The Age-Graded Nature of Advice: Distributional Patterns and Implications for Life Meaning

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Abstract

*Drawing from life course, social networks, and developmental social psychology scholarship, this article considers how advice transmission varies across age groups and examines the age-contingent associations between advice-giving and life meaning. Binomial and ordered logistic regression using the 2006 Portraits of American Life Study (*n = 2,583*) reveal that adults in their twenties are most likely to report offering advice to multiple social targets. Notably, however, the connection between advice-giving and life meaning is most pronounced for late-middle age adults—even as changes during this part of the life course reduce the odds of advice exchange. Consistent with developmental theory and the mattering perspective, we argue that advice is a mechanism for contributing to others' welfare and for cultivating life meaning. Yet opportunity structures for advice transmission also shift over life course, leaving adults in late-middle age and beyond with fewer opportunities to engage in such generative practices.*

Keywords

life course, age, advice, generativity, social support

BACKGROUND

Advice is a "ubiquitous element of supportive interactions" (MacGeorge et al. 2004:43), instrumental for finding jobs, getting good health care, locating romantic partners, or obtaining any number of other desired social resources. Amid the many verbal messages that could leave a mark on their life, people disproportionately recall the long-term impact of personal advice (Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon 1981). Yet as other scholars maintain, it is often even "better . . . to give than to receive" supportive attention (Thomas 2010:351; Krause, Herzog, and Baker 1992). Offering support, including advice,

implies competence and the ability to engage in socially productive behavior.

The current article picks up this theme with respect to age. Classic developmental theory suggests that the major psychosocial challenge in middle adulthood is about investing in others—the task of cultivating generativity rather than falling into stagnation (Erikson 1950). Within such a framework, advice can be a mechanism for

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contributing to others' welfare and for making life meaningful. Yet, the opportunity structures for giving and receiving advice are also likely to shift over the course of adulthood, and the institutional arrangement of modern American society appears ill-suited for promoting generative activity in late-middle age and beyond (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006). This insight is echoed by Schieman and Taylor (2001), who emphasize that relevance to others (mattering) is important in later life but also note that changing social roles in work and family life pull many adults from situations where contributions such as advice-giving would be warranted. Furthermore, older people may be viewed as having little to offer others, especially those in younger generations (Stewart and Vandewater 1998); stereotypes about being "out of touch" or unproductive may become internalized and shape subsequent interpersonal encounters (see Levy 2003). Surprisingly, however, little work has described the distribution of advice according to age in a national population, let alone sought to unpack what accounts for why people of different ages are more or less likely to give advice to strong and weak types of social ties. Our first research question, then, is whether and why age groups differ in their likelihood of having recently offered advice to a range of social targets.

Upon documenting the age-graded nature of advice transmission, we investigate potential implications of this supportive provision. Though there are countless possible outcomes of advice interactions, our focus on the life course—and our goal to document general population patterns of advice transmission—impels us to consider why giving advice might matter for a giver and why this might depend on their age. We expect that advice-giving is associated with certain aspects of life quality but chiefly when it occurs during stages of development when social contribution becomes an issue of foremost psychological

salience. In the case of advice, the relevant aspect of well-being is *life meaning*, and the related life stage is *middle age*.

This idea of a developmental alignment between advice and life meaning is grounded in Erik Erikson's stage theory of human development and elaborated by more recent theories in social psychology, especially the mattering perspective (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). In brief, Erikson (1950) argued that as people age, they undergo a sequence of psychosocial crises in which they strive to attain a particular, positive psychological quality (e.g., initiative, identity). Individuals are vulnerable to a corresponding negative psychological state (e.g., guilt, role confusion) during each stage of their development. During middle adulthood—according to Erikson, roughly age 40 through the midsixties (Erikson 1982:56–57)—the core psychosocial crisis centers on cultivating concern beyond the self; people in this seventh of Erikson's eight stages of development grow increasingly concerned about making their life count by contributing to others, and they therefore struggle to achieve generativity versus falling into stagnation.[1] Though parenthood has often been

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[1]Our definition of middle age considers Erikson's own parameters but also acknowledges that life spans have lengthened since his writing. Drawing from nationally representative data, moreover, we find that American adults view middle age as spanning a range roughly correspondent with Erikson but extended slightly on the high end when accounting for substantial spread in respondent evaluations. Respondents in the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) study view middle age as beginning at mean age 45.94, with a standard deviation of 6.44 years, and ending at mean age 62.13, with a standard deviation of 7.4 years. Allowing ± 1 standard deviations to encompass variability around each center point (middle age evaluations were normally distributed), we would observe a middle age ranging from 39.5 to 69.5. See online Appendix A, available at spq.sagepub.com/supplemental, for more details.

identified as the quintessential expression of generativity, Erikson himself came to take a broader view of the concept by deemphasizing its connection to biological parenting (Whitbourne and Bringle 2006). Indeed, generativity has come to be understood as the desire to leave an enduring mark in the world, a goal that involves guiding specific members of the current "younger generation" but also contributing to society's future in more general ways by leaving an institutional legacy, renewing cultural practices, or helping others through volunteering (de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995; Son and Wilson 2011).

