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A. V. Andreenkova

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NORMATIVE AGE PERCEPTIONS OF MAJOR
LIFE PHASES

Anna V. ANDREENKOVA¹ — Dr. Sci. (Soc.),
Leading Researcher
E-MAIL: anna.andreenkova@cessi.ru
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6776-7703>

¹ Institute for Comparative Social Research (CESSI),
Moscow, Russia

Abstract. Subjective perceptions age boundaries and age norms play an important role in shaping the calendar of people's lives, their demographic behavior and life strategies. The author of this article analyses age perceptions of three life stages — transition to adulthood, middle-age, and old age — in Russia. The analysis is based on the data of a national survey of general population RSS (Russian Social Survey) comparable to the European Social Survey (ESS), and on in-depth cognitive interviews with respondents from three generations of Russians. Age perceptions are characterized by median age of the transition to adulthood close to European average, relatively low median age for transition to middle-age and elder age, but also broad age normative intervals and relatively low consolidation of opinions. The similar opinion structure was found in most East European countries and in Germany.

In-depth interviews confirmed that the understanding and interpretation of the periods of adulthood, maturity and old age are quite similar in three generations of Russians and are close to theoretical ones. When defining the boundaries of life stages, the informants often use intervals rather than discrete numbers, and the differences in the cognitive process of converting an interval into an exact value are quite significant. However, methodological limitations cannot serve as the main reason for the differences in the age-related ide-

НОРМАТИВНОСТЬ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ О ВОЗ-
РАСТНЫХ ГРАНИЦАХ ОСНОВНЫХ ЖИЗНЕН-
НЫХ ЭТАПОВ

АНДРЕЕНКОВА Анна Владимировна — док-
тор социологических наук, ведущий научный
сотрудник, Институт сравнительных социаль-
ных исследований (ЦЕССИ), Москва, Россия
E-MAIL: anna.andreenkova@cessi.ru
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6776-7703>

Аннотация. Представления о возрастных границах и возрастные нормы играют важную роль в формировании календаря жизни людей, их демографического поведения и жизненных стратегий. Анализ представлений о времени наступления трех жизненных этапов — взрослости, зрелости и старости — проведен на основе данных всероссийского опроса населения «Российское социальное исследование (РСИ), Европейского социального исследования, по программе которого проводилось РСИ, и глубинных когнитивных интервью с россиянами из трех поколений. Представления о возрастных границах в России характеризуются средними для Европы медианными значениями возраста достижения взрослости, довольно ранним возрастом наступления зрелости и старости, но при этом широкими интервалами, в пределах которых россияне определяют границы этапов, и низкой консолидированностью мнений. Такая структура обнаружена в большинстве стран Восточной Европы и в Германии.

Как показали глубинные интервью, понимание и интерпретация периодов взрослости, зрелости и старости довольно сходны в трех поколениях россиян и близки теоретическим. При определении границ этапов чаще используется интервальный, нежели дискретный метод, а различия в когнитивном процессе преобразования интервала

as of Russians; substantive reasons are more important. The structure of age norm perceptions in Russia was stable between the surveys of 2006 and 2018. The changes in normative climate are driven by the transition of generations rather than by intragenerational changes, and the general system of views is stable.

Age normativity, which arises with a high and stable agreement of opinions regarding the onset of life stages, is weakly manifested in Russia. Although the stereotypes regarding markers and characteristics of life stages can be strong, the time of onset of life stages is not determined unambiguously, which allows pushing back or expanding the boundaries of life stages, making them less predetermined. In younger generations, the perceived age boundaries of the main life stages are more flexible than in older generations. In the modern Russian socio-cultural environment, age perceptions of major life stages perform mainly guiding and orienting functions and only to a small extent prescriptive, opening the space for the variety of individual life trajectories.

Keywords: age norms, age perceptions, timing of life, periodization of life course, life phases, transition to adulthood, middle-age, older age, cross-national comparisons

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в точное значение довольно существенны. Но методические ограничения не могут служить значимой причиной различий в возрастных представлениях россиян, более важны содержательные причины. Структура возрастных представлений о наступлении взрослости, зрелости и старости показывает высокую стабильность при сравнении данных 2006 и 2018 гг. Изменения происходят за счет движения поколений, в результате скорость изменений низкая, а общая система взглядов устойчивая.

Возрастная нормативность, возникающая при высокой и стабильной согласованности мнений в отношении наступления жизненных этапов, в России проявляется слабо. Хотя стереотипы, касающиеся маркеров и характеристик жизненных этапов, могут быть сильны, время наступления жизненных этапов не определяется однозначным образом, что позволяет отодвигать или раздвигать границы жизненных этапов, делает их менее предопределенными. В молодых поколениях нормативность представлений о границах основных жизненных этапов ниже, чем среди старших поколений. В современной российской социокультурной среде возрастные представления о границах жизненных этапов выполняют преимущественно направляющие и ориентирующие функции и лишь в небольшой степени предписывающие, оставляя довольно большой простор для реализации индивидуальных жизненных траекторий.

Ключевые слова: возрастные социальные нормы, представления о возрастных границах, календарь жизни, периодизация жизненного пути, жизненные этапы, взросление, зрелость, старение, межстрановые сравнения

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путь, ценности, ожидания поколения, взрослого в 1990-е, — лонгитюдное исследование через 30 лет”.

Introduction

Public perceptions of age, periodization of life, markers of transition from one life stage to another are formed in the process of social interaction within particular historical and socio-cultural context. These perceptions have guiding function; they might be seen as means for orientation and navigation in life course that structure self-evaluation and self-image and ease planning and assessments of life goals. However, they also can perform regulating functions or be presented in social norms if supported by social sanctions and encouragements. Age norms prescribe what should be done and not should be done in particular age, for example, what clothes are appropriate to wear, which events to attend, what should be liked or disliked and avoided, and also how to evaluate and even judge other people. On a social level age norms bring order and structure, make life more predictable, facilitate the adoption and implementation of governing policies, which increases the manageability of social life. At the individual level, age norms help to envision a life path and form life plans. Accumulating the experience of generations, age norms serve as the basis for judgments about what is “on time” and what will be the payback for doing something “not on time”, what to expect and what to be prepared for at different stages of life. Strict norms in organizing the lifetime increases the standardization of life: the “social clock” can be so loud as to drown out individual desires, plans, and choices. External normative judgments may prevail over internal assessments and feelings, opening the way for age discrimination.

