

# When is a person too young or too old to work?: Cultural variations in Europe

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# WHEN IS A PERSON TOO YOUNG OR TOO OLD TO WORK?

## *Cultural Variations in Europe*

Stephen Sweet, Ithaca College

### I. INTRODUCTION

If an aging workforce presents a concern for employers, then how do varying age expectations shape the timing and duration of work within the life span? And how much of a person's life should be spent working? This issue brief documents the extent to which attitudes toward age and work vary among societies and reveals how gender role expectations further shape these variations.

Not all societies structure work in an equal manner, and age is one factor that is used to determine who should (or should not) be employed.<sup>1</sup> Cross national variation in eligibility for retirement benefits and regulations concerning child labor amply illustrate the way this consideration is used to confine or expand work attachments. In addition to the ways it is structured into regulations, age also fits into cultural orientations — value systems, social scripts, and accepted templates — used to guide the pacing of lives. While laws and organizational policies may determine when individuals might be eligible to work or exit from work, it is the culture that influences the embracing of these policies, the inclination to pace one's life in accordance with opportunity structures, and the view of one's life as being “in synch” or “out of step” with one's birth cohort.

This brief, using the third wave (2006-2007) of the European Social Survey (ESS), considers the following:

- 🌐 If a successful transition to adulthood equates with a capacity to be responsible (and, as a consequence, employable), when does adulthood start?
- 🌐 If a successful transition to middle age equates with the establishment of career success, then when does a person reach middle age?
- 🌐 Given that age influences the opportunity to retire, when do members of different societies interpret the ideal age to retire and when do they believe one is too old to work?
- 🌐 Given the variation in cultural scripts on the timing of entries to and exits from work, to what extent do societies vary in the expected duration of work within the life course?

Employers (especially those working in multinational environments) may benefit by understanding cultural variations to predict movement into, out of, and between jobs. This knowledge can also inform the targeting of career development initiatives directed to employees at specific career stages. Finally, these age expectation norms can be used to appreciate cross-national variations in the appetites for work, as some societies appear to embrace work for much longer durations of the life course than others.

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## **WHEN DOES SOMEONE BECOME AN ADULT?**

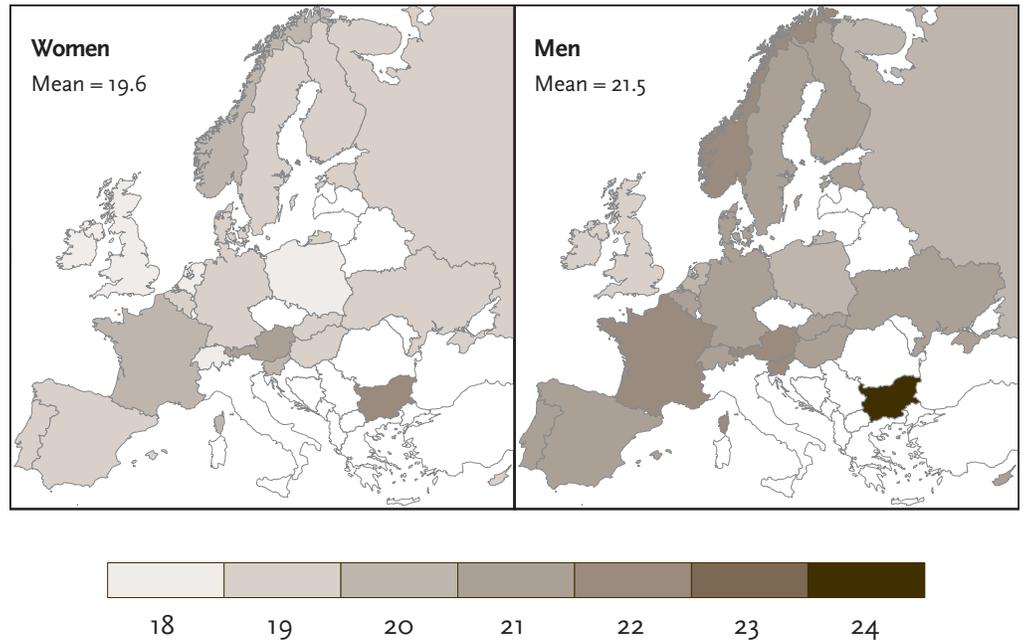
“Adulthood,” a taken-for-granted social status that confers a responsibility to work, is a social construction. In evidence of this conclusion, social historians highlight that it is only in the last 150 years that Western societies made strong distinction between children and adults.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists have shown that some cultures integrate initiation rituals that mark transitions to adult roles.<sup>3</sup> This approach stands in stark contrast to Western societies that transition children into adults through an incremental attainment of status markers, such as driver’s licenses, national (military) service, voting rights, rights to work, protections against work, and other signifiers of autonomy and responsibility. Within this murky incremental approach, Western societies have introduced “adolescence,” a life stage nested between childhood and adulthood. And while adulthood is commonly perceived as a stage where one has transitioned from school to work and from one’s parents to one’s own family, the actual experience of launching children into adulthood is more complicated.