Advice, the focus of this article, is a direct expression of generative behavior and a means of being significant to other people.[2] Consistent with Erikson's and others' comprehensive vision of generativity, we assess advice given not only to family members but also to friends, neighbors, and strangers—contributions to people across a range of social distances. Drawing from the mattering framework, we depict advice to a diversified set of social targets as a way of cultivating a social identity that is consequential to varied others (i.e., contributing beyond one's immediate family). Our second main research question asks whether giving advice to others is associated with having a sense of purpose in life and if this association is contingent on age.

Advice Provision and the Life Course

Though traditional age norms might imply that people become more wise,

mature, and insightful across middle age and later life—and thus best positioned to proffer advice or serve in roles such as "the mentor" (Finkelstein, Allen, and Rhoton 2003)—there are several reasons to expect that age is unlikely to have a simple, positive, linear association with advice transmission. Indeed, in light of changing opportunity structures throughout the life course, a better overarching hypothesis is just the opposite:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Older adults are less likely than their younger counterparts to have given advice within the past year.

Yet, in order to understand advice in the life course, it is useful to consider different targets of advice. The life-course perspective specifies that people undergo an age-graded sequence of social roles and transitions that structures their social relationships, dynamics that should have a direct bearing on general patterns of advice provision. Nevertheless, the underlying reasons and intervening pathways between age and advice likely differ depending on whether advice transmission is to family members, close friends, or weaker ties outside the primary group. Though younger age groups should, in general, give more advice than older ones, important features of young adulthood and middle age lead to different predictions about who is more or less likely to give advice to a range of social targets.

First, early- to mid-middle age is the time of most intense family role obligations. Dependent children require continual attention, while nonresidence between parents and children begets far less intergenerational contact (Fingerman et al. 2012). Emerging adults—in college or launching their careers—remain close to their parents and are likely to seek their advice (Fingerman et al. 2009), but this dependence on parental

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[2]Scholars have long identified advice as a central element of generativity. For example, 2 of 13 items in a widely used Q-set measure of generativity deal directly with advice (Peterson and Klohnen 1995:23): "is turned to for advice and reassurance," "tends to proffer advice." Such characteristics, as the authors note, are "central to Erikson's conception of positive generative functioning."

guidance seems to wane once adult children form their own households and begin having their own children (Fingerman and Hay 2004). Therefore, adults not yet in the empty nest phase—primarily those in early- and mid-middle age—seem positioned to most frequently offer parental advice (though, of course, many adults continue to proffer advice to their nonresident children and grandchildren). With increased age also comes the increased likelihood of widowhood (about 70 percent of those becoming widowed are 65 or older; Elliot and Simmons 2011). Married adults frequently cite their spouse as a central confidant (Cutrona 1996), and so losing a wife or husband would remove an important discussion partner with whom to exchange advice. In sum, we might expect advice transmission—with respect to family life—to peak in middle age and then decrease thereafter because of key transitions that would eliminate opportunities for advice provision.

> *Hypothesis 2*: Advice to family members is more prevalent in early- and mid-middle age than during young adulthood, late-middle age, or older adulthood.

Labor force transitions and workplace experiences are another important life-course consideration. Work is time-intensive activity often done with others, and many people count co-workers among their close friends (Sias and Cahill 1998); retirement, then, may precipitate fewer advice-sharing encounters with friends. A number of studies document that retirement generally decreases social contact (e.g., van Solinge and Henkens 2007), thereby reducing opportunities for advice exchange and shrinking the pool of potential recipients. Research supporting the "complementarity thesis" likewise posits that work-based roles help people form and maintain social connections

because it puts people in close proximity with others and makes them aware of opportunities to engage with others outside the workplace (Erlinghagen 2010). Each of these dynamics suggests that older adults will be less likely than their younger counterparts to offer advice to friends, due in part to retirement. In addition, studies on age and organizational dynamics suggest that late-middle age workers are at an increased risk of feeling undervalued and less integrated in their workplaces (e.g., Taylor and Walker 2003), factors that may also undercut opportunities to advise (though for which we do not have a direct measure in the current study).

Further, whether related to retirement or to other age-related change such as declining health or flagging energy, there is mounting evidence from time use studies that older adults do less socializing (e.g., spending evenings out) than their younger counterparts (Cornwell 2011). All else equal, greater social contact provides more opportunities to become aware of others' problems, generate the trust underlying advice solicitation, and simply have an advice-related conversation. For these reasons, we might expect young adults, particularly in their twenties and thirties, to have the most opportunities to give advice to friends.

> *Hypothesis 3*: Advice to friends grows less common across age decades—namely, prevalence is highest for young adults.

Workplace dynamics and patterns of sociability also likely have implications for advice-giving to weaker ties beyond immediate family or close friends. Giving advice is central to many job duties (e.g., for doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers), and so all else equal, labor force activity might be expected to increase the likelihood of advice provision, particularly to weak ties, or strangers, who fit the role of client, customer, or patron.

