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Age and Sequencing Norms in the Transition to Adulthood*

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Abstract

The timing and sequencing of events marking the transition to adulthood have become the focus of a growing body of research. Recently, the concept of social norm has been used to provide an explanation for observed regularity in the process of transition to adulthood, and the degree of conformity to social norms governing the transition has been hypothesized to have consequences for individuals in adulthood. In this paper it is argued that the concept of social norm has limited usefulness as an explanation of behavior marking the transition to adulthood or as an explanation of its consequences. It is argued further that previous use of the concept in empirical research has been misleading because the research has not measured social norms.

Over the past few years, sociologists have paid increasing attention to the study of age differentiation and the social organization of the life course. Much theorizing in this area assumes a normative model of the life course, whereby norms, or shared expectations, regarding an appropriate timetable for major life events frame the life course. These norms are assumed to be supported by informal sanctions, resulting when major deviations from the prescriptive timetable occur—for example, when a role transition occurs too early or too late (Elder, a, b; Neugarten and Datan; Neugarten et al; Riley et al.).

This normative model of development over the life course has been in evidence in recent research on the transition to adulthood. Since the transition to adulthood is marked by a series of interrelated events representing movement from economic dependence and participation in the

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family of origin to economic independence and establishment of a family of procreation, research on the transition to adulthood has considered both the timing and sequencing of events marking the transition. The ages at events such as departure from the household of the family of origin, exit from school, entry into the labor force, marriage, establishment of a new household, and entry into parenthood have been studied (Elder and Rockwell; Marini, a, b, c; Modell; Modell et al., a, b; Rindfuss and Bumpass; Rindfuss et al.; Waite and Spitze; Winsborough). In addition, the order of several of these events—specifically, exit from school, entry into the labor force, entry into marriage, and entry into parenthood—has been examined (Hogan, b; Marini, d; Winsborough). Within this body of research, social norms have been referred to primarily in connection with the timing of entry into marriage and parenthood (Elder and Rockwell; Modell; Rindfuss and Bumpass; Rindfuss et al.; Waite and Spitze) and the order of events in the transition (Hogan, b). Norms regarding the appropriate ages for entry into marriage and parenthood have been assumed to govern the timing of marriage and first birth, and a normative sequence of events has been assumed to govern the ordering of events. Norms have not been referred to, however, when the ages at exit from school and entry into the labor force have been studied since the timing of these events is assumed to result primarily from the amount of education an individual attains (Duncan et al., a, b; Featherman and Carter).

Sociologists, therefore, have selectively invoked the existence of social norms to explain behavior in some situations and not others. When the situations in which social norms are referred to are compared with those in which they are not, it is evident that reference to social norms is made primarily when the behavior being investigated does not confer (or is not the direct result of another behavior that confers) social status on an individual—that is, when the values of the variable being examined are not known to be differentially evaluated. This selective use of the concept of social norm appears to be linked to the implicit assumption in most sociological thinking that individuals are utility maximizing—that is, that individuals act in a way they think will lead to the most beneficial result. When alternative actions are known to be differentially evaluated and rewarded, the principle of utility maximization provides a motivation for behavior and an explanation of its outcomes. When alternative actions are not known to be differentially evaluated and rewarded, there is no obvious motivation for behavior or reason for its consequences. It is in the latter situation that reference to social norms tends to be made. By arguing that alternative actions are differentially evaluated because they conform differentially to shared expectations for appropriate behavior—that is, because they conform differentially to social norms—sociologists provide a motivation for behavior. They also provide an explanation for the consequences of behavior by arguing that actions have differential conse-

quences for individuals because those actions vary in the extent to which they conform to social norms.

In this essay, I argue, first, that there is insufficient evidence to support use of the concept of social norm to explain behavior during the transition to adulthood or its consequences. I argue, second, that the tendency to use the concept of social norm to explain behavior and its consequences is no more useful or legitimate in situations where behavior does not confer social status on an individual than in situations where it does. In particular, I argue that it is no more useful to refer to social norms when seeking to understand the timing of entry into marriage and parenthood or the sequence of events in the transition to adulthood than when seeking to understand the timing of exit from school and entry into the labor force or the amount of education attained. I argue, third, that use of the concept of social norm in research on the transition to adulthood has been misleading because of the way the concept has been operationalized.