Empirical evidence of the existence of age norms was found in the 1960s on the example of the USA where researchers revealed a high consensus in the perceptions of the age thresholds for different life events [Neugarten, Moore, Lowe, 1965]. However, so far, the regulatory and sanctioning impact of age perceptions has only indirect empirical evidence, while the individual life calendar has proven to be very flexible [Settersten, 2003]. Therefore, the influence of age norms requires more detailed analysis and interpretation.

Sociological approach to the study of age perceptions and norms for boundaries of life stages

For many decades the concept of age boundaries of life stages was central for scientific discussion in psychological research. The discrepancy between objective and subjective age, social pressure of age norms, the fear of “not being in time” with life events, and crises of life stage transitions were the key topics of study. The sociological studies of age perceptions for boundaries of life stages have much shorter history but they opened new perspectives and fields of studies including life event research and studies of social changes at the individual and group level [Andreenkova, 2024].

Although age perceptions are based on knowledge about physiological processes and include universal components, they are not the same in different countries, cul-

tures, historical periods, and even among different social groups within the same society [Newman, 2008; Scherger, 2009]. The impact of age perceptions on different groups may also differ. For example, the pressure of age norms on women is stronger than on men [Billari et al., 2011]. Perceptions of life stages age boundaries depend on many factors including actual and subjective age [Montepare, 2009; Lisenkova, Shpagonova, 2021].

Legal norms can be one of the sources for public perceptions of age thresholds for life stages. However, the impact can also be reverse, since some social norms can be transformed into legal ones [Kohli, 1985]. Legal age norms change slowly. For example, the age of majority (judicial age for adulthood) in Europe has been fixed at 18 years since the French Revolution. Most countries, including Russia, followed this example, although age perceptions in these countries do not always correspond to this norm. Laws on the minimum age of marriage were adopted in Russia in the 1920s and have not changed since then [Lekanova, 2020]. Age norms for retirement were legally set in the USSR in 1932 and some changes were introduced only in the second decade of the XXI century [Uryupina, 2018]. Cross-national comparisons of public age-related perceptions and views provided reasons to doubt that legal age norms define or play a crucial role in shaping social age norms. For example, despite the similarity of legal age norms in European countries, as well as in Russia, the age climate in these countries is not the same [Aassve, Arpino, Billari, 2013].

In recent years, the social consequences of age norms have become the subject of wide discussion in Russia. Age discrimination of older people in labor market [Subbotina, Asatryan, 2022] and medical provision [Gorelik, Kolpina, 2014], normative pressure regarding the age of marriage and the birth of the first and last child, and age-related perceptions of health relate to this topic. The question of when old age starts, image of different ages and life stages, age stereotypes were also studied in recent years [Zaitseva, 2008; Nesterova, Sokolova, 2023; Lyalikova, Nazarova, Karpova, 2023]. Life stages are defined based on events assigned to a particular life stage [Chernov, Zmievskaya, 2015]. Studies of the event structure of the life course in Russia showed an increase in the average age of key life events, especially in the marriage and family domains [Zakharov, 2009; Mitrofanova, 2020], and also revealed the trend towards de-standardization of distribution of events by lifetime [Zmievskaya, Kuryshcheva, 2015]. However, the issue of how changes in behavior and life choices correspond to changes in the normative structure, whether they precede or follow such changes has not been extensively studied so far.

In recent years, several empirical studies of age norms for life events and life stages have been conducted in Russia, providing the reference point and grounds for developing this field further. The study by Elena Selezneva showed that the range of age interval for boundaries of youth in Russia are 19 to 28, the duration of youth as life stage is 9.45 years, and the perceptions of age thresholds appeared to be not related to real age of respondents [Selezneva, 2022]. The VCIOM survey conducted in 2023 showed that the age threshold for old age was around 63 years, and it increased by one year since 2017. Additionally, this survey revealed a strong relationship between actual age and age perceptions for entering old age: people over 60 years old estimated the start of old age at 68, and young people under 25 years old at approximately

58 years¹. In the study headed by prof. Anatoly Antonov, the results of an online survey showed that the normative age threshold for old age stage is 70.7 years old; the differences in the perceptions about men and women were not found, but age and gender of respondents and their health status were defined as influencing factors for normative age perceptions [Antonov et al., 2023]. Most studies of recent years were focused on the age of the transition from adolescence to adulthood and from middle age to old age. The age limits of middle age or the structure of age perceptions of all life stages attracted the attention of researchers less. Studying the level of life course standardization and the trend to de-standardization, researchers suggested the hypotheses about the influence of age climate on the speed of life course destandardization in general and between different social groups [Andreenkova, Medvedeva, 2024]. But to test this hypothesis, we need to identify the main characteristics of public perceptions of age thresholds for life stages which is the main goal of this study.

Theoretical and methodological bases for the study of public perceptions of age boundaries for life stages

The perceptions of age boundaries and age norms are studied in different social sciences and within different scientific schools, which leads to diversity and uncertainty in terms and concepts. In this study we use the following system of concepts.

Age landscape is understood as a set of demographic, socio-economic, institutional, legal, and value factors in relation to the age of different life events and life stages, as well as common behavioral patterns and life strategies. Age landscape has an objective behavioral aspect (statistical time of occurrence of different events, i. e., standard behavioral patterns) and a subjective value-normative aspect, which is *age climate*. *Age climate* consists of public perceptions and attitudes about age, including time of occurrence of different events and stages, various events assigned to life stages, sequence of events, relations of objective and subjective age, age stereotypes, and social age norms. Age climate is characterized by quality as favorable or unfavorable for different practices and behavior, it can be strict or soft in using normative sanctions, and it consists of narrow or broad age ranges for different behavioral practices.

In the academic literature and discussions, the concepts of age norms and age perceptions of life stage boundaries are often used synonymously. Sometimes norms are differentiated into opinions about what is right and must be practiced, and what is actually practiced. We suggest defining perception of age boundaries as knowledge, opinions, and expectations about the age range of life events and life stages, attitudes about the ideal age for events, and images and stereotypes about ages and life stages. Perceptions of age boundaries function as landmarks in people's lives. If perceptions of age boundaries are highly consolidated, they can also acquire regulating functions and as such play the role of social age norms. The normativity of perception of age boundaries is therefore the research question rather than a priori characteristic.