More broadly, older adulthood is characterized by smaller, less active, and less diverse social networks relative to younger adulthood (Ajrouch, Antonucci, and Janevic 2001; Cornwell 2011; Lang, Staudinger, and Carstensen 1998). Some scholars propose that older adults rid themselves of less meaningful relationships because they prefer to be around those with whom they feel especially close as they sense their life span winding down (Lang et al. 1998). This expression of socioemotional selectivity might not portend the loss of advice interactions, but it would reduce the *range* of people to whom the individual could extend advice—weak ties, in particular. Exposure to a diverse circle of contacts is associated, moreover, with an increased likelihood of giving advice to weak ties (Vargas and Schafer 2013), perhaps reflecting how network diversity provides the type of wide perspective useful for giving guidance. To the extent that older adults have narrower network reach, we might expect them to offer less advice to fewer people outside their close circle.

Finally, there is a geographic element to the opportunity structure of advice. Increasingly, older adults are disproportionately likely to live in less populated areas that provide less incidental exposure to others (Kilko 2015). Reflecting later-life residential mobility patterns and the historical process of particular cohorts aging in place, a majority of older adults now live in low-density suburban and rural areas where it might be difficult to visit family and friends without extensive transportation time (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2014) (thus adding further rationale for Hypotheses 2 and 3). Further, residing in less populated areas also likely means reduced exposure to strangers and neighbors, reducing the opportunity for advice transmission with weaker ties.

Therefore, based on work roles, social network dynamics, and geographical factors, we pose two additional hypotheses.

> *Hypotheses 4 and 5*: Advice to strangers (Hypothesis 4) and advice to neighbors (Hypothesis 5) grow less common across age decades—namely, prevalence for each is highest for young adults.

In summary, diverse life course considerations generate an overarching hypothesis that age is negatively associated with advice provision. Yet follow-up Hypotheses 2 through 5 lead us to explore some distinctive mediating pathways that may apply in particular ways for particular types of social targets (e.g., family roles related to advice to family, work status related to advice to friends and strangers). Our first five hypotheses also acknowledge that age patterns may be nonlinear; where we anticipate that advice prevalence drops with age, young adults are expected to have highest rates of advice transmission (the exception being advice given to family, where advice is expected to peak in early- to mid-middle age and decline thereafter). While there are different ways to define age groupings, we build from Erikson's general template and use decade distinctions to distinguish several segments of young adulthood (20–39), young-middle age (40–49), mid-middle age (50–59), late-middle age (60–69), and older adulthood (70+).

Advice-Giving and Life Meaning

Upon documenting the age-graded nature of advice transmission, we turn to potential implications of this supportive provision, particularly with respect to *life meaning*. The idea that life is meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling is a central component of life quality, arguably even more

fundamental than happiness, positive affect, and other dimensions of well-being (Hughes 2006). For Erikson, meaning in life is achieved by accomplishing developmental tasks at socially expected points in the life course (Reker, Peacock, and Wong 1987). During middle age, then, the key psychosocial crisis on which life meaning hinges is the conflict between generativity and stagnation.

The current consensus among developmental psychologists is that generative motivations, capacities, and self-evaluations are not the exclusive province of middle age and can arise at various points in the adult life course (McAdams 2001; McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan 1993). Yet the perspective of development alignment implies that serving as a mentor, providing guidance, or helping someone with life problems becomes acutely relevant for life meaning chiefly during a certain window of development when generativity versus stagnation is in peak psychosocial conflict. In other words, the age-related *implications* of giving advice need not mirror the age-based *prevalence* of giving advice.

These expectations can be elaborated by literature on *mattering*, which examines how people feel relevant, needed, and interconnected with others (Elliott, Kao, and Grant 2004; Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). Sociological perspectives on mattering maintain that the occupancy of salient roles, such as worker, spouse, or parent, confers a sense of meaning to people's lives, as these roles grant the opportunity to exert influence and contribute to others (Fazio 2010; Schieman and Taylor 2001). Elliott and colleagues (2004:339) note that advice exchange, in particular, is a touchstone signal that one matters across various social relationships. Earlier theories of role accumulation also hinted at these dynamics, emphasizing the benefits of exerting influence over a diverse range

of strong and weak ties and suggesting that "the sense of being appreciated or needed by diverse role partners" yields psychological gratification (Sieber 1974:576). Mattering to family members is undoubtedly important. But, studies documenting a positive association between social network diversity and well-being (e.g., Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra 2011) and the health-protective role of giving advice and other nonmaterial assistance to nonkin (e.g., Brown, Consedine, and Magai 2005) suggest that middle- to older-age people thrive when they can contribute to an array of individuals known in different contexts.

Though there is little research on when it is in the life course that "mattering matters most," Schieman and Taylor (2001) propose that because late-middle age and onward is an interval of pending role exits (e.g., retirement, widowhood, the "empty nest"), the feeling of mattering may become an especially poignant concern during this stage of life. By this line of thought, advice-giving counts most for life meaning when mattering is most under threat. Correspondingly, several studies suggest that providing social support—more so than receiving it—enhances well-being among older adults because of the pride and esteem that comes from influencing others' lives at a point when they foresee pending dependence on others (Krause et al. 1992; Thomas 2010).

