



multilinks

VIEWS ON LIFE COURSE MARKERS AND LIFE PHASES OF MEN AND WOMEN: SOME FINDINGS FROM THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY

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How central are intergenerational roles in marking life transitions and defining life phases, such as adulthood and old age? Are there gender differences in views of life stages and how they are structured, and do respondents in different societies think that roles hold contrasting significance for men and women? These are issues that motivated a cluster of questions in the 2007 European Social Survey. The team that created the module (*Lifetiming*)¹ wanted to explore issues of *identity* and *interdependence* in phases of adulthood: How important are certain roles for marking life stages and age group membership? How do roles embed men and women of different ages in webs of interdependence? In this brief report, some key findings from 23 countries are presented, with an emphasis on roles that involve intergenerational ties. Respondents were asked how important they considered certain role transitions to be for marking the entry into adulthood and old age. For each transition, they were instructed to rate it from “very important” to “not important”. A so-called “split ballot” design was used, in which half of the respondents were asked about the lives of women,- the other half about men.

Becoming and being an adult

In the case of entry into adulthood, four transitions were included: leaving the parental home, starting a full-time job, living with a partner and becoming a parent. Thus, two questions involved parent-child ties. In the majority of countries, starting full-time employment was seen as the key transition for becoming adult. In the case of men, respondents in 16 countries saw full-time employment as the most important. In the remaining 7 countries, 4 had leaving home in the top spot, 3 the transition to fatherhood (Portugal, Russia, Ukraine). When asked

¹ *The Timing of Life: The organisation of the life course in Europe*, a module for Round 3 of the European Social Survey, developed by Francesco Billari, Università Bocconi, Italy; Gunhild Hagestad, Agder University College, Norway and Norwegian Social Research; Aart Liefbroer, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute and Free University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Zsolt Spéder, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Hungary

about women, respondents in 11 countries most often named work as important. In second place came motherhood, mentioned by most respondents in 6 countries, followed by leaving home, which lead the list in 6 countries. The Nordic countries stood out by identifying leaving the parental home as the most important transition, for both men and women. Here, starting a job came in second, except among Danes, who put becoming a parent in second place. In these welfare states, all relatively affluent and providing public support for education and independent living, ceasing to be a “child” in the parental home appears central in marking the beginning of adult life. Two other countries also had leaving home in first place: Austria and the Netherlands. Overall, transitions as markers were seen as more important for men than for women. In the case of leaving home and starting a job, all countries had a greater proportion of respondents naming the transitions as more important for men than for women. The *only* transition that is *not* clearly seen as most central for men, is that of becoming a parent. Here, ten countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden UK, Ireland, France Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Estonia) deemed it more important for men than for women (Figure 1). However, only three of these countries had men naming it as most important for men: Sweden, Finland and the UK. Ten countries saw it as equally important for both genders: Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Cyprus, Portugal, Spain, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Ukraine. Only two countries had slightly more who judged it to be more important for women: Hungary and Bulgaria. In both cases, this view was taken by women respondents.

If we ask how common it was for a majority of respondents to regard parenthood as most important, for both men and women, figure 1 shows this to be the case in 5 countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Portugal, Russia and the Ukraine. Ten countries had 25-50% naming it as most important; 9 had less than 25% (Austria, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, UK).

So far, we have focused on role entries, such as becoming a parent. These “becomings” may alter age-related identity, for example being perceived as an adult. In a classic discussion of social roles, sociologist Irving Goffman spoke of role *attachment*: how important is it in shaping identity? However, we also need to focus on “being”- role incumbency. To what extent does it entail what Goffman called *commitment*: facing a set of expectations that represent constraints in a web of interdependence? In the survey, two questions attempted to capture the extent to which parenthood represents commitment for men and women: Reactions to a man/woman who is working full time, while having a child under the age of three, and reactions to a man or a woman who gets divorced while having a child under 12. Here, strong and clear gender patterns emerged in reported disapproval. With regard to the first, respondents felt that most people would react more strongly against working mothers than working fathers. As Figure 2 shows, such disapproval emerged in 21 countries. In 6 countries, a majority of men and women disapproved of working mothers (Germany, The Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Russia and the Ukraine). The lowest disapproval rates and the smallest differences between mothers and fathers were found in Norway, Denmark, and Portugal. Nearly all countries (20) had disapproval of fathers with young children divorcing. Here, a majority of both men and women reported disapproval of fathers divorcing while having young children: Estonia, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Overall, we may conclude that broad consensus exists on patterns of role commitment in parenthood: fathers are needed, most likely as earners; mothers are primary carers in the first years of life.