The key elements of age climate are perceptions of age boundaries for life events (these events can vary across countries and historical contexts) and life stages, the ideal age of occurring for events, the distance between subjective and objective age,

¹ Live long, live well! // VCIOM, 2023. June 19. URL: <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/zhit-dolgo-zhit-khorosho> (Accessed: 20.08.2024).

expectations regarding life expectancy, i. e., regarding life time. *Life stage* is as part of the life course periodization, a phase of the process of physical, psychological, and social personal development. The perception of age boundaries for life events and life stages are often studied together, but the sources of these perceptions may differ, as well as related factors. If personal experience has a strong impact on the age perception of life events, since the confirmations and reflection of subjective perceptions are grounded in the matrix of real life events, then the age perceptions of life stages are totally subjective and can be verified externally.

Methodology for research on perceptions and norms regarding age boundaries for life stages

In this study, we analyze public perceptions and norms regarding the three major life stages: early adulthood, middle age, and old age. These perceptions are measured as subjective thresholds for starting and ending the life stage, transition to the next life stage (we also use terms *threshold of starting the event* and *age limits*). To describe the perceptions of age thresholds for life stages, we use the measure of consolidation of opinions on national level, the range of perceptions, social pressure (soft or strict, having orientation/ guiding or sanction impact). The study employs complementary research method and bases both on the quantitative data coming from a Russian nationally representative population survey and the materials of a series of in-depth cognitive interviews.

In-depth cognitive interviews “Life Time in the Perception of Russian Generations”. In-depth interviews were conducted within the project “Life course of the Generation Growing Up in the 1990s” with people from three generations: older generation (1949 and older), middle generation (1960—1979), and young generation (1980—2005). The total of 103 interviews lasting on average 45 minutes were conducted by telephone. Among the participants, males and females were represented equally, as well as individuals with and without higher education; the sample also included participants from different regions of the country and settlements of different sizes (see Annex 1). They were recruited by phone, and phone numbers randomly selected from the national probability-based panel. The method of in-depth cognitive interviews (TII — telephone in-depth interviews) implied the inclusion of open-ended questions about the age of starting different life stages: “*Into what segments would you divide people’s lives? What stages would you emphasize? What age range do each of these stages fall within? How is each of these stages different? What is special about each stage? How is it different from the other stages (previous, subsequent)?*”, “*Around what age do you think people become adults?*”. These questions were followed by cognitive parts revealing how responses were formed, namely: “*What was your first thought when you heard this question?*”, “*What was your line of reasoning when you decided how to answer?*”, “*What answer options did you consider and choose from?*”.

In-depth interviews held by telephone have some drawbacks and advantages. On the one hand, this method puts high cognitive load on the respondent and requires high professional skills of the interviewer (Wills, 2009). On the other hand, conducting in-depth interviews by telephone reduced the variability due to the “interviewer style” because all interviews were conducted by two professional moderators, allowed ge-

ographical diversity of the sample, and reduced the influence of self-selection typical of any pre-recruited interviews.

Quantitative estimates. Statistical assessments are based on data from the Russian Social Survey (RSS), a longitudinal population survey that is conducted every two years. For time comparison, we used the data from wave 3 (2006) and wave 9 (2018), which includes the *Timing of life* module. International comparisons are based on the data of the European Social Survey (ESS), that was used as the research program in RSS, which ensures high comparability of data. We compare 24 countries in wave 3 and 29 countries in wave 9 contrasting them with Russia. In all countries the surveys were conducted on national random probability samples of the population 15 years and older by face-to-face in-home interviews, sample size varies from 800 to 2,500 respondents². In Russia, the survey was conducted by the Institute for Comparative Social Studies (CESSI) in the fall of 2006 (wave 3), sample size comes up to 2,427 respondents, and then in late 2018 — early 2019 (wave 9), with sample size of 2,416 respondents³.

The *Timing of life* module included questions about the age thresholds of the main life stages — youth (transition to adulthood), middle age, and old age. The questions were divided by gender using *split-ballot* design: half of the respondents (both men and women) were randomly assigned to answer questions about the age of men, another half answered questions about the age of women:

D15. People differ in their ideas about the ages at which _____ become adults, middle-aged and old. At what age, approximately, would you say _____ (GROUP 1: girls or women; GROUP 2: boys and men) become adults?

D16. At what age, approximately, would you say _____ (GROUP 1: women; GROUP 2: men) reach middle age?

D17. At what age, approximately, would you say _____ (GROUP 1: women; GROUP 2: men) reach old age?

Public perceptions of age boundaries for life stages: formation, consolidation, range

The following indicators were constructed to describe and analyze age perceptions of Russians:

- age median;
- standard deviation from the mean;
- degree of perception formation — the share of respondents who could not name certain age as a threshold of the life stage;
- age range — between the youngest age category named by at least 5 % of respondents and the oldest category named by at least 5 % of respondents;
- level of consolidation (consistency of opinions) — the share of respondents who named the three most frequently mentioned age categories (*modes*).

² European Social Survey: official website of the project. URL: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.com> (date of reference: 20.08.2024).

³ Russian Social Survey: official website of the project. URL: <http://www.russiansocialsurvey.ru> (date of reference: 20.08.2024).

Degree of formation of perceptions of age thresholds of life stages in Russia. The overwhelming majority of respondents (over 90 %) could name the age when the transition from one life stage to another starts. 9 % of respondents could not identify the starting age of transition to adulthood, while 6 % of respondents could not identify the age of transition to the middle age and old age (see Table 1). These results confirm that the perceptions of age boundaries of life stages are well formed in Russia.

The content of public perceptions of age boundaries for life stages. The total length of the life stage from the transition to adulthood to old age, calculated as the difference between the estimated median values of the transition to adulthood and the transition to old age, was 45 years. The median age of transition to adulthood was 20 years, to the middle age — 40 years, and to the old age — 65 years (see Figure 1). The mean (μ) values are very close to the median: 21 years as the age of transition to adulthood (standard deviation $\sigma = 4.5$ years), 38 years for the transition to middle age ($\sigma = 9.3$ years) and 65 years for the transition to old age ($\sigma = 8.8$ years).