In sum, though highly generative people are likely to report higher quality of life across adulthood, we anticipate that advice transmission will be filtered differently through varied stages of psychosocial crisis and take on particularly generative overtones mainly during middle age. Erikson's generativity perspective highlights the entirety of middle age and in its classic form draws special attention to literal intergenerational contributions (which we denote as advice given to

immediate family members). The mattering perspective extends this hypothesis and particularizes late-middle age as the point when these patterns should most clearly manifest. Furthermore, the mattering framework emphasizes the importance of contributing to strong *and* weaker ties, placing less specialized emphasis on intergenerational exchanges.

> *Hypothesis 6a (emphasis on classical generativity)*: Giving advice is associated with higher meaning in life—especially during middle age and particularly in the context of family.
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> *Hypothesis 6b (insights drawn from the mattering perspective)*: Giving advice is associated with higher meaning in life—especially during late-middle age (60–69) and when extended to the greatest number of social targets.

METHODS

Data

Hypotheses are tested with the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), a nationally representative survey containing information about advice given to multiple social targets. In 2006, the PALS team conducted interviews with 2,610 non-institutionalized American adults aged 18 and over.[3] Respondents were initially selected through a multistage process in which zip code areas were randomly selected with probability proportionate to size, addresses were randomly selected from each zip code area, and one randomly

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[3]A second wave of data collection was also undertaken in 2012, but the present analysis focuses on the 2006 data. Sample attrition was nontrivial (about 50 percent of initial respondents could not be re-interviewed in 2012), and our research questions focus on age differences (which change at a constant rate over six years for all respondents). Had multiple survey waves been available across a longer stretch of time (say ten or fifteen years), we would be able to more meaningfully document within-person developmental change across adulthood.

selected adult was selected for a full interview from each selected household. The survey yielded an 83 percent contact rate, an 86 percent screening rate, and an 82 percent cooperation rate, resulting in an overall response rate of 58 percent (.83 × .86 × .82). With the available survey weights, the PALS sample closely mirrors basic population patterns found in the census's American Community Survey.

Dependent Variables

PALS respondents were asked, "In the past 12 months, for which people, if any, have you given advice or counsel?" Response categories include (a) close family, such as parents, siblings, and adult children; (b) friends or non-immediate family; (c) neighbors; and (d) strangers. We derived several variables from these four questions, including four binary variables denoting advice to each target (1 = yes, 0 = no), and another dichotomous variable indicating advice to no one in the past year (1 = no advice to any target, 0 = otherwise). Overall, 68 percent, 58 percent, 19 percent, and 15 percent of the sample reported giving advice to close family, friends, neighbors, and strangers respectively; 15 percent reported giving advice to none of these targets.

Hypotheses 6a and 6b consider life meaning as a dependent variable. Our measure for this outcome comes from the statement "I believe there is some real purpose for my life," where respondents were asked to state whether they 1 = strongly agreed to 5 = strongly disagreed. Answers were reverse-coded. Overall, the sample skewed toward agreement, with 72 percent in strongly agreement, 20 percent in agreement, and 8 percent reporting less than agreement.

Independent Variable and Covariates

Age was derived from the respondents' self-reported birth year and categorized

in decade groups. We used decade groupings because the public-use version of the PALS data coded everyone in their ninth or tenth decade of life in the categorical designation of 80+ (to protect confidentiality). There were 60 such participants, a number considerably lower than other decade groups, so we define 70 to 80+ as the oldest age group (for simplicity, we refer to this group as 70-somethings). For simplicity, we also refer to respondents aged 18 to 29 as twenty-somethings. Hence, people in their thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties fall in true decade groups, while the youngest and the oldest adults are in somewhat expanded age categories. Recognizing that binning participants into decade groups comes with some downsides (e.g., loss of information), we conduct additional analyses with age (and its square) as a numerical variable (findings consistent with those shown in the main tables; available on request). In these analyses, we treat everyone over age 80 as equal to that topmost value.

To account for demographic factors, we include household size, gender (coded male = 1, female = 0), race/ethnicity (dummy variables denoting self-reported black, Latino, Asian, or other; white is the reference category), and years of formal education. Family roles are accounted for with dummy variables for currently partnered (1 = married or cohabiting, 0 = otherwise), child(ren) living in the home (1 = one or more in the household, 0 = otherwise), and child(ren) living outside the home (1 = one more living elsewhere, 0 = otherwise). Finally, we account for five other factors representing bases of social connection and shaping the opportunity structure of advice exchange. Currently working is denoted by a dummy variable distinguishing those who reported working for pay, full- or part-time (1 = yes, 0 = no). A social activity index is based on questions asking "About

