When Do We (Expect To) Become Adults?

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Introduction and theoretical background

Whilst chronological age, alongside race and sex, is one of the "big three" social categories (Stolier and Freeman, 2016), chronological age on its own is insufficient to determine people's current stage of life. As a matter of fact, transitioning from one stage to the other not only is it not immediate – it does not magically happen on people's birthday – but it also does not occur at the same time for everyone, since it depends on a broad spectrum of personal, social and contextual factors (Settersten, 2002; Rennes and Throssell, 2019).

Demographers identify three stages in the human life cycle: childhood, adulthood and old age (Lee, 1994). The focus of this paper lies in the middle, since adulthood encompasses a wide range of ages – from early adulthood to middle adulthood and late adulthood – and experiences – entering the workforce, becoming financially independent, establishing long-term relationships, becoming parents, and pursuing personal and professional goals (Nelson and Luster, 2015).

Growing up is a unique experience, thus, it is no coincidence that people's answers will differ when questioned about the ages at which they believe that individuals enter a new life phase. This discrepancy between the ideal (subjective) age at which individuals should enter adulthood and the social (objective) age at which society expects them to become adults, which results from the above-mentioned heterogeneity, will be the focus of this paper. This age discrepancy can depend on demographic factors (age, gender, place of residence, immigrant status, social status), on factors related to ones' personal life achievements (education, employment, income, marital status, having children), but also contextual macro/institutional factors (availability of social welfare programs, (un)employment rates, income inequality, ageing populations).

Previous research has frequently explored the transition to adulthood through events such as completing education, entering the labor market, marriage and parenthood (see for example, Gagné et. al, 2022). However, they tend to overlook the subjective perceptions of age. Our aim is to fill this gap by computing an indicator that measures the subjective-objective discrepancy and provides the necessary insights for a more comprehensive understanding. Indeed, this age discrepancy can have a profound impact on individuals' life satisfaction, as it may result in them feeling behind, on track, or ahead of schedule. Life satisfaction is a subjective measure of a persons' quality of life according to their personal criteria, which can in turn be shaped by social cues. For instance, when there is social congruency, individuals foster a sense of social belonging and validation, which enhances their life satisfaction. Conversely, early or delayed transitions can lower life satisfaction, leading to stressful and unknown situations.

Moreover, beginning in the 1970s, there have been significant changes in the transition to adulthood. The traditional milestones of completing education, getting a job, getting married, having children are no longer interconnected, are often postponed and sometimes even skipped entirely (Billari, 2004; Billari and Liefbroer, 2010).

Age norms may also vary across societies due to cultural, economic, and social differences and are here analyzed followings Esping-Andersen's framework (1990). Northern European countries often witness earlier transitions into adulthood, given that individuals can rely on supportive social policies. Generous welfare regimes have been found to have a buffering effect that prevents individuals from delaying their transition to adulthood, also and especially, during times of economic crisis (Lesnard et al., 2016). On the other hand, in Southern Europe, it is viewed as normal for young adults to stay with their parents for longer (Mencarini et al., 2017), thus delaying marriage and parenthood until their mid-thirties, due to the persistently high youth unemployment rates and a greater sense of familial solidarity (Reher, 1998). Western Europe stands in the middle, exhibiting a more varied pattern: they are early birds when it comes to entering the labor market and leaving their parental home, but are still delaying getting married and having children to a remote future (Lesnard et al., 2016). Lastly, once young adults in Eastern European countries have left their parental homes, they are less likely to postpone getting married and having children. However, this does not always coincide

with leaving home at an early age, especially since they tend to experience longer periods of unemployment and, thus, enter the labor maker at older ages (Schwanitz, 2017).

Data, Measures and Methods

To explore the relationship between ideal (subjective) age and social (objective) age for transitioning into young adulthood, adulthood, and old adulthood, we use the ninth round *"Timing of life, Justice and fairness"* of the European Social Survey (ESS), administered in 2018 and covering 30 countries. Our sample consists of 38,099 individuals aged 18 and over, after excluding individuals with missing information on ore or more variables used in the statistical analyses.

We select self-reported life satisfaction as the dependent variable. Life satisfaction is measured with a 11-point Likert scale from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). The question was *"All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?"*. To account for age discrepancy, our main variable of interest, we built an indicator coded 1 when the ideal age is greater than the social age[1] and coded 0 when the opposite is true. Our main takeaway is that when the indicator is equal to 1 it means that individuals feel they can reach adulthood's various phases later than society expects them to.

Finally, since previous studies have found gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence, marital status, parenthood, educational attainment, occupational condition, self-rated income, self-rated health, and social participation to be important determinants for life satisfaction, we also control for those demographic characteristics.

As a first step, we carry out descriptive analyses. This is followed by multivariate analyses, based on linear regression models (OLS) with country fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries that might influence our dependent variable. Moreover, we stratified the analysis by European regions[2] – Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Western Europe and Eastern Europe – to capture regional variations and provide insights tailored to the specific economic, social, and cultural contexts within each area.

Preliminary results

As shown in Figure 1, life satisfaction varies significantly across European regions, with Nordic and Western countries reporting higher life satisfaction than Southern and Eastern countries, in line with most international rankings (Blanchflower and Bryson, 2023).

