

# **Is There a Deadline for Parenthood?**

An Example from Poland

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## **Abstract**

*The postponement of childbearing is occurring across Europe and the USA, but the paths of this trend differ profoundly from country to country. In Poland, as in other Central and Eastern European countries, most women have their first child at a relatively young age. This paper asks about the role of age norms in sustaining the pattern of early motherhood. We investigate young adults' perceptions of age in relation to their fertility choices. We find that age is indeed a salient dimension that structures and regulates individual childbearing plans. The qualitative approach of our study allows for gaining insights into how age norms are explained, argued about and sanctioned. We also reconstruct the mechanisms of the normative influence of age limits (deadlines) on fertility behavior. Thus, the study not only improves our understanding of the timing of childbearing but also contributes to the general discussion on age norms.*

## 1. Norms and Life Course Transitions

Although social norms are universally referred to when one attempts to explain human behavior, the discussion on how they should be defined and classified, how they emerge and are sustained, and how they shape human life has been carried on for a long time (Ajzen 1991, Ajzen and Fischbein 1985, Blake and Davis 1964, Coleman 1990, Ensminger and Knight 1997, Etzioni 1992, 2000, Gibbs 1965, Heckhausen 1999, Hechter and Opp 2001, Horne 2001, Marini 1984, Morris 1956, White 1998). In general, we can distinguish between two types of definitions of norms. First, one refers to the statistically prevailing patterns of behavior. According to this definition, “norms are merely behavioral regularities that generate social expectations” (Hechter and Opp 2001, p. xiii). The second type contains the element of “oughtness”: norms are perceived as some generally accepted prescriptions or proscriptions for behavior. When referring to the two types of definitions, some authors (e.g. Ensminger and Knight 1997) make a clear distinction between “a normal behavior” (i.e. statistically regular) and “a social norm” (i.e. prescription or proscription). In fact, most scholars agree that documenting the behavioral pattern is necessary but not sufficient to prove the existence of norms. The element of “oughtness” should be present as well.

Another disputable issue related to social norms is an existence of social sanctions. Some scholars argue that in order to speak of norms, one should also be able to identify the mechanisms of social control: negative sanctions in case of deviance and positive enforcements for compliance (e.g. Blake and Davis 1964, Ensminger and Knight 1997, Marini 1984). However, it is also argued that some norms might be internalized and hence having a strong regulating power even in an absence of social control (e.g. Ajzen 1991, Dohrenwend 1959, Horne 2001, White 1998). Heckhausen argues that the binding force of norms “may result precisely from the fact that they are *not* enforced by external institutional control but are internalized as frames of reference” (Heckhausen 1999, p. 36, emphasis original). Also, according to Coleman, internalization is “a more fundamental way” of how norms can be embedded in a social system (Coleman 1990, p. 243).

In what aspects can social norms shape human life? If we take a life course perspective, they may impact a number of experienced life events, their sequence and timing (Billari and Micheli 2001). Age and sequencing norms have especially been of major interest to demographers and sociologists (e.g. Billari and Liefbroer 2001, Billari et al. 2002, Elder 1975, Hogan 1978, Marini 1984, Modell 1980, Neugarten et al. 1965, Settersten 1997, 1999, Settersten and Hägestad 1996).

Age and sequencing norms are frequently regarded together, as clearly they are interrelated. The former defines *when*, in relation to the chronological time, any given life course transition ought to take place. For instance, at what age one ought to leave a parental home or marry. Sequencing norms regulate what should be the *order* of life events, for example whether one ought to finish school before getting married or what should come first, a child or a wedding. These two types of norms jointly construct normative life scripts or timetables (Elder 1975, Hägestad 1986, Nydegger 1986). It is, however, not clear to which extent the chronological age is salient in these timetables. Some studies indicate that the sequence of life events is a primal dimension and the age norms are almost irrelevant (Hogan 1978; Modell 1980; Neugarten et al. 1965, Nydegger 1986, for a discussion see also White and Klein 2002). On the contrary, other researchers find chronological age an important point of reference for structuring a person's life (Fry 2003, Heckhausen 1999, Settersten 1997, 1999).

The role of age norms in shaping the individual life course remains disputable. How salient are they and to what degree shared? Are there any social sanctions related to them or are they internalized? How strongly do they regulate human behavior? Under what conditions is the deviance from these norms excused? How do sequencing and age norms interact? These are just some questions among those posted in relation to the topic (Heckhausen 1999, Settersten 1999).

In this paper we focus on the relevance of age norms in shaping an individual's life course. More precisely, we are interested in age norms concerning the transition to

parenthood. Our interest in this particular life event comes from the current discussion about fertility postponement, which is taking place across Europe and in the USA.

It has been observed that the trend of childbearing postponement differs profoundly from country to country (Sobotka 2004). When looking at a woman's age at first birth in Europe, some clear discrepancy between (roughly dividing) West and East can be observed. In some Western European countries, the mean age of women at the first childbearing is approaching 30 (e.g. 29 in Germany, 28.9 in The Netherlands, 29.2 in Spain, 29.3 in Switzerland; Council of Europe 2006). In this area, 25-45% of women become mothers after they turn 30 (Sobotka 2004). This is, however, not the case for Central and Eastern Europe, where the mean age at first birth varies from about 23 to 26 years, with Slovenia being a remarkable exception (27.5, Council of Europe 2006). There are several reasons to believe that the above discrepancies are, at least to some extent, the result of differences in the local age norms.