Evidence on the Existence of Norms

Although mention of social norms figures prominently in theoretical writing on age differentiation and the organization of the life course, there has been little attempt to document the existence of age and sequencing norms governing the life course. Elder (a, b, c) has indicated repeatedly that there is little evidence on the normative regulation of life events. In 1975, he commented: "It is a matter of some irony . . . that so little major empirical work has addressed key issues on the normative base of age patterns in the life course; assumptions and assertions far exceed empirical evidence" (a, 187). In 1978, he again commented that: ". . . assumptions regarding the normative regulation of life events are currently based on very little hard evidence . . ." (b, S26). Despite these explicit cautions, there has been an increasing tendency for researchers to assume the existence of norms governing the transition to adulthood and to use the concept of social norm in ways that are not supported by empirical evidence.

Evidence on the existence of age norms governing the transition to adulthood is available only from responses to questions about the preferred ages to undergo various role changes. Most of this evidence pertains to the "best" or "ideal" ages at which to marry and become a parent. Evidence on the preferred age at which to marry comes from national public opinion polls conducted at various times since 1939. These polls have asked respondents what they thought was the ideal age for a man (or woman) to marry (Modell). Evidence on the preferred age at which to have one's first child is available from the 1970 and 1975 National Fertility Studies, which asked national samples of U.S. women under age 45 what they thought was the ideal age for a woman to have her first child (Pebbley;

Rindfuss and Bumpass). Other evidence on the preferred age at marriage and the preferred age at which to leave school and enter the work force is available from a study by Neugarten et al., which asked a small sample of middle-class respondents aged forty to seventy what they thought was the best age for a man (or woman) to marry and the best age for most people to finish school and go to work.

These data indicate that the preferred ("ideal" or "best") ages for various role changes are clustered at the model ages at which these role changes actually occur. Thus, when measures of central tendency are examined, there is little difference between the preferred and actual ages at various role changes. However, there is greater variability in the timing of actual role changes than in timing preferences. These comparisons suggest that individuals develop behavior preferences on the basis of the predominant behavior patterns of those around them.

To date, there is no evidence that sequencing norms govern the order of events in the transition to adulthood. Sequencing norms have been assumed to exist only on the basis of the observed order of events in the transition to adulthood (Hogan, b).

Regularity in preferred and actual behavior therefore constitutes the basis on which norms governing the transition to adulthood have been assumed to exist. Information of this type is inadequate to document the existence of norms. The concept of social norm has two primary distinguishing features. First, it involves a collective, or shared, evaluation of what behavior *ought* to be. Second, it involves the application of sanctions to induce a particular behavior (Gibbs; Hawkes; Jackson; Morris). A norm differs from a value in that a value can be held by a single individual, whereas a norm cannot. A norm differs from a custom in that a custom involves a collective expectation of what individuals *will* do, whereas a norm involves a collective evaluation of what they *should* do. It may be expected, for example, that others will drink coffee, but in most cases it is a matter of indifference whether they do. Drinking coffee is a custom, not a norm. A norm, therefore, is not simply a regularity in behavior, represented by a statistical average or typical value. Behavior that is typical may not be normative, and behavior that is unusual is not necessarily nonnormative. Observed regularity in preferred and actual behavior during the transition to adulthood is likely to reflect collectively held values arising from the internalization of predominant behavior patterns, or customs. This regularity may not indicate a belief that a role change *ought* to occur at a particular age, with negative consequences ensuing if it does not.

If norms do govern the timing and sequencing of events during the transition to adulthood, they are likely to identify a range of behavior as appropriate or acceptable rather than a particular age for the occurrence of an event or a particular sequencing pattern. Information on the limits of the acceptable range of behavior, therefore, is needed to document the

existence of norms—for example, information on what ages are considered too young or too old to marry. This range may vary for subgroups of the population and over time. Actual variation observed in the preferred ages for role changes between population subgroups and over time is consistent both with the existence of a normative range of behavior and with variation in the limits of that range for subgroups of the population and over time.