Fig. 1. Distribution of answers to the questions about the age thresholds for three life stages (% of respondents who mentioned the corresponding age)⁴ in Russia

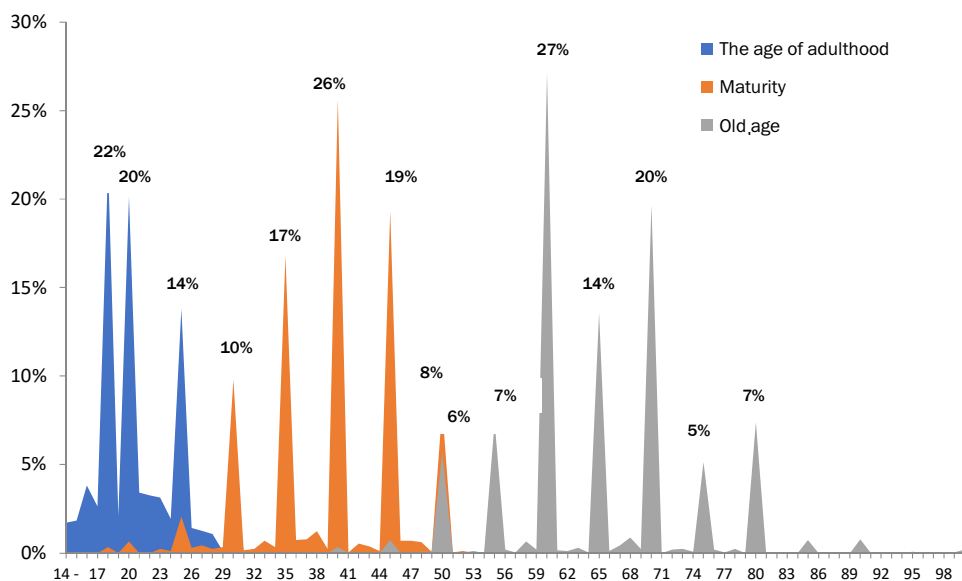


Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of answers to the questions about the age when each of three life stages start. The range of opinions about the age threshold of transition to adulthood is in the interval from 14 to 35 years. The age thresholds for entering middle age is wider and covers the interval from 20 to 55 years, and old age is even wider stretching from 45 to 90 years. The distribution has a pick-shaped form: some ages are named more often than others. The variability of Russians' age

⁴ Data from RSS 9, weighted by *dweight*, estimates for males and females together.

perceptions and the range of age thresholds for entering the life stages are different for three periods under review (see Table 1). The least variability of opinions was found for the transition to adulthood: standard deviation is the smallest, the total range is 12 years, 90 % of respondents named the interval between 17 and 29 years. Opinions are consolidated at two peaks — 18 and 20 years (named by 22 % and 20 % of respondents respectively), with a third peak at 25 years (named by 14 % of respondents). None of the legal ages was mentioned by a significant proportion of respondents, the age of 18 years was only one of the three peaks in the distribution. The legal age of adult consumer (21 years old) does not stand out as significant in the subjective assessment of the start of adulthood.

The perceptions of the threshold for entering middle age and old age are even broader: 19 years for the middle age (90 % of respondents named the age from 30 to 49 years old) and 28 years for old age (90 % of respondents named the age from 51 to 79 years old). Opinions on the starting age of middle-age stage are consolidated at 40 years (26 %), with two smaller peaks at the early age of 35 (17 % of respondents) and older age of 45 (19 %). Opinions about the onset of old age stage were consolidated at 60 years (27 %), with other peaks occurring at older age of 65 (14 %) and 70 (20 %). The legal age of retirement of 55 years for women and 60 years for men adopted in 1930s and lasted until recently, do not have strong impact on the public perception of starting time for old age life stage: the peak at 55 years accumulates only small proportion of respondents, 60 years was named by slightly over a quarter of respondents, which is far from the majority.

Consistency of age thresholds of different life stages

Theoretically, all three life stages — young adulthood, middle age and old age — are sequentially related. If the age threshold for the transition to adulthood is assigned to earlier age, it is reasonable to expect that the threshold for transition to old age will be earlier too, and vice versa. Empirical data shows that this consistency is far from absolute. The relationship is stronger between the adjacent life stages — young adulthood and middle age stage (Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.211) and middle age and old age (0.330), but it is weaker for distant stages — young adulthood and old age (0.006). All coefficients are significant at the 0.001 level.

More than two thirds of respondents were inconsistent in life stages age thresholds: an earlier transition to adulthood did not mean an earlier transition to middle age or old age, and vice versa. In general, these data provide similar results to those obtained in a non-random online sample in the United States, which also revealed the lack of consistency in the perceptions of life stage thresholds [Chopik et al., 2018].

The results of in-depth interviews confirmed that age thresholds for life stages are formed independently of each other. Respondents named different reasons for judgments about the starting age of adulthood, middle age, and old age and rarely linked the age thresholds of these stages to each other. The perception of age thresholds for life stages is influenced by the views on the length of the lifetime in general. For some respondents, lifetime appears to be “shorter”, all life events are concentrated within narrow time intervals, but other part of respondents think about life as a “longer” time span, distributing life events more evenly on broader life intervals.

Since perceptions of age thresholds for life stages are formed independently of each other, changes in perceptions of one stage do not necessarily lead to changes in perceptions of other stages. If the age perceptions about the starting the old age change, it will not mean that the perception of starting middle age or young adulthood will also change. The relative independence of age perceptions allows targeted policies to change the perception of the age thresholds of some life stages without affecting others.

Theoretical and subjective periodization of life — searching for reasons of low consolidation of perceptions of age boundaries for life stages

The distribution of opinions about age thresholds for life stages in the Russian Social Survey shows low consolidation, and the age range for transition to the next life stage is very wide. Such diversity of opinions can be explained by the discrepancy between the theoretical periodization of life used in quantitative survey and the subjective periodization used by people.