Longitudinal studies that follow individuals over time reveal considerable variation in the timing and sequencing of these work, family, and educational transitions.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the United States, it is common for children to return home to live with parents or remain financially dependent even after completing a college education.<sup>5</sup> It is also common for adults to go back to school after forming families and careers.<sup>6</sup> And in Italy, it is not unusual to observe “children” living with their parents well into their late 30s and early 40s. Thus, even though cultures have embraced adulthood as a concept, the actual transition from childhood is ambiguous and increasingly less scripted.<sup>7</sup>

While the legal definitions of adulthood vary, and transitions may not be distinct, there are some loosely defined understandings of when a child stops being a child and when an adult becomes an adult. To assess the variation in these expectations, Figure 1 maps the attitudes in respect to the question:

*At what age, approximately, would you say (girls or women/boys or men) become adults?*

Figure 1: Mean Age At Which Women and Men Reach Adulthood:  
Country Comparisons



There are a few things that are important to note in Figure 1. First, while there is cultural variation between European societies, there is also considerable consistency in considering adulthood as emerging somewhere between the age of 18-22. Bulgaria, however, stands out as having a particularly late evaluation of when the transition to adulthood occurs, with the transition to adulthood for men happening roughly at age 24. This is nearly 5 years later than in Ireland, where men are considered to be adults at approximately age 19.

It is also interesting to observe that women are considered to transition into adulthood at ages earlier than men in every European society studied in the ESS. In most societies this age differential is approximately 2 years. But even with the generally accepted appraisal that women become adults more quickly than men, there is also variation in the age disparities in women's and men's entry into adulthood. For example, in Ireland, there is only a 1.1 year gender-age gap. In contrast, in Hungary, the age that men are expected to be enter adulthood is 2.7 years later than women.