The best evidence on the variability of preferences for the timing of events is that provided by Modell on preferences for the timing of first marriage. Examining data on the age considered ideal for marriage at various times since the 1930s, Modell found persistent differences by social class, sex, and race in preferences for the timing of entry into marriage. Those from high socioeconomic backgrounds reported older ideal ages at marriage than those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those who attained a high level of education reported older ideal ages at marriage than those who attained a low level of education. An older ideal age at marriage also was reported for males than females,¹ and whites tended to report an older ideal age at marriage than blacks.

These subgroup differences in preferences for marital timing mirror subgroup differences in actual behavior. It is well documented that those from high socioeconomic backgrounds marry later than those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and that those who attain a high level of education marry later than those who attain a low level of education (Bayer, a, b; Call and Otto; Hogan, a; Marini, a; Ryder and Westoff; U.S. Bureau of the Census, a). It is also well known that men marry at older ages than women and that whites marry at older ages than blacks (U.S. Bureau of the Census, c). This parallel between subgroup variability in preferences and subgroup variability in behavior is consistent with the fact that behavior preferences are products of socialization, based on internalization of the predominant behavior patterns of significant others.

Other evidence that behavior preferences should be viewed as a reflection of behavior patterns is available in Modell's analysis of historical changes in preferences for marital timing and the relationship between changes in preferences and changes in behavior. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, Modell observed a close parallel between changes in ideal age at marriage and actual marital timing. In particular, he found that marital timing preferences were subject to periodic revision as behavior changed. Around the time of World War II, there was a marked lowering of the age at marriage for both sexes and a shortening of the period required for a cohort to complete the process of entry into marriage. To determine whether this change resulted from changing values about the appropriate timing of marriage or from changing circumstances that made it easier for individuals to realize previously held preferences, Modell compared preferences for marital timing before and after the war. His analysis revealed

no significant downward shift in ideal age at marriage. From this finding he concluded that the war had primarily affected the ability to carry out preferences rather than marital timing preferences themselves. Shortly thereafter, the ideal age at marriage changed in response to the change in behavior, shifting downward as the actual age at marriage had shifted. Changes in behavior preferences therefore were shown to lag somewhat behind changes in behavior, but the two occurred together. This parallel continued as behavior and ideals moved toward younger ages at marriage between the immediate postwar period and the peak of the baby boom, and as they subsequently reversed direction and started to rise again.

In summary, evidence on the preferred ages to undergo various role changes during the transition to adulthood suggests that preferences for the timing and sequencing of role changes are products of socialization, arising from internalization of the predominant behavior patterns of significant others. Such preferences do not constitute evidence that norms exist. To document the existence of norms requires evidence of a shared evaluation that a role change ought to occur within a range of ages and that sanctions are brought to bear when a role change occurs outside that range. Further, evidence on the variability of preferred and actual behavior for subgroups of the population and over time suggests that if norms do govern the transition to adulthood, they define a range of behavior as appropriate or acceptable that may vary for subgroups of the population and over time.

Conformity to Social Norms as an Explanation of Behavior

Despite the lack of evidence on norms governing the transition to adulthood, it is becoming more common to see reference to the existence of norms as an explanation for the tendency of young people to undergo role changes marking the transition to adulthood within a certain range of ages and in a certain order (Elder and Rockwell; Hogan, b, c). When the concept is used in this way, social norms are equated with regularity in behavior preferences arising through socialization. Social norms therefore could be given as a reason for the existence of any learned behavior, since it is generally true that expectations for appropriate behavior are transmitted through socialization and affect the behavior of individuals through a social learning process. For example, it is well known that adolescents' educational goals are affected by the educational attainments and expectations of their families and friends. Similarly, preferences for age at marriage—usually referred to as norms governing marital timing—are likely to be influenced by the marital behavior and expectations of family and friends. When the concept of social norm is used in a way that it can explain *any* behavior transmitted through socialization, its use becomes no more valid

in one situation than another. Just as it is often asserted that individuals tend to marry within a certain range of ages because social norms govern marital timing, it might be asserted that individuals tend to obtain between 10 and 20 years of formal schooling and do so at certain ages because social norms govern the amount and timing of education.