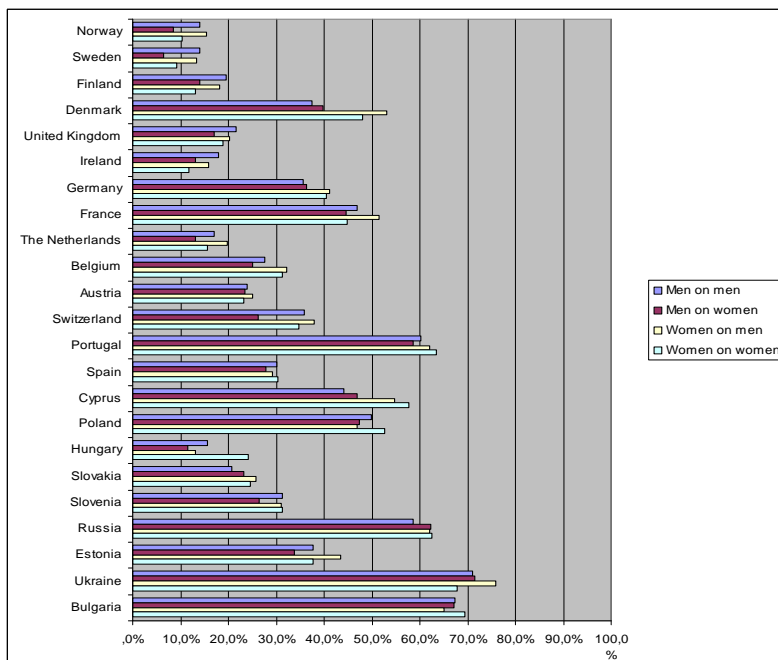
Becoming and being old

The interviews contained fewer questions about markers of old age than was the case for early adulthood. In this discussion, one transition is highlighted: Becoming a grandparent and needing the help of others. Overall, the data suggest that grandparenthood does not appear to constitute a significant marker for entry into old age. As Figure 3 shows, no country had a majority naming it as important or very important. More than one fourth of respondents deemed grandparenthood as a marker of old age in six countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Poland and Portugal. No clear differences between men and women emerged. The findings should not come as a surprise, since most people become grandparents in middle age or when they are in the third age. As is argued in another paper, modern grandparenthood is, to a great extent, seen as a continuation of parenthood, with an emphasis on supporting offspring in their role as parents. Thus, the strongest commitment in the role of grandparent may be through meeting the needs of adult children in their parenting responsibilities. Unfortunately, few countries have data on perceptions of grandparental responsibilities, and there are limited opportunities to compare perceptions and behaviour across welfare contexts. However, discussions within the MULTILINKS team have spurred new efforts to address these issues and several papers are currently under preparation or in press (e.g., Herlofson & Hagestad, forthcoming; Aassve et al., 2011).

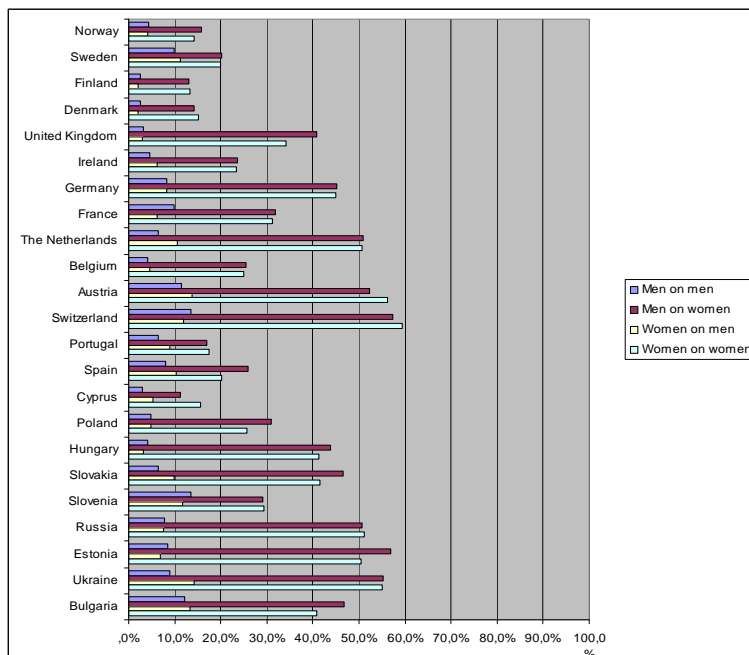
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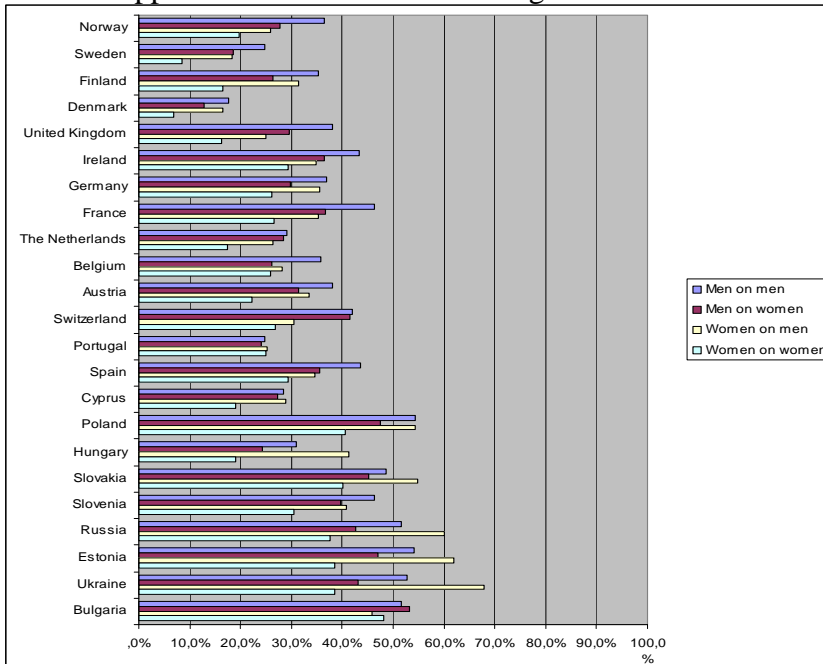
% saying parenthood is important for becoming adult



% who disapprove of men/women with child under 3 working f.t.



Disapproval of divorce while having children under 12



Importance of grandparenthood for being old