## WHEN DOES SOMEONE BECOME MIDDLE AGED?

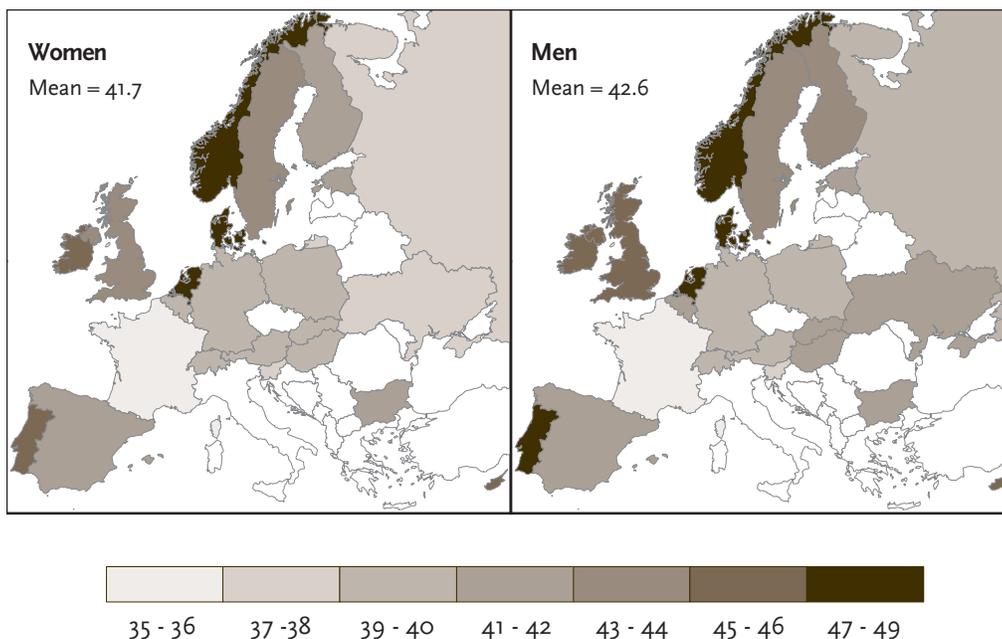
While thinking about the findings presented below, I asked my eight-year old son to estimate when a person became middle aged. Because he did not know the concept of “middle age,” he speculated in the following manner... “the average person lives to be 100, half of 100 is 50, therefore middle age is at age 50.” While his life expectancy information may be off, his logic was straightforward. Is this the way middle age is marked, as the half way point between birth and death?

The sociologist Phyllis Moen argued that middle age it is not so much mathematically defined as it is culturally scripted, as midlife can be considered “mid-course,” a point where individuals are expected to be “established,” meaning secure in their careers and in their family circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Psychologists, such as Erik Erikson,<sup>9</sup> highlighted how middle age constitutes a developmental point in the life cycle, wherein individuals begin to reflect back on their life accomplishments. In the best circumstances, these reflections can affirm attitudes of generativity. Alternately, midlife can be a time of angst, when individuals recognize that dreams deferred may never come true. This, in turn, may lead to reappraisal of goals, or redirect lives through career changes (i.e. returning to school or changing jobs), or reshape commitments to families.

To help understand the ways in which the timing of these types of experiences and goals may vary, Figure 2 shows the mean responses to the question:

*At what age, approximately, would you say (women/men) reach middle age?*

Figure 2: Mean Age At Which Women and Men Reach Middle Age:  
Country Comparisons



When averaging across societies, in Europe the average age for women and men to reach middle age is between ages 41-43 (respectfully). But as Figure 2 shows, there is a much wider cross-country variation in the estimation of midlife than is the case for the onset of adulthood. At one extreme, in France, middle age is estimated to be at approximately age 35, whereas in Denmark, midlife is at approximately age 49. Clearly, these differences have little, if anything, to do with life expectancies (comparable in both countries <sup>10</sup>).

It is also interesting to observe that there is a much smaller gender-age gap in the onset of middle age. Although men are estimated to reach middle age at slightly later ages than women (as was the case with the transition to adulthood), the gender-age gap is smaller in nearly every country than it was for the onset of adulthood. In some societies, such as Sweden, it disappears, as men in that society are believed to become adults two years later than women, but both sexes are believed to reach middle age at the same age of 43.

### WHEN IS SOMEONE TOO OLD TO WORK?

Like adulthood and middle age, the ideal age to transition into retirement years is socially defined. It is important to remember that retirement, as a life stage itself, did not exist prior to the industrial economies of 20th century, and the length of retirement and lifestyle expectations are shifting to correspond with the values of current generations as they age into retirement <sup>1, 11, 12</sup>. To consider how societies vary in their appraisal of when men and women should exit the workforce, I present analyses of responses to two questions in the ESS:

*At what age, approximately, would you say (women/men) reach old age?  
What is the ideal age for a (woman/man) to retire permanently?*