Using the concept of social norm as an explanation of behavior has two major limitations. First, norms do not explain how aggregate-level variation in behavior arises. As indicated above, norms can be viewed most appropriately as a reflection of behavior patterns. Just as behavior varies from one social group to another and changes over time, norms may vary and change. However, they do not explain why one behavior pattern rather than another first emerges or why behavior changes over time. For example, to say that people tend to marry at certain ages because social norms govern marital timing does not explain why a particular marital timing pattern came into existence or why marital timing varies between societies and over time. Aggregate-level variation in age at marriage undoubtedly is associated with variation in age-at-marriage expectations, but the source of aggregate-level variation in age at marriage is to be found in historical, social, and biological forces producing variation in behavior at the macro level, not in the shared cognitive representations of individuals.

Second, although norms may be regarded as shaping the behavior of individuals at the micro level, reference to the existence of norms can provide at best a partial explanation of individual behavior. Unless there is variation in norms for subgroups of the population, norms cannot explain intrasocietal variation in behavior. Even if subgroup variation exists, conformity to norms can provide only a partial explanation of individual behavior because there is variation in behavior within the range of what is considered appropriate or acceptable. Variation in actual behavior parallels variation in behavior preferences, but behavior varies more than preferences. Research therefore indicates that much of the variation in behavior among individuals cannot be explained by the expectations of significant others or individuals' own expectations (Alexander et al.; Duncan et al., a, b; Hout and Morgan; Kerckhoff; Sewell and Hauser). Thus, there is variation in individual behavior that cannot be accounted for by reference to social norms.

Sociologists have used the concept of social norm not only to provide a motivation for behavior but to explain the consequences of behavior. Behavior that conforms to social norms has been asserted to have beneficial consequences for individuals, whereas behavior that is nonnormative has been asserted to have negative consequences. For example, in research on the transition to adulthood, it has been argued that those who marry "early" or "late" and those who experience events in other than a "normative" sequence are likely to experience less satisfactory adjustment

to adult roles (Elder and Rockwell; Hogan, b, c). Use of the concept of social norm in this way amounts to asserting that individuals who deviate from a predominant behavior pattern are likely to suffer negative consequences. As argued above, this use of the concept is problematic because deviation from a predominant behavior pattern is not necessarily indicative of nonconformity to a social norm. However, even if an individual is known to have violated a norm, nonconformity to a norm does not provide an explanation for the consequences of behavior that is either readily interpretable or informative.

Using the concept of social norm to explain the consequences of behavior has two major limitations. First, it is unclear how an observed relationship between nonconformity to a norm and negative outcomes should be interpreted. The relationship may imply that members of society consciously bring negative sanctions to bear against deviants (that is, that nonconformity *per se* produces negative outcomes) or that differences in the experiences and the relationships that individuals who behave nonnormatively have to social institutions produce negative effects. It is impossible to distinguish empirically between these sources of outcomes, and to the extent that the latter are responsible, using conformity to social norms as an explanation involves circular reasoning. That is, because norms are likely to arise in response to institutional forces that shape behavior, those who do not conform to social norms, by definition, are likely to deviate from others in their relationships to institutions and to be at greater risk of negative outcomes.

Second, to assert that differences in behavior have different consequences because they represent varying degrees of conformity to social norms provides little information about the influences at work. It considers only one type of variation in behavior—specifically, variation in whether behavior falls within or outside the range of what is considered appropriate or acceptable. Focusing on conformity to norms therefore begs the question of why behavior has the consequences it does. Early marriage and parenthood, for example, may have negative consequences for a number of reasons. Those who marry and have children early may bring less maturity and experience to these roles. They may also interrupt their schooling early and have limited financial resources as a result. To say that accelerated role transitions have negative consequences because they are nonnormative tells us nothing about which of these influences is at work. Similarly, claiming that behavior has negative consequences because it is nonnormative classifies all nonnormative behavior together and ignores the fact that the effects of nonnormative behavior may vary with the nature of the nonnormativeness. For example, accelerated and delayed role transitions may have negative consequences for different reasons.