how many times" respondents did the following things in the past year: "visited family in person or had them visit you," "had friends over to your home," and "spent time with friends at a park, shopping mall, or other public place." Responses were coded as 0 = never to 8 = more than once a week, and the three items were averaged (α = .61). Population size is based on a ten-category indicator of county subdivision size (e.g., $\leq$5,000; 5,001–10,000; . . . ; 1,000,001–2,000,000; $\geq$2,000,000). This was converted into a numerical measure using midpoint values (plus 2,500 and 2,500,000 for the bottom and top categories) and divided by 100,000. We account for extent of exposure to diversity with a set of questions asking about frequency of conversation with individuals from a broad range of social groups (14 in all). Participants were asked, "How often do you have a conversation with someone who, as far as you know. . . ." Example categories include "is an elected official," "is a welfare recipient," "is a Muslim," and "is an atheist" (unfortunately, age was not a category assessed in this index). Response categories ranged from 1 = never to 7 = every day and were averaged across the questions to create an index (α = .80). Finally, we include an indicator of network size from a survey item where respondents were asked to estimate how many people they "feel close to." Respondents could estimate up to 20 or more individuals.

Analysis

Weighted descriptive statistics are shown by each decade of age represented in the PALS data. Hypotheses 1 through 5 assess the likelihood of advice-giving in general and advice to different targets, and we test these hypotheses with a series of binary logistic regression models. To assess the extent to which age differences are attributable to mediating variables,

we fix the cross-model error variance across the sequence of logistic models and compute the total, direct, and indirect effects of the focal predictor on the dependent variable. We use the Stata module *KHB* to perform this decomposition (Karlson, Holm, and Breem 2010; Stata program is based on the acronym of authors' names).[4] Hypotheses 6a and 6b, which examine the interactive role of age and advice-giving for life meaning, are tested with product terms in ordered logistic regression. Missing data was minimal (no variable missing at higher than .6 percent), so we used listwise deletion, and the analytic sample comes to $n = 2,583$ (~1 percent missing overall). All regression models adjust for the complex survey design and use sample weights to generalize to the broader American population. Predicted probability values from selected models are depicted using Stata's *margins* command.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents weighted means and proportions for each study covariate according to age group. For the purposes of our analysis, it is important to point out that adults are most likely to be partnered between their thirties and their sixties, far more likely to have children living at home in their thirties and forties than in other decades, and more likely than not to have nonresidential children in their fifties and beyond. Likelihood of working nosedives for adults in their sixties, while scores on the social activity and exposure to diversity scales tend to drop off more incrementally

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[4]Comparing coefficients from a baseline model to an adjusted model is clear-cut with ordinary least squares regression but becomes complicated in nonlinear models such as logit. In logit, adding covariates rescales the error variance and confounds one's ability to compare a coefficient from one model to the next.

across the age groups. Adults in their twenties are most likely to live in highly populated areas. All variables, with the exception of gender and Asian race, demonstrate significant age-based variation.

Advice Granted

Results in the first three models (Model A) provide the broadest statement about age differences in advice-giving: What is the overall age gap when we look across all four social targets?[5] Analyses are devised so that Model 1 considers age while adjusting only for basic demographic covariates, Model 2 includes family roles, and Model 3 incorporates the full set of covariates. Here the dependent variable is advice to *no one*, so odds ratios are interpreted as values >1 indicating higher odds of giving advice to no one. The results of this analysis display a pronounced disparity: without accounting for family roles or other bases of social connection, adults in their sixties and their seventies have odds approximately 2.5 and 4 times higher, respectively, than their twenty-something counterparts of having offered advice to *none* of the four target social roles within the past year. The fact that older adults are more likely than younger adults to have nonresident children suppresses this gap a bit (Model A2), but the gap is explained somewhat if we account for social activity and differential exposure to diversity (Model A3). Predicted probabilities from this fully adjusted model indicate that over one in five sixty-somethings and over a quarter of those above 70 would be predicted to offer advice to no family members, friends, neighbors, or strangers. Adults below the age of 60 fall just above the .10 probability mark for this scenario.

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[5]To save space, confidence intervals are omitted from Table 2. Full tables with 95 percent confidence intervals are available on request.

Table 1. Weighted Covariate Means/Proportions by Age Group, Portraits of American Life Study (*n* = 2,583)

	Age group					
Variable (range)	Twenties (*n* = 608)	Thirties (*n* = 569)	Forties (*n* = 539)	Fifties (*n* = 398)	Sixties (*n* = 248)	70+ (*n* = 221)
Household size (1–6)	3.43	3.51	3.30	2.64	2.40	1.92
Male (0, 1)	.50	.51	.50	.44	.43	.47
Black (0, 1)	.12	.12	.12	.11	.06	.07
Latino (0, 1)	.18	.15	.14	.08	.07	.06
Asian (0, 1)	.05	.06	.04	.03	.06	.003
Other race (0, 1)	.05	.05	.02	.04	.04	.01
Education (10–23)	13.70	14.77	14.57	14.83	14.33	14.12
Partnered (0, 1)	.40	.75	.73	.70	.74	.55
Child(ren) at home (0, 1)	.31	.73	.65	.38	.26	.10
Child(ren) outside home (0, 1)	.05	.20	.45	.67	.86	.85
Working (0, 1)	.73	.79	.77	.67	.36	.06
Social activity (0–8)	4.76	4.21	4.03	3.97	3.83	3.73
People close to (0–25)	9.49	9.82	10.74	11.93	12.07	13.25
Exposure to diversity (1–7)	3.36	3.30	3.43	3.30	2.75	2.40
Population size (1–10)	5.45	4.94	4.92	4.94	4.26	4.83

Note: ANOVA and chi-square analysis reveals that all variables except for gender (male) and Asian race demonstrate significant age variation (*p* < .05).

