Age norms on leaving home:
Multilevel evidence from the European Social Survey

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Motivations and contribution

The existing literature on international differentials in the transition to adulthood in developed countries has focused mainly on explaining why the timing of home-leaving is so different in different societies. Comparative work has emphasised the importance of institutional arrangements, in particular the way state welfare systems are able to support young individuals in making the transition to adulthood. In this framework, differences in social norms on the timing of life-course events may play an important role in shaping differences in behaviours. The existence of life-course norms, especially in the form of "age deadlines" (i.e. the normative upper age limit for experiencing an event) has been documented also for the case of leaving home (e.g., Settersten & Hagestad, 1996; Liefbroer & Billari, 2008). Moreover, it has been shown that social norms are a source of independent influence in the decision to leave the parental home (Billari & Liefbroer, 2007).

In this paper we try to understand to what extent age norms are driven by country or regional factors as opposed to individual-specific characteristics. For instance, individuals may consider the acceptable upper age of leaving home to be higher in areas characterised by stronger religiosity, which is often linked with stronger family ties. Labour market opportunities may also matter. Since high unemployment is linked with fewer opportunities for young people and higher economic strain, they might be inclined to stay at home longer. The question is whether such unfavourable conditions also impact individuals perceived norms about leaving home. Also aggregate education may play a role. In high-education areas, more young individuals leave home at a younger age, either to go to University, or because they have a higher level of economic independence through education investments. High education areas may also have less traditional attitudes and possibly weaker or at least less traditional attitudes to family life.

Data and methods

We use data from 25 European countries that participated in the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS). A key innovation of the third round of the ESS is that it includes a module the "Timing of the life course", containing individuals' attitudes towards life course choices. We focus in particular

on the question: "After what age would you say an individual is generally too old to still be living with her or his parents". This question refers to a *cultural age deadline* in the spirit of Settersten & Hagestad (1996). Interesting, the question is of the split ballot type, so we are able to consider what men and women consider to be "too old" for men and women separately. In the analyses we show here we used the sub-sample of respondents that answered the question about males. The interviewees can decide to give a specific value for the "age deadline" or, alternatively, to answer that "one is never too old to live with his parents" ("never" in the following). Since the percentage of "never" is quite high we decided to conduct our statistical analysis on a dummy dependent variable built in this way: *AgeNorm* = 1 if the age deadline is not smaller than 30 or "never"; = 0 otherwise. The estimation is implemented by a series of 3-level logistic regression models. The general model can be expressed in a latent index formulation as: $AgeNorm^{*}_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{ijk} + \beta_2 X_{jk} + \beta_3 X_k + \delta_k + \varepsilon_{jk} + e_{ijk}$; where *i* denotes the individual, *j* denotes the region, and *k* denotes the country.

Results and conclusions

Table 1 presents the estimate of regression coefficients for different model specification. Since we are particularly interested in the effect of regional and country level covariates (indicated respectively by "R" and "C"), in the first model (M1) we only included macro variables together with individual variables that are not affected by the context (e.g., age and respondent gender - reference group is male). Then, we included also other individual variables that can be mediators of regional and country level factors. As for the macro-level variables we can note that unemployment rate and education tend to be significant at the country level but not at the regional level, while religiosity is significant only at the regional level. However, given the high correlation among country level variables (and at a smaller extent also among regional level variables) it is worth to see what happens if only sub-groups of variables are included. In the fourth model (M4) for example, only unemployment and religiosity are included at the macro level: it is confirmed that religiosity is significant at the regional level, while unemployment at the country level. Similar patterns are obtained including only education and religiosity or summarising unemployment and education in a synthetic index.

As for the individual level variables we can note that women tend to accept a higher age norm than men. The activity statuses are categorised into six dummies: currently working, retired, long term ill, currently unemployed, staying at home and currently in education (reference group). It is interesting to see that compared to students all other activity statuses constitute individuals with higher age norms about leaving home. Finally, we find that those with higher education (measured in years) tend to

report a lower age norm of leaving home. This is due to at least two factors. First, individuals with higher education tend to have higher earnings, and therefore experience stronger independence. Secondly, they might be less traditional and adopt new behaviours. We can also see that more religious tend to have a higher age norm for leaving home.

Table 2 reports the estimated variances of the regional and country level error terms. We start by estimating a "null" model, which essentially means random effect estimation without any covariates. We then proceed to estimate the model with only age and gender (2), before including (one by one) the variables measured at the regional and country levels (3a-3c). The null model gives important insights: both the regional and country random effects are statistically significant but the country effect clearly dominates the regional one. We next consider the effects from including the aggregated variables. Interestingly, unemployment and education reduce substantially the country level variability (18% and 27% respectively), while the percentage of "explained" regional variability is small (3%) for education and nil for unemployment. Religiosity on the contrary contributes to explain a substantial portion of the residual variability both at the country (17%) and at the regional level (15%). All the aggregate variables together (M1) explain 38% of the initial country level variability and 17% of the regional variability.

Summarising, a key finding is that country differences are a more important force behind the observed variation in age norms than regional effects. This might signal that institutional variation or broad differences between societies are more relevant in shaping norms about leaving home with respect to local culture. However, we want to stress the fact that even tough regional variation is less pronounced than heterogeneity across country, it has not to be completely neglected. In fact, the significant residual variability at the regional level makes some regions more similar to regions in a different country than to regions in the same country. We found that this regional variability can be explained, for example, by variability in religiosity within countries. Moreover, the relatively low level of regional variability can be the resultant of averaging different levels of regional variability across the surveyed countries. It will be interesting to explore if estimating separate regional variance components for different type of countries (e.g., federal versus non-federal) highlights a different role played by regions in different countries.

Table 1 – Fixed effect estimates (question asked about males)

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Gender	0.130***	0.112***	0.100***	0.105***
Age	0.005***	0.003***	0.001	0.001
Unemployment R	0.451	0.468	0.780	0.407
Education R	-0.042	-0.043	-0.044	
Religion R	0.788***	0.809***	0.793***	0.607**
Unemployment C	11.647	11.792	12.177*	14.813**
Education C	-0.224*	-0.233*	-0.237*	
Religion C	0.988	0.961	0.927	0.744
Unemployed		0.132*	0.375***	0.391***
Years Education		-0.027***	-0.030***	-0.029***
Religious		0.116***	0.121***	0.121***
Worker			0.289***	0.296***
Retired			0.235**	0.252***
Sick			0.338***	0.347***
At Home			0.392***	0.368***
Constant	1.780	2.023	1.905	0.953*

Note: p-value: ***<0.01;** <0.05;*<0.10; R = region; C = country.

Table 2 – Random effect estimates (question asked about males)

	Regional level		Country level	
	Var	Δ Var (%)	Var	Δ Var (%)
1) Null	0.134***	---	0.690***	---
2) only Age and Gender	0.133***	---	0.692***	---
3a) AG+ unemployment R&C	0.133***	0.17	0.565***	-18.39
3b) AG+ education R&C	0.129***	-3.12	0.503***	-27.38
3c) AG+ religion R&C	0.112***	-15.46	0.572***	-17.35
M1	0.110***	-16.93	0.426***	-38.51
M2	0.110***	-16.95	0.391***	-43.57
M3	0.115***	-13.39	0.425***	-38.54
M4	0.106***	-20.48	0.453***	-34.48

Note: Tests on variance components are Likelihood Ratio Tests with halved p-value.
p-value: ***<0.01;** <0.05;*<0.10. R = region; C = country. Δ Var (%) is the percentage variation in regional and country variance estimates calculated with respect to the model with only age and gender (AG).