During in-depth interviews, the participants were asked to identify life stages in people's life, to describe the distinctive features of these stages, and to explain how they came to their opinion and what it was based on. The number of life stages named by respondents varied from two to twelve. Periodization into four stages (childhood, youth or adulthood, middle age, and old age) was used by 40 % of respondents. More than half of the respondents suggested a more detailed periodization. Participants divided the early years of human life between childhood and youth years into more parts than later years: late childhood, teens-adolescence, early youth, school years. For the mature age participants offered the division into "early maturity" and "late maturity", "mature and fully mature", "experienced and very experienced". In relation to the old life stage, about one third of respondents identified two stages — elderly and old; and some respondents named "preparation to retirement and retirement", "pre-retirement and retirement age", "old age and sunset of life".

The general terminological landscape in the description of life stages is quite diverse and includes about 30 independent words and about 15 more words with time adverbs (early, late). Some life stages had specific names (childhood, youth, old age). In addition to the names of stages, participants used the attribution to institutions (preschooler, kindergartner, schoolchild, student, working person, pensioner), stages of personality development ("formation of consciousness — acquaintance with the world", "cognition of self — realization, found what was looking for", "accumulation of knowledge and experience — blossoming / peak of life — end of life"). Some participants defined the stages by life goals and functions (education — work — family — retirement), others — by the physical status (healthy, full of strength — deterioration of health, sickness).

Another explanation for the diversity of opinions about the age thresholds for life stages could be the difference in how the thresholds are measured — a specific number (age) that participants were asked to name in the survey, or an age interval. In the latter case, the reason for the low consolidation of opinions could be the difference in the way of averaging the time interval, which was required to name the exact number in the survey. In the in-depth interviews, more than half of the partici-

pants used an age interval rather than a specific age when talking about the time of the life stage. Intervals were more often used to define the starting of middle age — the narrow span “25—30 years” or the broad one “25—40 years”. For the thresholds of old age, participants were more likely to name a specific age. Generally, we conclude that the participants look at the transition from one life period to another not as a discrete event, but as a gradual transition, and name a broader interval to account for individual diversity (“people go through life stages differently”). The cognitive process of transforming an interval into a specific number (age of transition) can be different with respondents referring to the mean of the interval or extreme values.

Participants were not always consistent in determining the age thresholds for different life stages: the upper threshold of one stage often did not coincide with the beginning of the next one. For example, youth ends at 30, but middle age begins at 40, or middle age ends at 60 and old age begins at 70. Apart from just violation of logic, such a gap may indicate the existence of additional life stages between 30 and 40 years and 60 and 70 years, which are intuitively assessed by participants, although they do not have a name for them.

The results of cognitive interviews showed that periodization into three life stages — adulthood, middle age and old age — is too broad, not detailed enough, so it creates difficulties in defining age thresholds, leading to logical inconsistency in their definition. Diversity in calculations can also increase diversity in results. However, even with these methodological thresholds, the conclusions remain unchanged. The broad range and high variability of public perceptions of age thresholds for life stages suggests that these perceptions do not work as social norms.

Perceptions of age boundaries and age norms of different generations of Russians

The age climate of a society can be characterized not only by the general structure of age perceptions, but also by the consistency of these perceptions between generations. If intergenerational coherence is high, the normative impact of age perceptions is high and the speed of changes in normative climate is slow. If intergenerational coherence is low, then the perceptions do not work as social norms or these norms are contradictory which may be an indicator of transformation processes.

Comparison of six generations of Russians (see Table 1) shows the general similarity of their perceptions about the age thresholds for life stages. The median age of the threshold to entering adulthood is the same in all generations (20 years) within a wide interval of 14 years (the interval is narrower only in the oldest generation born in 1949 or earlier). Consolidation of opinions is higher in the oldest generation (72 %), lower in the generation of 1950s-1979s (64 %), and even lower in the youngest generations. The median threshold for the transition to middle age is the same in all generations except for the youngest; the range of age interval is similar almost in all generations (20 years) except for two youngest (22 and 25 years, respectively). At that, consolidation of opinions is lower in each new generation.

**Table 1. Perceptions of age thresholds for life stages
among different generations of Russians in 2006 and 2018**

| Cohorts by year of birth | Age of transition to young adulthood | | | Age of transition to middle age | | | Age of transition to old age | | |
|--------------------------------|---|-------|-------------------|------------------------------------|-------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| | Median age | Range | Consolidation (%) | Median age | Range | Consolidation (%) | Median age | Range | Consolidation (%) |
| 2018 | | | | | | | | | |
| Total sample | 20 | 12 | 61 | 40 | 21 | 65 | 65 | 30 | 64 |
| 1990 and later | 20 | 14 | 56 | 37 | 25 | 60 | 60 | 30 | 61 |
| 1980—1989 | 20 | 14 | 57 | 40 | 22 | 63 | 60 | 30 | 68 |
| 1970—1979 | 20 | 14 | 63 | 40 | 20 | 67 | 65 | 30 | 65 |
| 1960—1969 | 20 | 14 | 65 | 40 | 20 | 70 | 65 | 27 | 64 |
| 1950—1959 | 20 | 14 | 64 | 40 | 20 | 71 | 65 | 25 | 66 |
| 1949 and earlier | 20 | 11 | 72 | 40 | 20 | 73 | 69 | 25 | 73 |
| 2006 | | | | | | | | | |
| Total sample | 20 | 14 | 61 | 40 | 22 | 69 | 65 | 30 | 70 |
| 1980—1989 | 20 | 9 | 61 | 40 | 25 | 66 | 60 | 31 | 72 |
| 1970—1979 | 20 | 14 | 60 | 40 | 20 | 69 | 60 | 30 | 71 |
| 1960—1969 | 20 | 15 | 59 | 40 | 20 | 69 | 65 | 25 | 71 |
| 1950—1959 | 20 | 13 | 63 | 40 | 25 | 71 | 65 | 30 | 67 |
| 1949 and earlier | 20 | 15 | 66 | 40 | 25 | 70 | 65 | 25 | 71 |

Note. Data of RSS 3 and RSS 9, weighted by *dweight*, estimates for males and females together.

The differences in perceptions of age threshold for entering old age between generations are the greatest: the median is 60 years in the opinion of younger generations and 69 years in the opinion of the oldest generation. The age interval limiting the boundaries of the onset of old age in the older age group is 25 years and it gets wider in younger groups (born in 1970 or later; 30 years). Consolidation of opinions is the highest in the oldest generation and it is getting lower in all subsequent generations.