Overall, there is strong support for Hypothesis 1.

We continue our logistic regression analysis of advice granted by focusing on each particular social target (Hypotheses 2–5). Family members compose the first set of models ("B" models in Table 2). The baseline model suggests that adults in their fifties are significantly more likely than those in their twenties (as well as those in their thirties, sixties, and seventies, as revealed by Wald tests) to have offered advice to family members in the past year. This pattern aligns with Hypothesis 2. Model 2 indicates that the distinctive advice-giving spike for 50-somethings is largely attributable to family roles—particularly for children living *outside* of the home. KHB decomposition analyses confirm that this family-role configuration completely mediates the pattern in Model B1. Interestingly, a gap between people in their sixties or seventies and their twenties also emerges

and becomes statistically significant in Model 2. Specifically, sixty-somethings are about half as likely as young adults to proffer advice; seventy-somethings are about 60 percent less likely than those in their twenties to do so. Wald tests reveal that the advice-granting levels for those in their sixties and seventies is also significantly different from adults in their thirties and forties.

Some of this unanticipated age gap is explained in Model B3. Here, age-graded differences in social activity and in exposure to diversity account for the difference between those in their sixties and those in their twenties or thirties (KHB decomposition reveals that 28 percent and 25 percent of the age difference is accounted for each factor, respectively, and both indirect effects *p* < .05). The difference between seventy-somethings and their younger peers, however, remains statistically significant (*p* < .05 for comparison to reference group; *p* < .05 for comparison to

Table 2. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Predicting Transmission of Advice, Portraits of American Life Study

	No one			Family			Friends			Neighbors			Strangers		
	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	E1	E2	E3
Age															
Twenties	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
Thirties	1.34	1.33	1.05	1.06	.89	1.01	.56*	.62*	.74	1.19	1.10	1.30	.79	.87	.98
Forties	1.08	1.24	1.11	1.06	.76	.84	.44*	.46*	.51*	1.09	1.01	1.15	.81	.90	.96
Fifties	1.04	1.33	1.01	1.50*	.96	1.14	.37*	.37*	.45*	1.61*	1.52	1.85*	.94	1.05	1.21
Sixties	2.46*	3.51*	2.28*	.92	.51*	.68	.20*	.19*	.31*	.62	.59	.86	.43*	.48*	.73
70+	4.03*	5.75*	3.47*	.68	.40*	.54*	.10*	.09*	.17*	.69	.66	1.01	.18*	.20*	.34*
Demographic controls															
Household size	.97	.93	.95	1.04	1.03	1.03	.96	1.01	1.00	1.06	1.02	1.02	1.00	1.04	1.05
Male	1.09	1.10	1.04	.83	.82	.85	.72*	.73*	.73*	.98	.99	1.04	1.08	1.09	1.14
White	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
Black	.77	.80	.79	.80	.78	.82	.92	.85	.78	1.30	1.32	1.24	1.72*	1.68*	1.57*
Latino	1.76*	1.72*	1.47	.62*	.65*	.74	.46*	.45*	.42	.57*	.58*	.56*	.77	.75	.72
Asian	2.48*	2.20*	2.18*	.70	.80	.83	.34*	.36*	.34*	.36*	.36*	.33*	.53	.53	.47*
Other race	1.01	1.01	1.12	.62*	.65	.60	1.20	1.13	.91	.74	.76	.59	1.70	1.62	1.24
Education	.82*	.81*	.87*	1.16*	1.17*	1.13*	1.20*	1.21*	1.14*	1.16*	1.16*	1.11*	1.14*	1.14*	1.08*
Family roles															
Partnered		1.05	.99		1.14	1.15		.77	.82		1.08	1.12		.86	.90
Child(ren) at home		1.18	1.17		1.06	1.08		.90	.86		1.16	1.16		.90	.88
Child(ren) outside home		.60*	.63*		1.90*	1.86*		1.19	1.17		1.00	.97		.96	.92
Other bases of social connection															
Working			1.18			.96			1.04			.81			.90
Social activity			.83*			1.14*			1.20*			1.14*			1.05
People close to			.98*			1.02*			1.00			1.02			1.02
Exposure to diversity			.54*			1.27*			1.66*			1.52*			1.70*
Population size			.96			1.02			1.06			1.07*			1.06*
Observations	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583

Note: Regression estimates are weighted, and standard errors are adjusted for the complex survey design. Confidence intervals not shown for sake of space (available on request).