Figure 3: Mean Age At Which Women and Men Reach Old Age:  
Country Comparisons

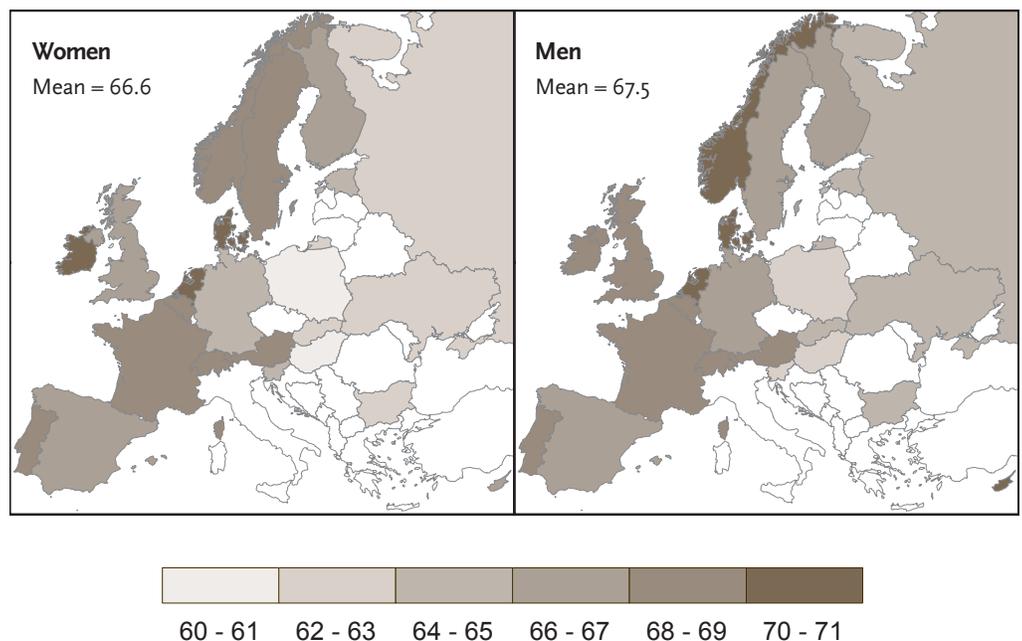


Figure 4: Mean Age At Which It Is Ideal For Women and Men Retire: Country Comparisons