The obtained results are consistent with the findings of previous studies and show that the perceived margin of old age shifts right with age [Antonov et al., 2023]. The age threshold of entering old age is gradually getting higher in each age group starting from those in their 40s. In other aspects, the age perceptions of different generations in Russia differ in the perception of age thresholds for the transitions, but more prominent differences are found in the age interval for these thresholds and the consolidation of opinion. Young generations name larger intervals for age thresholds, and the consolidation of their opinions is lower than in older generations, which may be a reason for lower normative pressure of age perceptions in younger generations.

Common and unique in the age climate of Russia and Europe

Whether perceptions of the age boundaries for life stages in Russia are unique or they sit in line with a common model of age climate formed in other countries, can be tested by comparing the data from Russia and other European countries. Such comparisons show that perceptions of the age boundaries for life stages in European countries are not identical but have much in common (see Annex 2). The average European model of starting age of the young adulthood is characterized by a median age of 20 years, a large range of this threshold (10—14 years) and the consolidation of opinions at the level of 60—65 %. Age perceptions in Russia correspond to this model.

Regarding the age thresholds for transition to middle age and old age, public perceptions vary considerably between countries. The median age for entering middle age varies from 35 to 45 years, for entering old age — from 65 to 70 years. The range of opinions about the threshold of middle age in most countries is between 20 and 30 years, of old age — 20—35 years. Consolidation of opinions about the age thresholds of middle age varies from two thirds to three quarters of respondents in different countries. The consolidation of opinions about the thresholds of old age is lower: in 15 countries it is about 60 %, and only in three countries it exceeds 70 %.

We can expect that age perceptions of life stages are logically structured — shifted towards either the lower limit (coming earlier) or the upper one. But this assumption is confirmed empirically in only a few countries where the median boundaries of middle and old ages are either consistently high compared to the European average (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Italy, and Cyprus) or consistently low (Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia, Estonia, Russia, and Slovenia). In other 18 countries, perceptions of the timing for the three life stages considered are not consistently aligned compared to European average, they stay above average for

some life stages and below average for others. This configuration confirms the earlier conclusion that public perceptions of age limits for life stages are formed independently of each other.

The closest to Russian is the model of age perceptions of life stages in the countries of Eastern Europe (Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, and Slovenia as the closest to the Russia; Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro, and Poland, although more distant, generally correspond to this model) and in Germany. The least similar model is observed in Scandinavia, Northern Europe, and some Southern European countries. This configuration of countries may be driven by the differences in life expectancy and the actual timing of life events in the population. In countries where the age climate is similar to Russia, life expectancy is lower than the European average, and the average age of some life events such as age at the first marriage and at birth of the first child is shifted towards the lower boundary. In the countries with the most distant age climate compared to Russia, life expectancy is higher than the European average, and the average ages of marriage and childbirth are shifted towards the upper boundary. Although some countries drop out of this pattern (Germany, Lithuania, and Latvia).

The analysis of time trends in the age perceptions for life stages can shed some light on the question whether differences between countries in age climate are determined by sociocultural factors or by demographic and socio-economic factors. If socio-cultural factors play the key role, then age perceptions should remain relatively stable over time, at least in medium-term perspective. If demographic and socio-economic factors are more important, we should expect public perception driven by demographic trends to shift in one direction in all countries and observe more similarities with North European model over time.

Dynamics of age perceptions for life stages over time and factors of change

To test the hypotheses about changes in age perceptions for life stages, we compared the data of the RSS 2006 and the RSS 2018. During this period of 12 years, age perceptions in Russia were highly stable. The median values of the entry to three main life stages practically did not change over this period (see Table 1). However, the variation of opinions and the range of age interval for entry into young adulthood increased significantly. The changes in age perceptions for entering middle age and old age changed only in terms of consolidation of opinions which decreased over time. We observe the onset of the trend to blurring age perceptions of life stages, decreasing the consolidation of opinions, which can be an indicator of weakening of the normative aspects of age perceptions.

The changes of age perceptions can occur because of general social factors affecting all generations, changes in individual age groups or because of the shift of generations and coming of the young generation with different views. To make the comparison, the same generations were analyzed in the data of 2006 and 2018 (see Table 1). The data show that the overall structure of age perceptions stays unchanged from 2006 to 2018. Changes which occurred in some generations are multidirectional. In the oldest generation, the mean age of entering the old age increased from 65 to 69 years old; the range of entry age to middle age and young adulthood became less

wide. In the generation of the 1950s, the range of entry age to middle age decreased from 25 to 20 years, and the age range of entry to old age decreased from 30 to 25 years. In the 1960s generation, the consolidation of opinions about the age threshold for transition to young adulthood increased (from 59 % to 65 %), and for transition to old age it — in contrast — decreased (from 71 % to 64 %). In the generation of the 1970s, only the perceptions of age for entering old age changed: the mean increased from 60 to 65 years old; the consolidation of opinions decreased from 71 % to 65 %. In the generation of the 1980s, the changes were related to the range of age perception to transition from young adulthood (from 9 to 14 years) and to middle age (from 25 to 22 years).

The most significant changes occurred as a result of generational shift, i. e. they were determined by different perceptions among new young groups. A comparison of the youngest generation in the 2006 sample and in the 2018 sample showed that, although the perception of mean age for transition to young adulthood and old age are the same in these two groups, the mean age for entering middle age in the new young generation is lower (37 years compared to 40). The age perceptions of the youngest Russians in the sample are shaped by a wider range of age for transition to young adulthood and lower consolidation of opinions regarding the thresholds of middle age (60 % compared to 66 %;) and old age (61 % compared to 72 %).

Consistent shift of public age perceptions towards the Northern European model has not been revealed so far. These data confirm the hypothesis about the relative stability of the age climate in a country and the key impact of socio-cultural factors, rather than general demographic ones at least in the medium-term. However, the new trend towards the diversification of opinions — a decrease in the consolidation of opinions and blurring of age thresholds of the main life stages, especially for transition to middle age and old age — leads to gradual transformation of the age perceptions of life stages and to the decrease of normative aspect of these perceptions. Changes occur mainly due to a generational shift — replacement of older generations by younger ones, therefore the speed of the shift is slow.