*p < .05.

thirty-somethings), though the size of the gap is attenuated somewhat. Recall from Table 1 that there is a steady decline in both social activity levels and in exposure to diversity across the age decades. Both of these factors in turn are associated with increased odds of advice-giving to family.

All told, there is strong support for Hypothesis 2. Children living *outside* but not within the home are most consequential for family advice-giving during middle age. Further, accounting for several key family roles reveals a suppressor association between older age and advice given to immediate family members.

Evidence for age-grading is more pronounced when it comes to advice given to friends ("C" models in Table 2). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, twenty-somethings are most likely to report having given advice to friends, and the odds of such transmission drop monotonically from one age decade to the next. The odds ratios change little when adjustments are made for family role variables (e.g., marital status) in Model C2, and indeed, neither partnership nor parenthood has any association with advice given to friends. One age difference is explained when we adjust for social activity and exposure to diversity in Model C3. Specifically, the gap between twenty- and thirty-somethings becomes nonsignificant, but the KHB decomposition indicates that none of the indirect effects are statistically significant for that age comparison. Though the odds ratios for other age groups inch closer toward 1, they remain statistically different from the reference group. These results suggest that age differences in social activity explain only a small amount of the gap between young adults and their older counterparts (KHB decomposition indicates that no mediating factor explains more than 20 percent of the age difference).

Neighbors and strangers represent the third and fourth social targets, respectively, to which respondents could report extending advice. Neighborly advice stands in contrast to family and friends. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, adults in their fifties are most likely to report offering advice to those living nearby, and this age pattern was robust—indeed strengthened—in the final model, which incorporates both family role and other bases of social connection as covariates. There was no evidence that older adults are less likely than younger people to extend advice to neighbors. When it comes to strangers, however, we see evidence largely consistent with Hypothesis 5; those in their sixties and seventies are less likely than younger adults to report offering advice (though the decline is not linear across age groups). The difference between sixty- and twenty-somethings appears attributable to population size and exposure to diversity (Model E3); young adults score higher in both regards, and each of these factors in turn is associated with opportunities to advise strangers. KHB decomposition, however, reveals that mediation is significantly driven primarily by exposure to diversity ($p < .05$). There was no evidence that work status or social activity explained the age patterns.[6]

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[6]To complement our analysis of advice given, we also considered the association between age and *receiving* advice (see online Appendix B, available at spq.sagepub.com/supplemental). In brief, PALS respondents were asked who among their closest nonresidential network associates gave them advice in the past year (one to four individuals could be nominated). Poisson models indicate that people receive advice from fewer of their strong ties across the age decades and in a linear manner when age is treated as numerical. Taken alongside the findings from Table 2, the evidence suggests that young adults live in a world of heightened advice exchange—they are far more likely to give *and* to receive advice than older men and women.

Advice and Life Meaning

Hypotheses 6a and 6b seek to understand whether giving advice has implications for adults' sense of meaning in life. We present a series of interactions to examine whether advice is associated with life meaning more strongly at certain ages. All five models in Table 3 adjust for the entire set of covariates included in Table 2 (plus the number of close ties who *gave* the respondent advice), but coefficients for these covariates are omitted here for sake of space (full tables available on request). We used ordered logistic regression because sense of life meaning has five categories. Coefficients are presented as odds ratios.

Our initial model indicates that adults with a greater number of close ties who provide advice tend to report higher levels of life meaning (coefficient not shown in table). Advice given, on the other hand, does not have a significant association with the outcome—at least not when presented as an "average effect" across all age groups. Model 2 interacts advice given with age, revealing that the association is far more pronounced among adults in their sixties than it is for twenty-somethings. Consistent with Hypothesis 6b, the interaction term is positive, indicating that advice-granting adults in their sixties report significantly higher levels of life meaning the more they report having given advice in the past year. Figure 1a depicts this interactive association. The line for sixty-somethings is set in bold, highlighting that the probability of strongly agreeing that life has "real purpose" goes from just above .6 for those who gave advice to none of the four targets to .86 for those who provided advice to all four. None of the other age groups have a significant boost in life meaning associated with advice-giving.

Models 3 through 5 unpack the interactive association of age and advice given on life meaning by isolating each of the targets of advice assessed in the PALS survey. Strangers, however, are left out of the table because of the difficulty in obtaining stable estimates; supplementary analyses reveal that those in the oldest group who reported giving advice to strangers ($n = 8$; advice to strangers was the least common form of advice reported by the sample) unanimously reported high levels of life meaning, providing insufficient variation across the dependent variables' categories.

One result stands out from the remaining models in Table 3. Specifically, we find evidence that among sixty-somethings, giving advice is especially meaningful in the context of friendship. The positive and significant interaction term shown in Model 4 takes on clearer meaning in Figure 1b, which plots predicted probabilities of reporting the highest level of life meaning. All age groups besides the sixty-somethings show statistically indistinguishable differences between not giving and giving advice to friends. Those in their sixties, however, go from Pr(strongly agree) = .66 to Pr(strongly agree) = .79 from the former scenario to the latter.