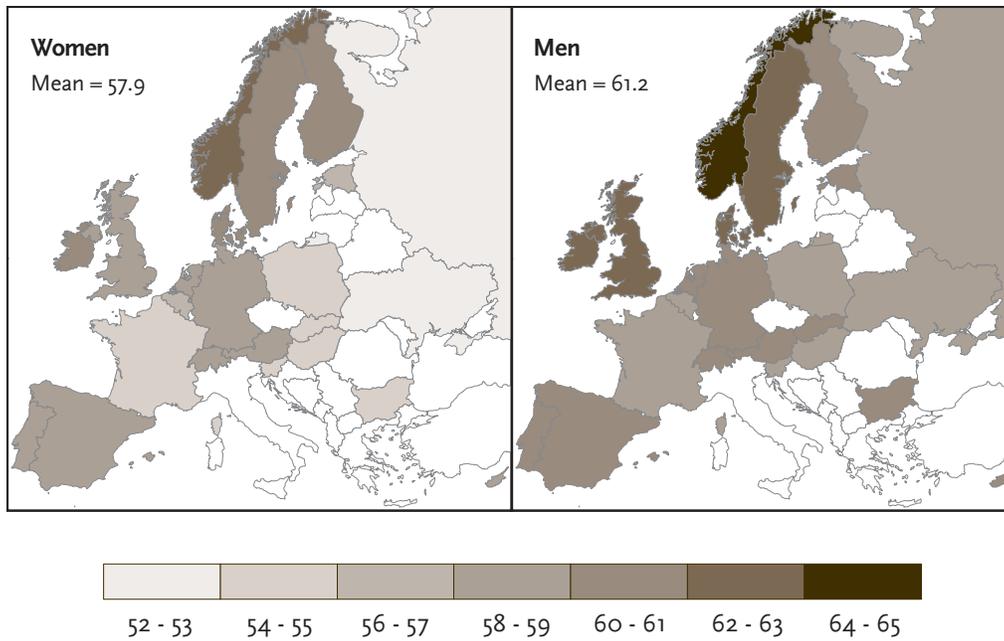


Figure 3 shows that European men are considered to reach old age, on average, one year later than women (67.5 and 66.6 respectively). Some readers might find this relationship surprising, given that men have lower life expectancies than women – an observation that would suggest that men reach old age at a faster pace than women. But as discussed above and below, while aging is driven by biological factors, the statuses associated with age are socially conferred. In this case, if old age is considered to be a period in life where one becomes frail or incapable of work, it becomes understandable that men reach old age later, as they have historically been considered to be stronger and more capable of working than women. Figure 3 also shows that the threshold for old age varies remarkably between societies. At the low extreme is Hungary, where women are perceived to become old at approximately 61 years of age, whereas in Denmark, the onset of old age occurs a full decade later at age 71 for both women and men.

Figure 4 shows that the ideal age for retirement (age 57.9 for women and age 61.2 for men) varies remarkably throughout Europe. There is an irony that even though women live longer, and are more likely to take “time outs” from paid work to care for children or aging family members, they are also expected to retire earlier. Likely the reason that men are expected to retire later has to do with pervasive attitudes valuing men’s attachment to the labor force, and converse attitudes that may restrict women’s access to work. While the ideal age for retirement is centered somewhere around age 60, there is considerable variation across societies. At the extremes are Ukraine, with an expectation that the ideal would be for women to retire at age 53 and men at age 59, and Norway, with women to retire at 63 and men at 64.

Considering the findings presented in Figure 3 and Figure 4 together, observe that there is a consensus across all of Europe that retirement should occur in advance of the onset of old age. All of the societies studied have cultures that believe individuals should be able to exit the workforce while they are still young enough to enjoy some years in later life free from the need to labor. But how much time should they get? Again, there is considerable variation. For example, in Estonia, retirement ideally occurs only 2.9 years in advance of old age, but in France retirement begins 10.1 years in advance of old age for men.

## HOW MUCH OF THE LIFE COURSE SHOULD ONE SPEND WORKING?

Thus far, I have documented cultural variation in the onset of adulthood (a life stage where one should be capable of holding a job), in the pace at which adulthood moves into middle age (and hopefully career security), and in the ideal age for retirement and the onset of old age. In this final analysis, I consider the question of how European countries vary in their cultural appraisals of how much of men’s and women’s lives should be spent working.

To create this estimate, I subtract the mean value to the question: *At what age, approximately, would you say (girls or women/boys or men) become adults?* from the mean value for the question: *After what age would you say a (woman/man) is generally too old to be working 20 hours or more per week?* Admittedly, this is, a crude estimate, as it does not include cultural expectations concerning “time outs,” such as opportunities for parents (most commonly women) to exit jobs to care for children following childbirth. It also does not include variation in work schedules (an important consideration), as work hours vary remarkably between countries.<sup>1</sup> This should be considered a starting point for a more ambitious analysis.

Figure 5: Mean Number of Years Men and Women Are Considered Capable of Working (Imputed): Country Comparisons