First, the delaying of childbearing is possible when relevant age norms change – when such behavior is culturally approved (Morgan 1991). It has been argued that the flexible and loose age norms are one of the reasons for the changes in the timing of childbearing (Castro Martin 1992, Rindfuss et al. 1996, Settersten and Haegstad, 1996). Therefore, it seems justified to suspect that the sustained patterns of early childbearing are supported by more universal and strict age norms. In fact, some evidence of that has already been presented for the Ukraine: Perelli-Harris (2005) used data from focus group discussions to illustrate how traditional norms foster early childbearing in this country.

Moreover, Settersten (1997) showed that age limits are perceived in relation to many life dimensions, but they are especially relevant for family-related transitions: marriage, entering parenthood and completing parenthood. His data, however, does not indicate any strong pressure connected to these age limits (at least in the US context he studied). People appear to treat them loosely and do not perceive any consequences of missing them. Although these findings prove that age is an important reference dimension for

family plans, they fail to show that age norms indeed have an impact on people's behavior (Settersten and Haegstad, 1996).

This paper discusses the issue of age norms related to the transition to parenthood in Poland, where women become mothers relatively early. Because we consider age norms in relation to the limited childbearing postponement in the region, we focus on these social rules which avert late parenthood. We examine whether any norms that define the age limit for having a first child exist and thus, encourage early childbearing. In other words, we investigate the age *deadlines* for the transition to parenthood.

We argued in the first section of the paper that it is necessary, although not sufficient, to show the behavioral patterns, in order to prove the existence of social norms. Therefore, our study starts from describing statistical regularities related to the timing of childbearing, but it does not stop there. We apply a qualitative methodology in order to investigate if the element of "oughtness" is present as well, how it is reasoned and how young people consider age norms when they make their fertility choices. Do they perceive any *deadline* for the transition to parenthood and how does it impact their behavior?

## **2. Age at First Childbearing in Poland – Statistical Regularities**

Although Poland records one of the lowest fertility levels in Europe (TFR of 1.24, CSO 2006), the postponement of childbearing there has been relatively modest so far. Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the mean age of women at the first birth over the last quarter century in Poland, in comparison with selected European countries. The shift in a women's age at first birth is not impressive in Poland, however, the timing of transition to parenthood clearly has been changing. And the change has been more visible during last years. From 1980 to 1999, the mean increased by one year (from 23.4 to 24.4), and in the following 5-years period it jumped by 1.2 year.

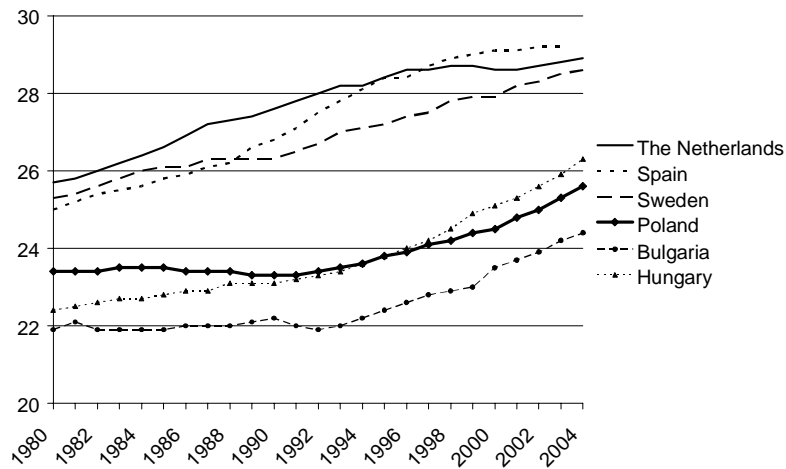


Figure 1: Mean age of women at first birth, Poland and selected European countries, 1980-2004. Source: Council of Europe 2006.

Polish women are waiting longer before entering parenthood. Still, the vast majority of first births occur from mothers aged 20-30. Figure 2 depicts age specific first births intensities in 2000 and 2005 in Poland. The number of births has decreased substantially for the age group 20-24, with some sign of recuperation in later ages. This recuperation, however, takes place mainly under the age of 30 – birth intensities for older age groups are still very low (see also: Kurkiewicz and Frątczak 2006). For comparison, we show data for Spain in 2005 – the difference is indeed remarkable.