Sources of age perceptions and norms — markers, characteristics, sources

The issue of change in age-related perceptions and norms is directly related to the issue of the sources of these perceptions. How do people decide at what age the transition to the next life stage occurs, do they use certain markers, rational explanations or do they regard it based on personal or social experience? Do they consider these age norms as unconditional and absolute “laws”? We look for answers to these questions in in-depth interviews with respondents.

When discussing the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, participants named different markers of adulthood and events and expressed different views on the criteria of life periodization. About half of the participants associated the transition to young adulthood with specific events such as marriage, entering the labor market, separation from the parental family, military service, childbirth, choosing a professional career, and completing education. Some participants related

early adulthood to personality development: formed plans, goals and expectations, shift from egocentric views focusing on self and individual desires to more pro-social views, feeling of responsibility for oneself and other people (*"I got married early, gave birth to a child. But I became an adult only by the age of 25; by that time, I understood something about myself and life and realized my plans and desires"* — woman of older age group, higher education, residing in the large city in Siberia). Autonomy and independence, i. e. separation from the parental family, personal decisions, and material independence, were other attributes defining the transition to adulthood. Some respondents defined the transition to adulthood using the characteristics of lifestyle, consistency and stability of life plans and routine (*"At age of 20, we already knew our day in the village: work, housework, livestock"* — man from middle age group, without higher education, residing in a village in the South). Participants rarely referred to legal age norms ("according to the law"), traditions ("it has always been like this") or absolute knowledge of the proper or must ("it should be like this" or "it is always done that way") as the source of their views about the age of transition to adulthood.

In defining the transition to the middle age, participants referred to the position of this stage relatively to other life stages (*"From this age I no longer consider myself young, there are younger people at my work"* — woman of older age group, without higher education, residing in medium size city in the Volga region). Professional and other types of achievements and social experience were named as other markers of middle age. Participants considered the transition from young adulthood to middle age as a transition from the preparatory life stage (getting education, searching for the job, searching for yourself, period of trials and mistakes) to the stage of recapitalization of personal potential. The third group of markers is sticking to a specific life trajectory from a large variety of different life paths, setting clear personal goals and finding personal "place in the world", defining one's way in life. For some participants, middle age means a statistical average, which they calculated mathematically as the half from the average life expectancy assumed to be 75 to 80 years. A few participants mentioned some aspects of social norms (*"It is well accepted that middle age or maturity comes after 40"* — woman of older age group, without higher education, residing in a medium size city in the Central region), but most participants did not mention it.

Participants related the starting of old age with the state of health, personal appearance and body condition: markers of old age are changes in how people look (wrinkles, gait, stooping, flabbiness) and the diseases and health weaknesses. The transition to old age is marked by the end of the life plan, exhaustion of desires. Some participants related the transition to old age to the passing away of one's peers and people of the same generation. The start of old age was also marked by the loss of autonomy, dependence on other people (in self-care), material dependence (on relatives or the government). The legal retirement age plays some role in defining the threshold of old age, but it is not the key one.

When discussing the reasons and sources for their judgments about the age thresholds of life stages, participants most often referred to real practices, common types of behavior ("most often by this age people..."). Some respondents used personal ex-

perience as an argument (“To this age I...”). Some participants directly related their judgment to social norm (“By this age people should...”), but in general, rational arguments prevailed over normative.

Defining the transition to next life stages, age is an important marker; however, often the relation is not direct but mediated by life events. Shifting of some life events to earlier ages, especially marriages and first births, entering the labor market and finishing education, as well as the exit from the labor market, leads to the earlier normative age thresholds for life stages transition. Participants who have observed a decline in the health and physical condition of their peers at younger ages, reported younger normative age threshold to old age. If participants did not notice visible changes in their peers or the changes occur later, the normative age threshold shifted to older age. At the same time, we should consider that markers of life stages may change, for example, educational and economic events can become more important markers of transition to adulthood than family and marriage events. Age-related perceptions and norms may guide the shaping of the life course, but they are also grounded and derived from general social practices and behaviors.

Age perceptions — or age norms defining life stages?

This research shows that the age climate in Russia is more complex than it may seem in the discussions about age stereotypes and standardization of life events. It revealed the relatively stable subjective views of the periodization of life in the society. Respondents associated each life stage with certain expectations, emotional characteristics and evaluations, and some of them can be attributed to age stereotypes. The obtained results go in line with the findings from previous studies based on qualitative methods [Chernov, 2015].

The variation of opinions about the age thresholds for life stages is high, as well as the range of age intervals of these thresholds, which raises serious doubts in defining these age perceptions as social norms. The issue of normative power of age perceptions for life stages seems to us going far beyond terminological disputes. Public perceptions are transformed into social norms under several conditions: broad social consensus — high consolidation of opinions, axiomatic acceptance of it (sources and reasons are not questioned, but taken for granted), stability over time, and reinforcing by potential sanctions for violation or non-acceptance of a norm. Analyzing the age climate in a particular society, we refer not to the presence or absence of social norms in determining the age thresholds for transition to life stages, but to the degree of normativity of these perceptions. The degree of normativity can be treated as a specific state or function of social perceptions or attitudes. In different nationally-specific and historic contexts, perceptions about age thresholds can work as a strict social norm or can play only a guiding role. These perceptions can have either universal cultural or national scope or be group-specific (different age norms for different social groups). Lacking social pressure, age perceptions have an informational or guiding function, enhancing the orientation in life time. If exerting strong pressure, age perceptions perform as social norm executing regulating and prescribing functions.

The age perceptions on boundaries of life stages in modern Russia are characterized by low normative power. The range of age thresholds are very wide, the consolidation of opinions is low, and the perceptions are based on rational arguments, derived from personal and social experience. Previous research found evidences of widespread stereotypes and even stigmatization of some life stages, in particular old age [Lyalikova et al., 2023]. This study revealed that even if the life stage per se is associated with stereotypes, prejudices, and strong expectations, the norms related to time of transition to life stages are rather weak. The transition to life stage is in large extent associated with event markers and psychological attributes, but not necessarily with a specific age. For example, old age is more attributed to poor state of health, specific appearance or body status, the lack of life goals and prospects, conservatism in learning new skills and new knowledge, than to specific age. The stage of young adulthood has more clear age boundaries and is less related to particular markers or life events. Middle age and old age life stages are defined in different dimensions including age, life events, and socio-psychological characteristics.