In summary, the concept of social norm has limited usefulness as an explanation of behavior and its outcomes. If the concept is used prop-

erly, examining conformity to norms focuses attention on only a limited portion of the variation in the timing and sequencing of life events—specifically, that reflecting conformity to shared expectations for appropriate or acceptable behavior. Since the range of such behavior is likely to be relatively wide, conformity to social norms can provide at best a partial explanation of individual variation in the timing and sequencing of events and a partial explanation of its consequences. It can provide no explanation of societal variation in the process of transition to adulthood. Even at the micro level, use of the concept of social norm to explain the consequences of behavior is not subject to clear interpretation and begs the question of why behavior has the consequences it does.

Operationalization of the Concept of Social Norm in Empirical Research

Use of the concept of social norm as an explanation of behavior not only tells us little about the determinants of particular types of behavior and the reasons why behavior has the consequences it does, but it may be quite misleading in empirical research. Because the concept of social norm has not been measured, researchers have assumed that behavior which is statistically modal is socially normative for all individuals. A recent example of this confusion between statistical modality and social normativeness can be found in Hogan's (b) research on the order of events in the transition to adulthood. On the basis of the observed order of three events in the lives of individuals—exit from school, entry into the labor force, and marriage—Hogan assumed that this most common ordering pattern was socially normative. Conversely, he assumed that other ordering patterns represented varying degrees of nonnormativeness. By equating a statistical mode with a social norm, he assumed both the existence and content of a norm and ignored the possibility that no norm may exist, that it may define a range of behavior as acceptable, and that it may vary within and between cohorts.

Hogan found that those who attained higher levels of education and those who were members of younger cohorts were less likely to experience events marking the transition to adulthood in a "normative" sequence. These findings are likely to reflect the existence of variability in individual orientations toward the ordering of events by education and cohort rather than variability in conformity to a social norm. For example, although there may be a social norm against marrying prior to leaving high school—in part because high school students are considered too young to marry—it is less likely that there is a social norm against marrying prior to the completion of higher levels of education, particularly graduate education, during which a large proportion of students do marry. Similarly, since educational attainment has increased and age at

marriage has declined since World War II (U.S. Bureau of the Census, b, c), it is likely that social norms against marrying prior to the completion of schooling have changed over time. The assumption that a modal ordering pattern represents a universal norm therefore ignores the possible existence of a normative range of behavior and possible variation in that range for subgroups of the population and over time.

Another way to examine the plausibility of the assumption that statistical modality reflects social normativeness is to consider the assumption with respect to the distribution of education. In the United States, it is statistically modal to obtain a high school education. One would not conclude from this that it is socially normative to obtain a high school education. It is probably socially normative to obtain anywhere from 12 to 20 years of schooling, with expectations regarding the precise level considered appropriate varying for subgroups of the population. Such a comparison illustrates the point that statistical modality is a distributional characteristic of the sample, not an indicator of a social norm. Just as the modal level of education does not reflect a universal norm regarding education, so the modal sequence of events in the transition to adulthood (which, it should be noted, is related to the level of education) should not be assumed to reflect a universal norm regarding the sequencing of life events.

Whether researchers confuse a statistical mode with a social norm, there has been a general tendency to assume the existence of a universal norm and thereby to ignore subgroup variability in norms. Failing to consider subgroup variability, which requires that norms be measured directly, has serious consequences for research purporting to test hypotheses about conformity to norms. One hypothesis that has been advanced is that individuals who experience events marking the transition to adulthood at normative ages and in a normative sequence achieve better adjustment in adult roles. If a universal norm is assumed when this hypothesis is tested, subgroup variability, such as that occurring between social classes, in the expected ages for leaving school, entering the work force, marrying, and becoming a parent and in the expected sequence of events marking the transition to adulthood is ignored. Those with high and low socioeconomic attainments therefore will be found to behave nonnormatively more often than those with average socioeconomic attainments, not because they are less likely to conform to social norms but because they are conforming to the expectations of their own social class. Another hypothesis that cannot be tested without measuring social norms is the hypothesis that individuals with high levels of resources are more likely to achieve conformity to social norms than those with low levels of resources. If a measure of central tendency in behavior is used to indicate the existence of a norm for the sample as a whole, those with high levels of resources, who are in the minority by definition, will actually demon-

strate *less* conformity to social norms than those with more average levels of resources—again, not because they are less likely to conform to social norms, but because they are conforming to the behavior patterns of their own social class.