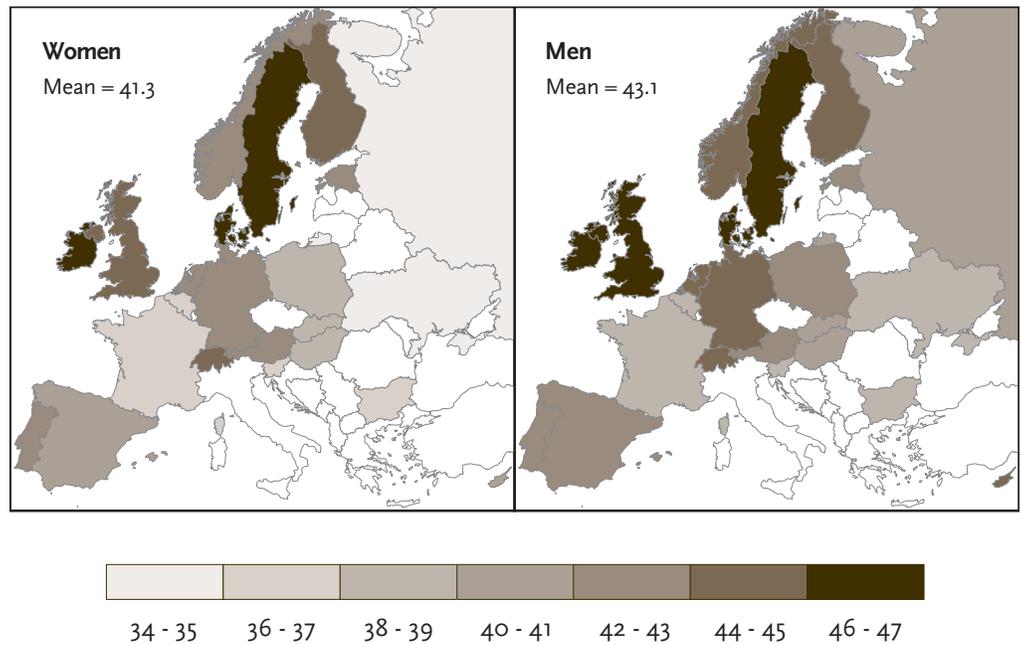


Figure 5 shows that, on average, women and men could be expected to be capable of working approximately one half of their lives (41.1 years and 43.0) years respectively. But as important is the variation throughout Europe in the expected capability to work throughout the life course. At the low extreme is Ukraine, where the span between the onset of adulthood and incapacity to work in later life is 34.4 years for women. In contrast, in Ireland, men could be expected to be capable of working for 47.5 years in their adult life.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

The ESS shows that there are widely different appraisals across nations of when a person becomes an adult, when they reach middle age, when they should retire, and when they are too old to work. And not only do these appraisals vary by society, they also vary in respect to men and women. Ultimately, these attitudes may shape the capacities of societies to attract employment, as well as the resources they may need to provide to members who are deemed “unfit” for work.

These findings may be of use to employers, especially those who operate multi-national enterprises and who need to anticipate the likelihoods of worker turnover that may occur as a result of an aging population.

- ④ While “hard” data offered through chronological age demographics are commonly used to consider labor force turnover “risks,” this report suggests considering those data in respect to national cultures. The information collected in the ESS suggests for example that approaching age 55 in France (an age when many there would want to retire), is remarkably different than approaching that same age in Sweden (where many would still want to work).
- ④ Given the variation in expectations concerning when someone can (or should) work are so large in Europe, these findings may offer greater predictive power in anticipating labor force turnover than would be possible by simply estimating the proportion of one’s workforce that is over any given age.
- ④ And beyond predicting labor turnover, these data may help inform the application of career development initiatives targeted to specific age groupings.

National cultures shape the paces at which workers enter into the early career stage, established career stage, and the stage at which careers are exited. These data suggest that different societies have different appetites for work, with some expecting work to occur through the majority of the adult life span, while other societies expect work to comprise a smaller proportion of a person’s life. This may have direct implications on the carrying capacities of societies to be productive and compete in a global economy and may shape employer decisions to relocate into societies that may be more or less work oriented.