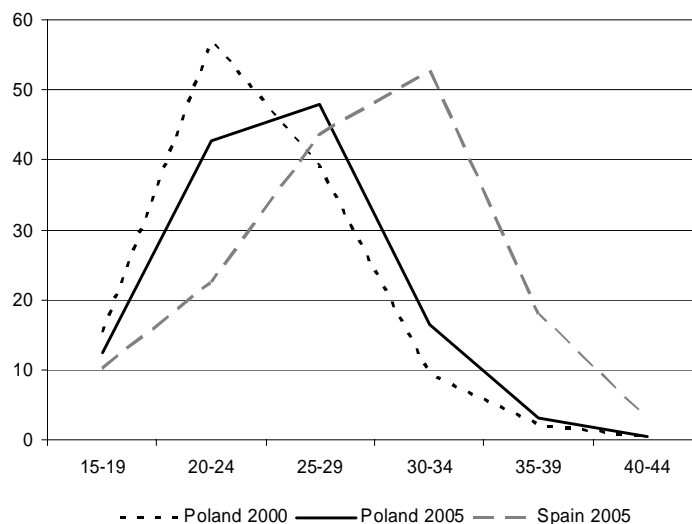


Figure 2: First births age specific intensities (number of births per 1000 of women in given age group), Poland 2000 and 2005, Spain 2005. Source: Eurostat, New Cronos Database.

An increase of births in the age group 30-34 is noticeable as well. However, for this group, a large majority of births occurs in the first part of this period. Currently, 90% of first births take place from women aged 30 or younger, and another 5% from those aged 31-32 (CSO 2006). Again, if we consider the example of Spain, only 57% of first births occur from women aged 30 or younger.

Apparently, the transition to motherhood after the age of 30 remains rare in Poland. This tendency has been also reconstructed by individual level data. Oláh and Frątczak (2006), using the 2001 Polish Retrospective Survey, calculated the relative risks of transition to parenthood for Polish women, who were still childless at the age 25. Naturally, the results show that the intensity of first birth decreases as the age increases. This trend, however, is not significant up to the age 30 and becomes significant only then. In other words, if a woman does not have a child by the time she is 30, the chances of her becoming a mother later rapidly decline.

As far as the statistical regularities are concerned, we see that although the age at first birth increases, *normal* behavior in Poland is still to become a mother before the age 30. Nonetheless, we are not able to evaluate to what extent this statistical pattern generates expectation and how strong its regulating power, as far as the fertility choices are concerned, actually is. Can we speak of a real social prescription here? In order to gain some insight into this issue we conducted a qualitative study, related to individual fertility choices.

The main aim of our study was to investigate whether age is a relevant category for young people at the early stages of their family formation? Do they perceive any age norms in relation to their transition to parenthood? If so, what are they and how are they explained? What are the mechanisms sustaining these norms? And finally - what is their impact on individual fertility choices (regulating power)? How do the age concept and related norms impact the timing of transition to parenthood and are there any cases when nonconforming behavior is justified?

Our research questions echo some of the problems related to age norms in general, as they were outlined in the introductory sections. Thus, our paper contributes to the discussion on age norms in general, as well as to the debate on the different patterns of fertility postponement, particularly in regards to the slower tempo of the changes in some parts of Europe.

### **3. Qualitative Approach - Method and Sample**

For our study, we conducted problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000) which combine methodological openness in the data collection with a specific theoretical focus on one or more topics. Our guideline covers six topical areas providing rich information on the history of the respondents, on his or her current situation as well as desires and intentions, with a special focus on the family sphere. In particular, the interview includes: (1) a retrospective biographical narrative of the respondent up to the moment of the interview and his or her current life situation; (2) the union history and the status of the current relationship; (3) the fertility history and the current desires and intentions related to childbearing and parenthood; (4) the experiences of or value-orientations connected to being a parent; (5) the impact of the political and economical transformation of the early 1990s on respondent's family and fertility plans; and, (6) plans and fears related to the future life course development. The analysis for this paper mainly draws on the information gathered on fertility histories, as well as on fertility desires and intentions.

The study took place in Warsaw. We interviewed 48 individuals (26 women and 22 men) at various stages of their family careers: couples still dating, cohabiting or married, childless or with one child. For most couples, it was possible to interview both partners. Women's age ranged from 20 to 30 and men's from 20 to 35. Our respondents varied in regard to their education. Two educational subgroups were defined: up to high school exams (primary, vocational, secondary professional or secondary general education: 20 respondents) or higher (studying, Bachelor's or Master Degree: 28 respondents).



The analysis of the gathered material is modeled on the “grounded theory” approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During the interview, respondents talked about their experiences, desires and intentions regarding childbearing. In these narrations, first of all, we identify all passages related to age and childbearing desires or intentions. In this material, we categorize and define different ways of and reasons for considering age by our respondents with regard to when they plan parenthood. The richness of the textual data allows us to study a relation of age norms to other aspects of fertility choices in-depth and it permits for reconstructing the various mechanisms of normative impact of age.

#### **4. Results – Does Age Matter?**

Before we go into presenting how age is considered for family planning, we should note that all childless respondents in our sample (34 interviewees) intend to have at least one child. The intentions are differently reasoned and also they are not always well-defined (yet). Some respondents have already started their first attempts at having offspring, for others the intention still takes the form of a strong conviction that they will have a child one day. Still, none of the childless respondents claims that he or she does not want to or does not intend to have a child.

