all my life.

Mary, a 19-year-old mother, provided a summary statement of this system's existence:

My grandmother raised me. Now it's time for me to give her something back. It's O.K. if my mother raised my child for now. If she didn't, I wouldn't be able to take care of my grandmother.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of these studies was to explore the relationships between age norms, family role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of African American women. Three distinct patterns emerged. In the urban on-time normative lineages, a 20- to 23-year pacing of generational turnovers created a family system of mutual assistance and adjacent generation role responsibilities; older women in the lineage were not saddled with the care of multiple generations. In the urban early non-normative lineages, accelerated childbearing in two successive generations created a dependent intergenerational system; great-grandmothers in the lineage became overwhelmed with the care of three and four generations. Finally, in the Gospel Hill study, early childbearing, as an adaptive strategy to a distinct sociocultural environment, created a family system of mutual assistance and nonadjacent role responsibilities. Older women in these lineages were not responsible for the care of any family member.

Although the two qualitative studies reported here yield interesting findings on the relationship between age norms, family role transitions, and the caregiving responsibilities of aging women, they are exploratory and thus have a number of limitations. The first limitation concerns generalizability of the findings. In both studies, respondents were not randomly selected from African American populations that are necessarily representative. This limitation is noted particularly in the case of the Gospel Hill respondents. It is important, therefore, in reviewing the findings from these studies that readers do not divorce the data from the context and attribute the life-course patterns of African American families in these two studies to African American families in general.

A second limitation of this research concerns its focus on maternal lineages. Clearly, important elements may be missed when data on family dynamics are not also gathered directly and as intensively from spouses, boyfriends, fathers, siblings, aunts, and other extended family members. The intent of these exploratory studies, however, was not to tackle the complexity of extended intergenerational family dynamics yet. Rather, it was an attempt to examine the caregiving responsibilities of aging African American women using a perspective, the life-course generations approach, that has not been traditionally used in studies of the family roles of African American females.

However, despite the limitations of the studies, several issues for future research on age norms, family role transitions, and the distribution of caregiving responsibilities in families are indicated. First, social science researchers should further examine the mechanisms that drive family transitions. An important and relatively unexplored component of those mechanisms is the relationship between context and family timetables. Do African American families create temporal blueprints that direct the life course of individual family members based on the context in which they live? Do those blueprints have different specifications for the roles of aging men as compared to aging women?

A second path would extend the investigation of time, structure, and roles beyond the lineage to the kinship network. What roles do extended family members play in the design of family timetables? How do the life-course paths of in-laws, uncles, aunts, cousins, and "adopted kinfolds" affect the family roles of men and women in later life?

A third direction for future research would involve an assessment of the relationship among family timetables, family role transitions, and stress. Do family members who make role transitions that are not in accordance with family timetables experience greater stress than those that do?

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