When social norms are actually measured, conformity to norms may prove to be of little interest as a causal variable because there may be little variation in conformity to norms governing the transition to adulthood. That is, the parameters of acceptable behavior may be so wide that little variation in conformity to norms is observed. For example, it may be considered appropriate or acceptable to marry at any time after completing high school at age 17 or 18. Similarly, once high school has been completed, it may be considered acceptable to enter the labor force or marry prior to the completion of higher education. Because the number of individuals deviating from these standards of acceptable behavior is smaller than the number deviating from standards of preferred behavior (even when variability in behavior preferences for subgroups of the population is considered), less variation in conformity to norms will be observed when conformity is defined in terms of what is acceptable than in terms of what is preferred.

In summary, use of the concept of social norm has been misleading in research on the transition to adulthood because social norms have not been measured. The statistical mode of the behavior distribution has been assumed to represent a single social norm governing behavior of a given type for all individuals. Since evidence on behavior preferences indicates that such preferences vary for subgroups of the population and over time, just as behavior varies, using a measure of central tendency to represent a universal norm causes those with behavior orientations other than those held by the largest number to be defined as behaving nonnormatively. The possibility that variation in preferred and actual behavior may exist within a normative range or may indicate variation in norms is ignored. Unless social norms are measured, hypotheses about conformity to social norms are untestable. However, when social norms are measured in terms of what is considered appropriate or acceptable rather than what is considered ideal or preferred, relatively little variation in conformity to norms may be observed.

Suggestions for Future Research

Having argued that recent use of the concept of social norm in research on the transition to adulthood poses problems of both a theoretical and empirical nature, I turn to recommendations for future research. In general, I suggest that the concept be used more selectively and that sociologists take a broader view in seeking to identify causes and consequences of

variation in the timing and sequencing of major life events. Four general questions which do not necessarily require consideration of the role of norms might provide an agenda for future research. One question is what are the micro-level *determinants* of the timing and sequencing of events marking the transition to adulthood. That is, in a sample of individuals from a given society at a particular point in time, what are the personal characteristics and life circumstances that produce variation in the process of transition to adulthood? A second question is what are the micro-level *consequences* of the timing and sequencing of events marking the transition to adulthood. That is, in a given society at a particular point in time, what effects do the ages at which particular events occur and the order in which they occur have on the lives of individuals? A third question is what are the *determinants* of variation in the process of transition to adulthood over time and between societies. Although analysis of determinants of the timing and sequencing of events at the micro level can provide some insight into factors likely to be responsible for variation in the process of transition to adulthood at the macro level, precise inferences about determinants of variation in the process of transition over time and between societies require consideration of variables measured at the macro level. A final question is what are the *consequences* of variation in the process of transition to adulthood for societies. That is, to what extent do societal differences and changes over time in the timing and sequencing of events account for other societal differences and changes?

In addressing these four questions, some attention might be directed to understanding the role of norms, although the importance of studying norms should be evaluated relative to the importance of other research questions. A necessary condition for the study of norms is that the concept be defined precisely. Given the definition above, measurement of norms requires at least two types of information: (1) information on the acceptability of a behavior within the population of interest and (2) information on the strength of sanctions brought to bear when behavior is unacceptable. The acceptability of behavior can be measured on a continuum ranging from ideal or preferred to permissible but less desirable to unacceptable. To demonstrate the existence of a norm, some degree of consensus about the acceptability of behavior must be demonstrated for the population as a whole or for population subgroups. The existence and strength of sanctions vary at least in part on a continuum parallel to the acceptability of behavior. Preferred behavior does not invoke sanctions, but the probability and strength of sanctions increases as behavior becomes more unacceptable. The strength of sanctions also varies for different types of behavior, since it depends on the perceived consequences of unacceptable behavior and, therefore, on the importance of preventing it.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline a precise protocol for the measurement of norms, but the kind of data that might be collected