We explored our data, investigating the relevance of age for childbearing experiences and intentions of all our respondents. In the following sections we shall present the results of these analyses. First, we present how the interviewees perceive and reason the age deadline for the transition to parenthood. Secondly, we look at the mechanisms of social control over this deadline. Next, we present how strongly it can influence individual fertility choices. How do young people consider the age limit, when they think about their own lives? Finally, to complete our investigation on the regulating power of norms, we explore whether any exceptions are acceptable and, if so, under what circumstances.

##### **4.1. *Age Deadline***

In our study, we ask the respondents what aspects should be taken into consideration when planning a child. We do not ask directly about the age issues in any way, therefore

it is quite striking that the majority of respondents spontaneously come up with the concepts of “age”, “time flying”, “getting old” or (on the other end of continuum) “still being young”. Among our interviewees, 30 convey that they consider, or considered in the past, some form of age deadline for having their first child. It is also remarkable that almost all childless women in our sample report some form of time pressure for becoming a mother, with just three exceptions: the youngest female in the sample (20 years old) and two women who are undergoing gynecological or infertility treatment. Among those who did not mention the aging aspect are some childless men, as well as respondents already with a child (in most cases, unplanned).

For those who speak of time pressure, the most frequently perceived deadline is age 30. This age mostly concerns women (but not only) and is mentioned explicitly (“*I would like to have a child before I’m 30*”) or implicitly (“*It’s high time, I’m 28*”). It is also in some cases perceived as a strict upper limit (“*I want to have a child before 30*”) or as a more vague point of reference (“*Maybe about 30?*”). These findings are in line with the statistical regularities, as described before. We report also cases when the deadline is set lower: for instance at the age of 25. The maximum limit that appears in our data is 32, but it is given not as a single point but as an upper limit of a range: “*I think, it will be 30-32*”. In general, a clear message is: one should not wait too long with the transition to parenthood. Our respondents give several explanations as to why one ought to have children at a young age. We identify seven main categories of different reasons, as presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Not surprisingly, the age deadline is most strongly connected to biological and health aspects: a female’s optimal age for childbearing and her fertility limits. We make a distinction between these two reasons because they differ in their relation to age and in their weight. As far as a woman’s optimal age for childbearing is concerned, if respondents define it at all, they suggest the mid-twenties (24-26). They reason that this

moment is the best, but they do not mention any consequences of having a child out of this “best period”.

The argument, related to the fertility limits, is much stronger. Women perceive the postponement of childbearing as a threat that they will have problems getting pregnant and delivering a baby or even that they will eventually remain childless. They do not want to be responsible for such an outcome (“...later, I don't want to blame myself”).

The opinion that postponement over the age 30 can lead to childlessness is in most cases given as an undisputable fact, which does not require any additional explanations (see Table 1). However, it also happens to be supported by experiences of friends or by doctors' opinions:

*“This topic appears. They feel obliged to have children before 30, or some of them are trying and it takes time and it's worrying, or it needs some medical tests. So I can hear about things like this...” (Female 28, childless)*

*“My last visit to the gynecologist ended up with some comment that gave me lots to think about: that one cannot postpone it till – nobody knows when. It's time to consider it. I keep telling myself that I am still young – that's OK, but it does not translate into biology.” (Female 29, childless)*

Note, that the deadline of 30 is sometimes explained also in relation to the limits of completed fertility. If one wants to have two children, the first one needs to be born early.

There are also several cases of respondents who give the deadline of 30 but without any explanation. As these are mostly childless women, older than 25, we believe that the biological explanation, related to fertility limits, is most likely to be valid for them as well. For this age group, this argument becomes highly relevant, as we shall illustrate later in this paper.

Some other reasons given to justify the perceived age deadline for parenthood deal with having more energy and patience for a child, having better relations with offspring and wanting to be still young and full of energy for “*enjoying life*” or to proceed with one’s own career when a child is grown up. Finally, they argue that having a child in older age results in a situation of family roles being mixed: one can be taken for a grandparent of one’s own child. Note that these explanations concern both women and men.

#### **4.2. Social Control**

Our respondents do not report any direct social pressure connected to the age of childbearing. Data do not reveal any socially imposed sanctions for having a child over the age of 30. Only one category of explanations, related to the mixed social roles of late parents, can be regarded as connected with some social mechanism of control: being labeled as a grandparent of one’s own child may lead to an embarrassment in front of others (“*I don’t want to be a grandpa and take my child to school*”).

However, strong pressure and numerous mechanisms of social control exist when it comes to having a child in general. Presenting all factors, influencing childbearing intentions goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, a high position of children in individual values system of Poles (Frątczak and Balicki 2003, Giza-Poleszczuk and Poleszczuk 2004, Ogryzko-Wiewiórska 2001) is clearly sustained also by social norms and a complex system of sanctions and rewards. Childlessness is clearly not an acceptable option here. Everybody ought to become a parent and some examples of mechanisms of social control over this norm are presented in Table 2. It’s striking that punishment for childlessness (even unintended!) can be as severe as being left by a partner.

[Table 2 about here]

The pressure to have a child is combined with a great concern, described before, that the postponement of childbearing over the age 30 may ultimately lead to childlessness.

Thus, we may say that there is no direct social control over the age at first birth, but there is an indirect one, as illustrated by Figure 3 below.