The flexibility of age perceptions of life stages allows moving the timing of life events assigned to life stage, both at the individual and at the general social level. For example, despite the high social tension and numerous discussions on increasing the retirement age in Russia, particular age thresholds did raise much debate. The new thresholds of the retirement age of 65 years correspond well with the cognitive map of age perceptions. The trend towards the de-standardization of life [Andreenkova, Medvedeva, 2024], the increase in total life expectancy, labor and professional career, and reproductive timing [Noskova, Kuzmina, 2024] leads to a gradual extension of perceived intervals for starting age of different life stages. Social perceptions and norms, on the one hand, influence real practices, while on the other hand, they change because of these practices. This research confirmed that age perceptions and norms change slowly and are mainly the result of the generational shifts, ensuring the stability and continuity of the social system. The lack of strict normative pressure defining the starting time and transition to different life stages allows pushing back or extending the age intervals of life stages, making them less predetermined and flexible in individual life.

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Annex 1*Socio-demographic composition in-depth cognitive interviews*

| Socio-demographic characteristics | Number of participants |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i> | |
| Men | 52 |
| Women | 51 |
| <i>Generations by year of birth</i> | |
| Generation 1949 and earlier | 30 |
| Generation 1960–1979 | 41 |
| Generation 1980–2005 | 32 |
| <i>Education</i> | |
| University education | 50 |
| Lower | 53 |
| <i>Region</i> | |
| Central | 27 |
| Northwest | 12 |
| Southern and North Caucasus | 14 |
| Volga | 13 |
| Ural | 9 |
| Siberian | 16 |
| Far Eastern | 12 |
| <i>Urbanization</i> | |
| Megacities (1 million of residents or more) | 25 |
| Large cities (250–999 thousand residents) | 28 |
| Medium-sized cities (20–249 thousand residents) | 27 |
| Small towns and rural settlements | 23 |

Annex 2

Perceptions of age thresholds for life stages across countries, RSS 9 and ESS 9 (2018)

| Country | Perceptions of age thresholds for life stages (survey data) | | | | | | Other characteristics of the age climate | | |
|----------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Young adulthood | | Middle age | | Old age | | Average life expectancy* | Age at first marriage** | Age at birth of first child** |
| | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Years | Median | Median |
| Croatia | 23 | 57 | 40 | 66 | 60 | 68 | 78 | 24 | 25 |
| Czech Republic | 18 | 49 | 40 | 66 | 65 | 61 | 79 | 23 | 25 |
| Germany | 20 | 51 | 40 | 64 | 65 | 62 | 81 | 25 | 27 |
| Russia | 20 | 61 | 40 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 73 | 22 | 24 |
| Slovakia | 20 | 67 | 40 | 65 | 65 | 56 | 77 | 23 | 24 |
| Estonia | 20 | 61 | 40 | 71 | 65 | 69 | 78 | 23 | 24 |
| Slovenia | 22 | 54 | 40 | 63 | 65 | 65 | 81 | 24 | 25 |
| Bulgaria | 25 | 60 | 42 | 66 | 65 | 66 | 75 | 22 | 23 |
| Hungary | 20 | 61 | 45 | 56 | 65 | 60 | 76 | 23 | 25 |
| Serbia | 21 | 60 | 45 | 72 | 65 | 69 | 76 | 23 | 25 |
| Montenegro | 25 | 52 | 45 | 67 | 65 | 67 | 77 | 25 | 26 |
| Poland | 20 | 58 | 45 | 71 | 66 | 68 | 78 | 24 | 25 |
| Spain | 20 | 51 | 30 | 40 | 68 | 73 | 83 | 26 | 28 |
| France | 20 | 63 | 35 | 57 | 70 | 61 | 83 | 25 | 27 |
| Belgium | 20 | 61 | 40 | 48 | 70 | 60 | 82 | 24 | 27 |
| Switzerland | 20 | 62 | 40 | 59 | 70 | 59 | 84 | 27 | 29 |
| Austria | 20 | 60 | 40 | 69 | 70 | 65 | 82 | 25 | 26 |

| Country | Perceptions of age thresholds for life stages (survey data) | | | | | | Other characteristics of the age climate | | |
|-------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Young adulthood | | Middle age | | Old age | | Average life expectancy* | Age at first marriage** | Age at birth of first child** |
| | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Median age (years) | Consolidation (%) | Years | Median | Median |
| Ireland | 18 | 60 | 45 | 70 | 70 | 66 | 82 | 27 | 28 |
| UK | 18 | 66 | 45 | 75 | 70 | 61 | 81 | 25 | 28 |
| Portugal | 19 | 61 | 45 | 71 | 70 | 67 | 81 | 24 | 26 |
| Netherlands | 20 | 66 | 45 | 65 | 70 | 71 | 82 | 26 | 28 |
| Sweden | 20 | 75 | 45 | 75 | 70 | 61 | 83 | 28 | 27 |
| Finland | 20 | 67 | 45 | 75 | 70 | 63 | 82 | 25 | 27 |
| Latvia | 20 | 56 | 45 | 75 | 70 | 65 | 75 | 23 | 24 |
| Lithuania | 21 | 61 | 45 | 73 | 70 | 63 | 76 | 23 | 24 |
| Cyprus | 20 | 57 | 48 | 72 | 70 | 63 | 81 | 25 | 26 |
| Denmark | 20 | 62 | 50 | 67 | 70 | 61 | 81 | 27 | 27 |
| Norway | 20 | 65 | 50 | 73 | 70 | 63 | 83 | 26 | 27 |
| Iceland | 20 | 69 | 50 | 77 | 70 | 65 | 83 | 26 | 24 |
| Italy | 24 | 58 | 50 | 73 | 70 | 75 | 83 | 26 | 28 |

Note. Age thresholds of adulthood, middle age, and old age from ESS and RSS data, wave 9 after weighting by *dweight* variable.

* World Bank data, 2018. URL: <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sp-dyn-le00-in?year=2018&gender=total#data-table-section>.

** Calculated from ESS9 and RSS 9, means for respondents aged 25 years and older who experienced each of the corresponding events.