can be illustrated by briefly considering norms governing the timing of marriage. As indicated above, previous attempts to measure marital timing norms have focused on the preferred age at which to marry by asking respondents about the "ideal" or "best" age for a man (or woman) to marry. This type of information needs to be supplemented by information on the acceptable ages for marriage, which can be obtained by asking respondents about the youngest and oldest ages at which it is appropriate, or acceptable, for a man (or woman) to marry. With these data, it is possible to determine whether there is some consensus about the acceptable ages for marriage within the population as a whole or within population subgroups. Other information needs to be obtained about the sanctions that ensue when marriage occurs at an age regarded as undesirable or unacceptable. Such information might be obtained by asking respondents what they would do if their son or daughter were to marry at an age they considered undesirable or unacceptable, respectively, or by asking respondents what they thought other people would do if someone married at such an age. It is possible that there are no formal sanctions attached to marrying at a given age and that even informal sanctions associated with the timing of marriage are weak. If this is the case, it is unlikely that deviation from marital timing norms per se produces negative consequences.

With measures of norms, it is possible to study the role of norms within the context of research on the four questions outlined above. In studying micro-level *determinants* of the timing and sequencing of events marking the transition to adulthood, the effect of norms can be studied by examining subgroup variability in norms, with subgroups defined by variables such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and sex. Since norms for the population as a whole are invariant by definition, they cannot be studied as a source of micro-level variation within a society. The most important questions pertaining to micro-level *consequences* of the timing and sequencing of events are likely to be those focusing on the full range of variation in the timing and sequencing of events. However, consequences of nonconformity to norms can be studied by considering that portion of variation in the timing and sequencing of events that represents variation in conformity to norms. As stated above, one consequence of measuring social norms appropriately is that relatively little variation in conformity to norms may be observed. It will also be difficult to interpret the results obtained, since it will be impossible to determine whether nonnormative behavior has a negative effect because members of society consciously bring negative sanctions to bear or because differences in the relationships that individuals who behave nonnormatively have to social institutions produce negative effects. If a negative effect is observed for the latter reason, the fact that the behavior is nonnormative does not in itself explain the outcome.

Just as the process of transition to adulthood varies over time and between societies, social norms governing the process of transition can be expected to vary. Previous research suggests that norms are a reflection rather than a cause of macro-level variation in behavior patterns and that changes in social norms mediate the process of social change between cohorts (Riley). That is, as new cohorts differ from preceding ones, their behavior alters social norms, thereby affecting the behavior of subsequent cohorts. This relationship between changes in behavior and changes in norms can be studied at the macro level to identify the role of changing norms in the process of social change.

Conclusions

Although normative conceptions of the life course have become increasingly popular in research on change over the life course, a normative model of the life course, which assumes a normative life pattern and focuses on the role of norms in shaping the timing and sequencing of major life events, should not be adopted as a general paradigm for research. Norms undoubtedly exist and are transmitted through socialization from one generation to another. However, a normative model of the life course places undue emphasis on the role of norms and thereby diverts attention from efforts to understand why particular life-course patterns emerge, why the process of change over the life course varies from one individual to another, and why this variation has the consequences it does.

Age and sequencing norms governing the transition to adulthood should not be the major focus of research on the transition to adulthood because knowledge of the role of norms can contribute to our understanding of this period of the life course in only a limited way. From a theoretical standpoint, continued use of the concept of social norm is likely to inhibit progress toward more useful explanations of behavior during the transition to adulthood. From an empirical standpoint, use of the concept of social norm is likely to produce misleading results. This latter danger can be reduced by explicitly measuring norms, but the importance of doing so is questionable, given the theoretical weaknesses of the approach and the likelihood that measuring social norms in a way that preserves the sociological meaning of the concept will produce relatively little variation in conformity to norms.

Note

1. This finding is corroborated by Neugarten et al.

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