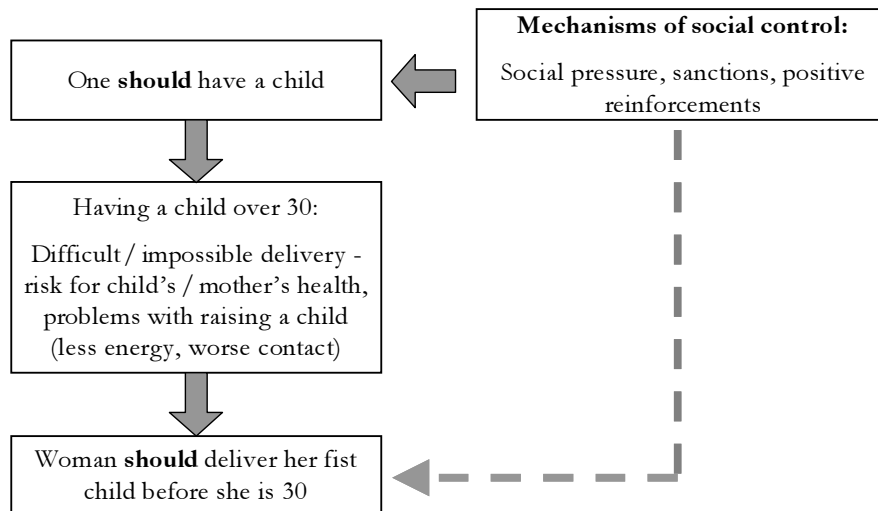


Figure 3: An indirect mechanism of social control over the age deadline for parenthood.

Women may not expect nor fear any social sanctions for having a child after they are 30. They do, however, anticipate severe consequences if they are not able to have a child afterwards. As the result, chronological age does not only provide a point of reference for fertility choices, but we can also document a relatively strong regulating power of the perceived age deadline for parenthood.

#### **4.3. Regulating Power of Age Norms – Impact on Fertility Choices**

To begin with, we consider how young people consider and deal with the age limits when they plan their family. The interview data show that when a woman approaches 30, this topic becomes highly relevant for her. As a vivid illustration of this, we can consider one female respondent, still childless at age 29. She feels exceptional pressure to get pregnant in the following year. However, her partner wants to wait, saying that he is not ready for a child yet. Thus, she is almost certain to miss the deadline of 30. There are several remarkable features of her ways of dealing with and talking about this situation.

First of all, she mentions almost all possible reasons for having a child as soon as possible. In general, for all interviewees, we identified seven main explanations of

the age deadline (compare Table 1). In her narration, as many as five of them are present (fertility limits, optimal time, patience for a child, contact with a child and mixed social roles):

*“I’m at that age and later I wouldn’t like to regret that I’m not able any more [to have a child], that we put the decision off for too long and that I got to a doctor and he says “I’m sorry, your time is up” (...) there’s a period in which women should get pregnant and give birth (...) the child is healthy then and the woman is all right too, and everything is just fine. And then I’m not a mum and grandma at the same time and the relations with the child are all right too, they are not out of balance, as when I’m 50 and my daughter is 15 or 10 because I was a mummy who had her child very late, and then everything irritates me.” (Female, 29, childless)*

Not only does she present these arguments in the interview, but they are also her weapon to convince her partner (*“He knows exactly, and I always make him aware of it, that I’m at my age...”*). She urges him to think that childbearing is important *now*, and although she claims that she does not want to *“force him”*, she also says:

*“You probably have to persuade the man, so he realizes that if we want to be together and set up a family at some time, then we should think about it earlier, in order not to hold a grudge against ourselves later. Because I wouldn’t like to regret and reproach P. [partner] for waiting too long and that there is a problem.”*

On top of that, she has also stopped taking the Pill, leaving the issue of contraception completely to her partner.

The above case of disagreement in a couple is quite extreme compared to other respondents in our sample. Naturally, as this is first and foremost a woman’s age that is considered, the pressure is stronger for a female than for her partner. The woman is also frequently the one who brings the topic up. However, with most couples in our sample, with time, also a male partner is increasingly concerned with the age issue. Hence, a consensus in a relationship usually exists.

With time, our respondents not only start to perceive age-related aspects as gradually more important for their fertility plans, but they also tend to evaluate them as more influential than other issues. Interestingly, this relates also to material factors which are universally perceived as crucial for reproductive choices. A place to stay, job and money are frequently mentioned as the prerequisites for having children – and their lack leads to the postponement of childbearing. Still, this importance apparently loses its power as the age deadline approaches.

