

**Social norms and life course events:
A topic for simulation?**

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Position paper – not for quotation or circulation

WORKSHOP ON NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS IN MULTI-AGENT SYSTEMS

The so-called life course approach (Giele and Elder, 1998) has contributed to the development of interdisciplinary theory and analytical tools in social sciences. Since its very inception, the importance of norms — or internal timetables — in shaping the life course of individuals has been stressed. The basic idea is that major decisions in the life course are influenced by social norms — and their accompanying sanctions — existing in the social networks people belong to. This view does not necessarily imply that behaviour is determined completely by social norms. Other factors may also play a role, but social norms are certainly expected to contribute significantly to the explanation of behaviour. Very limited empirical research has however been conducted on the topic. Researchers have usually limited themselves to assuming the existence or non-existence of life-course related norms rather than examining the issue. And in general, the very possibility of empirically studying life course norm has been challenged.

Social norms and life course events: empirical studies – definition and implementation in survey research

A broad consensus exists that past work on social norms is not very useful in understanding the importance of norms in shaping the life course in contemporary societies. Modell (1997) argues that the idea of age norms “has proven so attractive that social and behavioural scientists have tended to accept it with inadequate specification and empirical underpinning”. Elder (1992) states that “we still lack knowledge of age expectations in large populations concerning events in the life course. Study of the *normative* foundation of the life course deserves far more attention than it has received so far”. One of the few publications that have touched upon the issues raised by Elder is a monographic issue of *The Gerontologist* in 1996. Billari and Micheli (1999) provide an additional study.

The concept of norm often remains ill defined and ambiguous in the literature. Billari and Micheli (1999) for empirical purposes, define norms as statements:

- a. Related to the necessity (*prescription*), possibility (*permission*), or impossibility (*proscription*) of undertaking certain behaviours.
- b. Sustained by sanctions.
- c. Characteristic of a certain group of actors.

They distinguish three broad categories of social norms concerning the life course, i.e. age, sequencing and quantum norms.

In sociological theory, “(age) norms are prescriptions or proscriptions about behaviour in the form of “should” and “should not”; they are supported by consensus; and they are enforced through various mechanisms of social control, particularly social sanctions - positive, to keep people “on track”, and negative, to bring straying individuals “back into line”(Settersten and Mayer, 1997)”. It is possible to distinguish between appropriate ages or optimal age norms, and upper and lower limit ages for specific events (defined as ‘cultural age deadlines’ by Settersten and Hagestad, 1996a,b or ‘goal deadlines’ by Heckhausen, 1999). Such norms have so far been the most extensively studied on life course events.

Sequencing norms concern the order in which two (or more) events occur in the life course. Heckhausen (1999) states that future research on social norms within the life course framework has to focus on sequencing prescriptions. They have largely been neglected in the recent literature on norms on life course events.

Quantum norms refer to the number of times a certain event should or should not be experienced. Again, it is possible to distinguish between an appropriate number and upper and lower

limits. One of such quantum norms, i.e. norms with respect to the number of children, has been extensively studied in demography.

Sanctions: norms vs. scripts

The ideas of individuals about the life course do not necessarily have to be sustained by sanctions. Even if no sanctions are attached to them, such ideas may still be fundamental in shaping the life course of individuals, by providing internal calendars or scripts that orient behaviour. From a developmental psychology perspective, Heckhausen (1999) states that the effect of social norms may have been internalised in Western societies, and this renders obsolete any need for external societal enforcement. She concludes that “life-course patterns would be expected to have become increasingly regulated by internalised norms about age-appropriate behaviour, age-graded events and transitions, and age-sequential rules (e.g. you must finish school first before you can have a family) as societal regulation became more lenient.” Such age-calendars may even include ideas regarding the length of life. The notions of ‘norms’ and ‘scripts’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive. People may hold *general* ideas about the suitable timing and sequence of life-course events, and at the same time sanction only transgressions of *specific* age and sequence norms.

Social norms and life course events: an agent-based perspective

There has been growing interest in the study of social norms within the field of computer simulation of artificial societies. Such developments most certainly deserve some attention on the part of researchers interested in demographic behavior. Norms can be implemented in simulation as built-in constraints (which is the less interesting view for our approach), as built-in ends (goals), or as built-in obligations (Conte and Castelfranchi, 1995a, 1995b; Saam and Harrer, 1999).

The agent-based perspective seem to be interesting, because a) little doubt exist on the importance of social norms and scripts on life course events; b) large empirical evidence is available on the actual ages, sequencing and quantum of life course events; c) one can build experiments based on multi-agent systems to help implementing in a consistent way norms and scripts in theories of life course behaviours.

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