## APPENDIX

Table 1: Participation in the European Survey Wave III (2006/2007)

Country	N	Valid Percent
AT Austria	6918	5.5
BE Belgium	5475	4.4
CH Switzerland	5985	4.8
CZ Czech Republic	4386	3.5
DE Germany	8705	7.0
DK Denmark	4498	3.6
EE Estonia	3506	2.8
ES Spain	5268	4.2
FI Finland	5918	4.7
FR France	5295	4.2
GB United Kingdom	6343	5.1
GR Greece	4972	4.0
HU Hungary	4701	3.8
IE Ireland	6132	4.9
IT Italy	2736	2.2
LU Luxembourg	3187	2.6
NL Netherlands	6134	4.9
NO Norway	5546	4.4
PL Poland	5547	4.4
PT Portugal	5785	4.6
SE Sweden	5874	4.7
SI Slovenia	4437	3.6
SK Slovakia	3278	2.6
UA Ukraine	4033	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>124659</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2: Means In Respect to Women

Country	Age Become Adults	Age Reach Middle Age	Age Reach Old Age	Ideal Age to Permanently Retire	Age Too Old To Work 20 Hours Or More \ Week	Duration of Work Capability (Imputed)
Austria	21.3	40.4	68.1	59.0	63.3	42.0
Belgium	19.2	40.6	68.4	56.6	56.0	36.8
Bulgaria	22.2	41.6	63.7	56.0	58.4	36.2
Switzerland	18.9	39.0	68.4	59.9	63.9	45.0
Cyprus	19.8	45.0	66.5	59.4	61.6	41.8
Germany	19.5	39.6	64.7	58.4	62.7	43.2
Denmark	19.8	47.4	70.8	61.7	66.3	46.5
Estonia	19.5	41.6	64.1	57.8	62.4	42.9
Spain	19.9	41.4	66.1	59.0	60.7	40.8
Finland	19.2	42.4	68.0	60.8	64.3	45.2
France	20.3	35.6	68.9	55.8	56.5	36.2
United Kingdom	18.1	44.1	67.8	59.9	62.8	44.7
Hungary	19.1	39.9	60.9	55.1	58.6	39.6
Ireland	18.4	45.7	70.1	61.0	64.5	46.1
Netherlands	18.7	47.0	70.7	59.8	61.2	42.5
Norway	20.4	47.6	69.7	63.1	64.3	43.9
Poland	18.9	39.8	61.7	54.2	58.8	39.9
Portugal	19.8	45.9	68.8	59.4	62.4	42.5
Russian Fed.	19.5	38.2	63.2	52.9	54.1	34.6
Sweden	19.2	43.7	68.6	61.9	65.8	46.6
Slovenia	20.5	38.2	64.0	55.4	56.7	36.2
Slovakia	19.9	39.9	63.4	55.6	59.4	39.5
Ukraine	19.5	38.8	63.4	52.6	54.0	34.4
<b>Total Means</b>	<b>19.6</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>66.6</b>	<b>57.9</b>	<b>60.9</b>	<b>41.3</b>

Table 3: Means In Respect to Men

Country	Age Become Adults	Age Reach Middle Age	Age Reach Old Age	Ideal Age to Permanently Retire	Age Too Old To Work 20 Hours Or More \ Week	Duration of Work Capability (Imputed)
Austria	22.8	40.8	68.2	61.8	66.2	43.4
Belgium	21.6	41.6	69.2	59.8	61.5	39.9
Bulgaria	24.2	42.7	65.4	60.7	63.0	38.8
Switzerland	21.2	40.0	69.7	62.0	67.1	45.9
Cyprus	21.5	46.6	70.3	61.7	67.0	45.4
Germany	21.6	40.6	66.2	61.0	65.7	44.1
Denmark	21.2	49.1	71.2	63.2	68.3	47.2
Estonia	21.6	42.1	64.6	61.7	65.3	43.7
Spain	21.3	41.9	66.7	61.0	63.4	42.2
Finland	21.6	43.0	67.4	61.9	65.7	44.1
France	22.6	35.7	69.5	59.4	60.8	38.2
United Kingdom	19.7	44.9	68.9	62.1	66.5	46.8
Hungary	21.7	41.4	63.1	59.4	62.6	40.9
Ireland	19.5	45.8	70.0	64.0	67.0	47.5
Netherlands	20.7	47.1	71.1	61.6	65.8	45.1
Norway	22.4	47.9	70.2	64.3	67.2	44.8
Poland	20.6	40.8	63.3	59.8	63.8	43.2
Portugal	21.5	47.1	69.5	61.1	65.3	43.7
Russian Fed.	20.7	39.3	65.3	59.4	60.9	40.2
Sweden	21.3	43.6	67.2	63.2	67.5	46.2
Slovenia	22.7	38.6	64.0	59.6	61.1	38.4
Slovakia	21.8	41.2	65.4	60.3	63.5	41.7
Ukraine	21.7	41.0	65.8	59.0	60.1	38.4
<b>Total Means</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>42.6</b>	<b>67.5</b>	<b>61.2</b>	<b>64.6</b>	<b>43.1</b>