*“A baby requires large financial expenditures and I’m just postponing it... not yet, not yet. Some dates are being mentioned: in a year’s time. Because I’m getting close to the round age and I need to take that into consideration too (...) I’m going to make this decision anyway when I’ll be getting close to thirty, no matter our financial stance. It will cease to be a problem then.” (Female, 27, childless)*

The same mechanism works in the next example of the couple that just a few weeks before an interview made a decision to start trying to conceive:

*“I wanted to put it off for some time until some financial things are clarified. But M. [partner] is right too, saying that in one year’s time there will be still some reasons not to do it anyway and to postpone it further. We don’t want to end up in our thirties and still planning and it would be perhaps too late.” (Male, 25, childless)*

Astonishingly, for women the age-related pressure can be also so powerful that it triggers considerations for and planning of childbearing, even if there is no clear desire to become a mother! Consider the following quotes:

*“I don’t think about a child, because I want to have a child. Only... I’m almost 30 and for me this is a kind of magic number. Because I think one has to have a child eventually (...) And this is rather the reason why I think about children, not that I would like to have kids so much now and I have so strong a maternal instinct.” (Female 29, childless)*

*“I hope that I’ll live till I’m 50 years old and I would like to have a grown-up child who would come and talk, who would help or whom I would help or a family relationship. Since I want to have it at that time I need to start trying now. This is not yet a wish to have a child. I don’t feel this need yet (...) but let’s say that you need to have your first child before you turn 30, so I have a few more years. Well, but it could also appear that it’s not so easy, right?” (Female 25, childless)*

The above examples show the importance of a perceived age deadline: it clearly has an impact on individual considerations and behavior. The norm seems relatively powerful. Another indicator of the strength of a norm is its inflexibility. The more rigid a norm, the fewer deviations from it can be accepted and the more rationalization is required in the case of deviant behavior (Blake and Davis 1964, Nydegger 1986). We shall conclude our results with examining in what situations missing a deadline for parenthood is justified.

#### ***4.4. Inflexibility of Norms – Justified Exceptions***

It is noteworthy that our respondents do not report any desire to postpone childbearing over the age 30. They do not perceive any benefits of it. They can imagine only three situations in which one could have a child later than at age 30. All of them are considered an outcome of external circumstances.

The first one is infertility or infecundity, of course as long as it is not related to the woman’s age, but rather to some congenital conditions, an illness or an accident. If a woman has problems with conceiving at a later age, she might be blamed (or blame herself) for not having tried to get pregnant when she was younger.

The second situation when it is justified to miss the deadline for parenthood relates to the lack of the (right) partner:

*“And I was talking to some single people... I have a colleague, she is older than I am, and she has a very strong need to become a mother, but she has no way.”  
(Female, 28, childless)*



Note, however, that the lack of a partner is treated here as (again) an external circumstance, not as a conscious choice. If a woman decides to remain single, she meets disapproval, as for instance, in the following example:

*“She is partying and so on, but I don’t envy her and I think it is not right, it is not a good way (...) How much longer can she go on like this? How much power will she have? Even if 10 years longer, until she is 40, but than she will find herself alone.” (Female, 28, 1 child)*

Health problems and an involuntary lack of a partner are independent of an individual will. In these cases, not only the substantial postponement, but also ultimate childlessness, could be justified. Nevertheless, it still can lead to some social sanctions, as we discussed before (compare Table 2).

The third reason, for which it seems acceptable to postpone childbearing until a later age is a difficult financial situation,

*“[My wife] often mentions that she would like to have children and that she’s running out of time, but at this very moment there’s no such chance. Well, most of all – there are no financial resources (...) That holds us back. This issue most of all: finance.” (Male, 30, childless, unemployed, wife: 29)*

Apparently, the interplay between age and the material situation gets even more complex. On the one hand, the normative power of an age deadline for childbearing may influence the subjective evaluation of available resources. On the other hand, a lack of financial means may act as a justification to postpone childbearing, even beyond the age of 30. Thus, a question arises here: how little is too little? In other words: what economic resources are perceived as sufficient for childbearing and what are still unsatisfactory? Are there any economic conditions that would justify childlessness? Apparently the answer to the question is negative.

*“These are temporary arguments. Because of that everything prolonged for us too. But it can’t be a reason for a final decision. It’s – like my mother usually says – when there is food for two people, it would be enough for a third one. So it’s not*

*that, I don't know what kind of conditions you would have to have so that authentically you couldn't afford to have a child. Besides, you read that some people are raising their children despite their very difficult situation.” (Female, 25, childless)*

Naturally, the second question then follows: how much longer, after a woman turns 30, would it be acceptable to wait? What happens if the material situation is really poor and does not improve? Our data does not allow us to approach this question directly, as we do not have in our sample childless women over 30. However, according to the official statistics, the first births intensities for women aged over 35 are practically negligible (CSO 2006). Apparently, if a woman misses the deadline, for instance for economic constraints, she has just a few years to overcome the obstacles. Otherwise, she remains childless. This process, however, clearly requires further investigations.

An interplay between age and material resources seems key for defining a time of a first childbearing. Although it is not our aim to discuss this issue in great detail in this paper, note that the age norms collide with sequencing ones here. Whereas the deadline regulates what is the latest when one ought to decide for a child, the sequencing norms indicate what things have to be achieved beforehand. Clearly, we have two counteracting powers here. The more things are required before a child, the harder it becomes to comply with the normative age deadline. And *vice versa*, the lower the age limit and the stronger its influence, the less time one has to achieve all the required things. These things are, *inter alia*, a place to stay, a job, some financial security, but also, not discussed here: education or marriage (Mynarska et al. 2005). The relationship between age, age-norms and material resources appears most complex and exceptionally important for fertility choices, and as such, it requires more attention in future research (see also: Mynarska 2006).