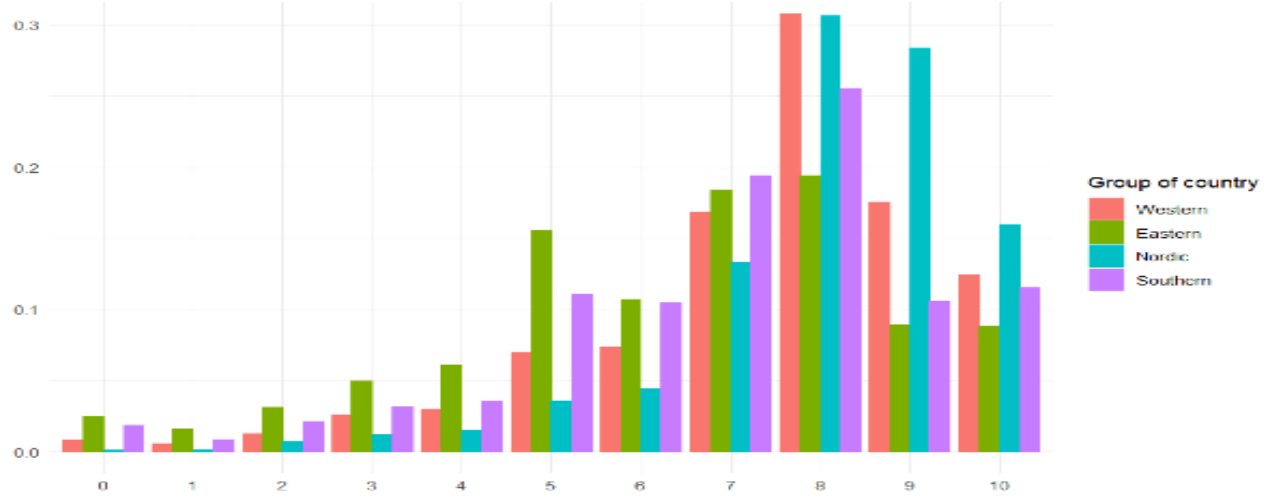

Figure 1. Self-reported life satisfaction in different European regions. Source: Author's own elaboration based on Round 9 of the European Social Survey.

[1] Based on the 2023 World Population Prospect, we established the following thresholds: 25 years old for early adulthood, 45 for middle adulthood and 65 for late adulthood.

[2] Northern Europe includes Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. Southern Europe includes Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta and Croatia. Western Europe includes the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland and Switzerland. Eastern Europe includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Bugaria and Montenegro.

Table 1 displays the coefficients of the OLS regressions. Country dummy variables were included in the regression but have not been reported.

After controlling for the previously mentioned socio-demographic and human capital variables, our analysis yields three interesting results. Firstly, in Northern Europe, those, who believe that they should enter early adulthood later than societal expectations, report lower levels of life satisfaction. Indeed, we can interpret the negative and statistically significant coefficient as if delaying early adulthood were perceived as feeling behind schedule. We believe this finding is in line with previous findings, since peer-pressure can be accentuated, and thus have a greater role in life satisfaction, in countries where welfare programs are designed to help individuals complete their transition (Lesnard et al., 2016). Similarly, in Eastern Europe, expecting to delay middle adulthood (and thus expecting to delay the milestones that are linked to this life stage) might lead to a sense of stagnation and social discrepancy, which can be harmful to life satisfaction. The coefficient is negative and statistically significant. Lastly, in all European regions, except for Western European countries, individuals, who believe they should enter late adulthood later than societal expectations, report higher levels of life satisfaction. Indeed, we can interpret the positive and statistically significant coefficient as if they feel they can slow down the ageing process, and thus consider themselves more vigorous and more satisfied with their lives (Heimrich et al., 2022).

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting life satisfaction in different European regions. Source: Author's own elaboration based on Round 9 of the European Social Survey.

	Northern Europe	**Southern Europe**	**Western Europe**	**Eastern Europe**
Socio-demographic				
Gender (ref. Male)				
Female	0.008	0.144***	0.068**	0.195***
Age (18 and over)	-0.015**	-0.037***	-0.034***	-0.046***
Age squared	0.0003***	0.0002***	0.0004***	0.0004***
Ethnicity (ref. Native)				
Immigrant	-0.05	0.021	0.077**	0.098*
Place of residence (ref. Big city)				
Small city	-0.008	0.150**	0.028	0.01
Rural	0.211***	0.144***	0.111***	0.123***
Marital status (ref. Never married)				
Married	0.232***	0.390***	0.259***	0.511***
Divorced	0.007	-0.296***	-0.097	0.111
Parenthood (ref. No)				
Yes	0.053	0.087	0.043	0.059
Human capital				
Education (ref. Primary)				
Secondary	-0.128	-0.008	0.039	0.162
Tertiary	0.089	0.088	0.061	0.118
Occupation (ref. Employed)				
Unemployed	-0.644***	-0.596***	-0.440***	-0.384***
Retired	0.140*	0.044	0.053	0.179***
Student	0.108	0.005	-0.023	0.136
Other	-0.204***	-0.061	-0.041	0.071
Income (ref. Comfortable)				

Feasible	-0.390***	-0.403***	-0.551***	-0.601***
Difficult	-1.137***	-0.962***	-1.469***	-1.333***
Very Difficult	-1.722***	-1.831***	-2.205***	-2.258***
Health (1 Very good – 5 Very bad)	-0.565***	-0.580***	-0.521***	-0.539***
Social interactions (ref. Often)				
Rarely	-0.563***	-0.732***	-0.579***	-0.728***
Sometimes	-0.159***	-0.357***	-0.235***	-0.277***
Is ideal (subjective) age greater than social (objective) age?				
Early adulthood	-0.112**	0.082	-0.054	0.033
Middle adulthood	0.015	0.094	0.05	-0.087**
Late adulthood	0.190***	0.131*	0.055	0.141***
Observations	6,050	5,988	12,883	13,178
Adjusted R^2	0.251	0.204	0.272	0.273

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