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES:

This report aggregates the reports of 124,659 respondents from the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS). Conducted in 24 participating countries in 2006-2007, randomly selected participants offered a representative sample enabling cross-cultural comparisons. Attitudes toward aging and life course transitions were asked in two modules, randomly assigned to individuals who reported their attitudes in respect to either men or women. To account for variation between sample characteristics and country demographics, analysis was weighted with a variable provided by the ESS (<http://ess.nsd.uib.no/files/WeightingESS.pdf>).

The analysis reports findings for the following survey questions:

*People differ in their ideas about the ages at which (girls or women/boys or men) become adults, middle-aged, and reach old age....*

*At what age, approximately, would you say (girls or women/boys or men) become adults?*

*And at what age, approximately, would you say (women/men) reach middle age?*

*And at what age, approximately, would you say (women/men) reach old age?*

*We are now going to ask you a series of questions about the ideal age for (girls or women/boys or men) to do certain things, then about when they are too young and finally about when they are too old to do certain things. In each case please give an approximate age.*

*In your opinion, what is the ideal age for a (woman/man) to retire permanently?*

*Sometimes people are considered too young to do or experience certain things...*

*And before what age would you say a (woman/man) is generally too young to retire permanently?*

*In the same way as people are sometimes considered too young to do certain things, sometimes they are considered to be too old....*

*After what age would you say a (woman/man) is generally too old to be working 20 hours or more per week?*

Preliminary analysis of the variables used in this report revealed that some participants reported that one might “never be too young” or “never be too old” to marry, have children, work, or retire, or other responses such as “it depends.” These types of qualitative responses presented a challenge in providing valid comparisons between countries. One strategy (not taken) would be to code these cases as “missing” in statistical analyses. The implications of this strategy would skew analysis toward the center of the life course, as acceptance of very young and very old ages would be screened away. A further threat to reliability could result from cultural variation in the disavowal of age related norms. This would happen if one society had greater proportions of participants reporting that one is “never too old” to retire in one society than in another. To address this concern, this report uses analyses that recoded qualitative responses to age specific accounts that reasonably approximate, in quantitative form, the attitude expressed. These recodes were performed in the following ways:

For all variables, reports of “it depends” were recoded as missing.

For attitudes concerning the age too young to retire, “never too young” along with values less than age 40 were recoded to 40, and reports of “should never work” were recoded to missing.

For attitudes of the ideal age to retire, reports of “should never work” were recoded to missing, “never too young” was recoded as missing, values less than age 40 were recoded to 40, and “should never retire” was recoded to 75.

For attitudes of the age too old to be working more than 20 hours per week, reports of “should never work” were recoded to missing, “never too young” was recoded as missing, values less than age 40 were recoded to 40, and “should never retire” was recoded to 75.

In creating total means, representing attitudes in Europe, the means represent the combined country averages. This adjusts the data so that all countries share an equal weight in creating this average, which is not adjusted by country population size.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the Center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

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## LIST OF GLOBAL ISSUE BRIEFS:

Global Issue Brief 01: Employers of Choice In Countries-of-Choice

Global Issue Brief 02: When Is A Person Too Young or Too Old To Work? *Cultural Variations in Europe*

Global Issue Brief 03: The Diverse Positions of French Employers On Age Management: *The ANACT's 10,000-company Survey*