## **5. Age Norms and Fertility – Discussion**

Poles, as well as citizens of other post-socialist countries, enter parenthood still at a relatively early age. According to official statistics, over 90% of first births in Poland

take place from women not older than 30. The qualitative study allowed us to investigate whether the statistical regularities are associated with age norms: universally shared prescriptions, encouraging early childbearing.

Our analyses show that age is a salient concept which is important for fertility planning. Our respondents frequently and spontaneously referred to age when talking about experiences or intentions related to the transition to parenthood. The most commonly mentioned deadline for making this transition is the age 30 and it mostly, although not exclusively, refers to the age of a woman. The explanations given for this deadline are consistent with those already found in the literature (Perelli-Harris 2005, Settersten 1999, Settersten and Haegstad 1996): the strongest argument relates to the biological clock of a woman and the limits of her fertility. Our data show that these concerns do have an impact on individual fertility choices.

As the age limit is associated most of all with biological aspects, can we argue that this is a social norm that acts here? We are convinced that the answer to this question is positive. First of all, we are able to identify the mechanisms of social control over the age of first childbearing, even though they do not operate directly. Secondly, deviant behaviors are rationalized and the acceptable explanations are connected to external factors. These aspects indicate the existence of social norms (Blake and Davis 1964, Ensminger and Kinght 1997, Marini 1984, Nydegger 1986). Furthermore, there are no reasons to believe that biology works differently for Polish than, for instance, for Spanish or German women. Still, in Spain and Germany, women deliver their first child much later. Thus, it is not the biological clock itself, but rather the social prescriptions and proscriptions which define at what age one should enter motherhood.

This is clearly visible if we relate our finding to the ones of Perelli-Harris (2005) for Ukraine. Ukrainian women also opt for early motherhood and in the focus group discussions, conducted in 2002 and 2003, they defended their position using basically the same set of explanations as we find in our study. They also name the same deadline: 30 years old. However, whereas our respondents believe that the best moment to have

a child (optimal age) is around 25, in Ukraine, a woman, who has her first child at this age, is already considered an “old birther”. Quoting one of the Ukrainian respondents:

*“I think it [the ideal age of first birth] is some time before 25, although if you believe the doctors, they say that children born to 18- year-olds are completely ideal; afterwards, it is already as if there has been an ageing of the organism.”*  
(Perrelli-Harris 2005, p. 65).

Moreover, a single woman at age 25 is in fact considered an “old maid” already.

The pressure to form a family early is strong and young women feel it in their peer group and also from the older generation. They also recognize that this pressure comes from a “deep tradition” (Perrelli-Harris 2005, p. 64). Apparently, in Ukraine the age-norms are related with even more pressure than in Poland, and the optimal age is defined earlier – although the same arguments are used to explain it. This is probably one of the reasons why Ukrainian women have their first child on average over 1 year earlier than Polish women do (Council of Europe 2006).

Unfortunately, we do not have access to any fully comparable, qualitative results from the countries where family formation occurs much later. This would provide valuable insight into the relationship between fertility postponement and age-norms. We believe that in these countries two scenarios are possible.

First, the age deadline for parenthood could have shifted to older ages. Even in the countries where women have their first child closer to the age of 30, the *actual* fertility limits have not yet been reached. According to Leridon’s estimates, women childless at age 35 have – biologically – still more than an 80% chance of becoming mothers (Leridon 2004). Thus, the age deadline of 35 is quite likely.

Second, it is also possible that the age deadline remains at age 30, but it loses its regulating power: it does not have a strong impact on behavior. The findings of Settersten and Hägstad (1996) support this scenario to some extent. In their study in the U.S., a vast majority of respondents perceived the age deadline for entering parenthood (75-

78%), and this deadline was on average close to 30 (29 for women, 30 for men). However, “late timing of family transitions was viewed as completely acceptable, accompanied by little social tension, without major consequences for the individual’s life course” (Settersten and Hägestad 1996, p. 185). They conclude that “the cultural age timetables for family transitions exist, but they may not be normative” (*ibidem*, p. 187). At the same time, the women’s mean age at first birth in U.S. was still relatively low (24.6 in 1996, Matthews and Hamilton 2002), however a considerable fraction of women remained childless till a later age. Martin (2000) shows that according to the Current Population Survey 1990 and 1995, as much as 34% of women were still childless at age 30 (note that childlessness is relatively rare in the U.S., Sobotka 2004). We are, however, cautious about comparing the results of Settersten and Hägestad (1996) with our own study. And that is for two reasons: they consider several age-deadlines jointly (for marriage, parenthood, completed childbearing, etc.) and they use data from the telephone interviews, which differ profoundly from the in-depth, face-to-face ones.

All things considered, we believe that our study brings strong support for the relevance of age norms hampering fertility postponement. Obviously, further research on this topic is necessary, especially in relation to the interplay between age and sequencing norms.

Our study contributes also to the general discussion on the age norms. It does so to a relatively limited extent, as we focus here only on the deadlines, and do not discuss the lower limits of childbearing. Nevertheless, even in this narrow scope, we clearly find age to be highly relevant for constructing normative life scripts of our respondents (Elder 1976, Hägestad 1986, Nydegger 1986). Moreover, these individual life scripts are not only “informed” by cultural timetables, as Settersten and Hägestad (1996) suggested, but indeed are strongly influenced by socially constructed age deadlines, at least in the case of fertility choices of Polish and Ukrainian respondents, as argued above. Interestingly, the regulating power of age norms changes with time: the closer the perceived deadline, the more relevant it becomes for a decision-maker. This should be taken into account in further studies.

Finally, our study shows that the mechanisms of social control over the compliance with the age norms might be indirect and thus probably more difficult to capture by researchers and by respondents themselves. People are not necessarily aware of to what extent and in which ways their life is influenced by society at large. They may fail to observe or refuse to acknowledge this impact, especially if independence and freedom of choice are highly valued for them.

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Table 1: Categories related to the explanations of the age deadline for parenthood.

Name of category	Description	Example
<b>Health and biological clock – fertility limits</b>	For women the postponement of childbearing beyond the age of 30 is a threat that they will have problems with getting pregnant.	<p><i>“I have my age and later I don’t want to blame myself that I’m not able any more [to have a child]. That we put the decision off for too long and that I go to a doctor and he says: I’m sorry, your time is up, and now you have to try hard or spend a lot of money so that you can have a baby. So I don’t want to let it happen.” (Female, 29, childless)</i></p> <p><i>“I’m simply aware that I’m getting older and older. Such postponing... later and later... and then it is too late at the end.” (Female, 25, childless)</i></p>
<b>Health and biological clock – optimal time</b>	For women, age exists biologically optimal for having children.	<p><i>“And after all M. (wife) is at the best age to have a child now, 24-26 years old, so we also consider the medical aspects” (Male, 25, childless, wife 25)</i></p> <p><i>“It is best to deliver a child between 20 and 30, and even better up to 25.” (Female, 22, childless)</i></p>
<b>Energy and patience for a child</b>	Having children at an older age means less energy and patience for a child	<i>“I would like to be still fit. To play [with a child], go somewhere, go cycling, play football or something. When you’re older, you don’t feel like doing that. One prefers to rest, to lie down.” (Male, 28, childless)</i>
<b>Age distance – poor contact with a child</b>	Older parents have worse contact with their children, especially during a child’s adolescence.	<i>“[When people] plan to have a child when they are 30, in my opinion it’s terrible. I mean terrible for a child, because a child is born, grows up and parents are old people already. And they have or they might have worse contact with a child” (Male, 29, 1 child)</i>
<b>Mixed social roles</b>	Having children at an older age results in being a parent and a grandparent at the same time.	<i>“I am 28. I don’t want my child to call me grandpa.” ( Male, 28, childless)</i>
<b>Nothing more to expect of life afterwards</b>	Having a child at an older age means that when a child is grown up, parents will be too old to use their lives or proceed with a job career.	<i>“I always think about the stage, I think, when a child is 15 years old, how old I will be, so I would still have a life!” (Female, 25, childless)</i>
<b>Not able to have a second child</b>	Waiting too long with the first child means less time to manage the second one.	<i>“If I had a first child in a couple of year’s time, when I’m about 30, then... for a second child one also needs a couple of years and it is too late then!” (Female, 25, childless)</i>

Table 2: Examples of the categories related to the mechanisms of social control: social pressure for having children.

Name of category Examples	Description	Example
<b>Social disapproval or pity (sanction)</b>	Childless people are perceived as egoistic, strange and disturbed (when they do not want to have children) or unhappy and sad (when they cannot have children)	<i>“She is somehow abnormal, degenerate; she doesn’t want to have children, horrible!” (Female, 24, childless)</i> <i>“I know two couples, of my parents’ age, who don’t have children. And this is really sad, depressing. I think such people become freaks.” (Female, 29, childless)</i>
<b>Direct pressure from family</b>	Directly communicated encouragement to have children or disapproval for not having one	<i>“The parents, especially, mine are saying that we should have a baby. My mum says: I’m retired now, so I would have something to take care of after.” (Female, 26, childless)</i>
<b>Loss of a partner (sanction)</b>	Not wanting (or even not being able) to have a child is a sufficient reason for another partner to leave	<i>“If she didn’t want to [have children], I think... it would end up in breaking up” (Male, 28, childless)</i> <i>“If we tried all options and didn’t succeed [to have a child], if he wanted to leave, I would let him...” (Female, 29, childless)</i>
<b>Social exclusion (sanction)</b>	Not having children is related to being an “outsider”: losing friends, being treated as a strange person.	<i>“People around you set up their families, they are happy about their children, they have their problems... and you sit there on your own and it doesn’t concern you.” (Female, 28, 1 child)</i>
<b>Child – giving a status of a mature person (positive enforcement)</b>	Childbearing is positively reinforced by giving a new social status to parents	<i>“They would look at me as a mature woman because I am over 18, but I think that in their opinion... I don’t know if they treat me completely as a child but surely not like a mature woman, maybe fifty-fifty. But when someone has a child (...) then it’s a symbol that she is a mother so she is a responsible and mature person” (Female, 22, childless)</i>