DISCUSSION

This article continues the conversation on which factors underlie advice transmission and why it matters (Marin 2012; Vargas and Schafer 2013). Drawing from perspectives on social networks and the life course and insights from developmental psychology, the results revealed a nuanced story of the age-graded nature of advice transmission and how advice-giving is most associated with purpose in life during a particular window of adult development.

Predicted Probabilities of Life Meaning

(a)

Predicted Probabilities of Life Meaning

(b)
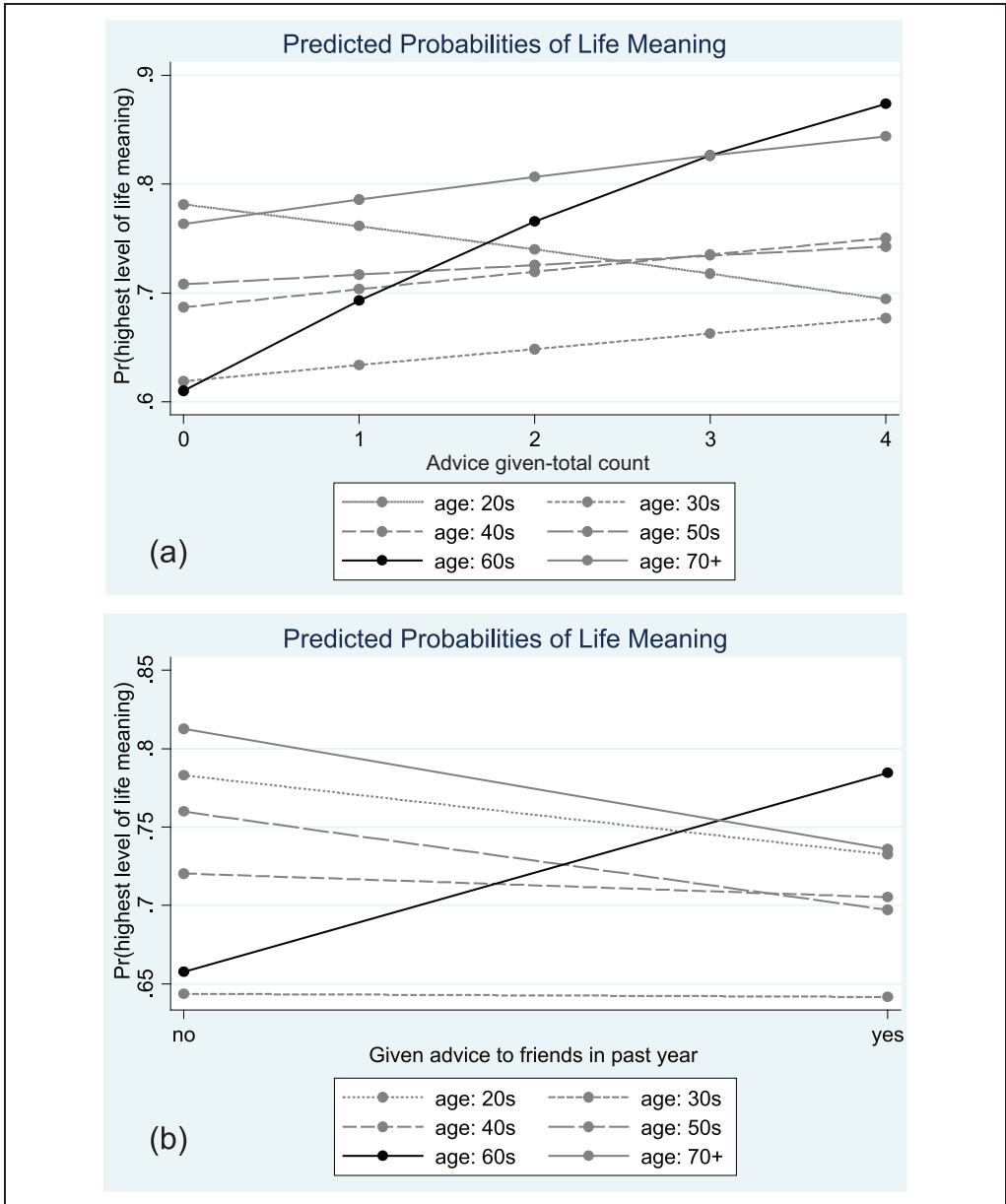
Figure 1. (a) Predicted probability of reporting highest life meaning, Portraits of American Life Study. Values are predicted from Model 2 in Table 3, all covariates held at their mean. (b) Predicted probability of reporting highest life meaning, Portraits of American Life Study. Values are predicted from Model 4 in Table 3, all covariates held at their mean.

A main finding was that older people are considerably less likely than younger people to have given recent advice, particularly to those outside of their close family. The advice drop-off appears most pronounced when people are in their sixties. Overall, more than one in five adults in their sixties report giving advice to *no*

Table 3. Odds Ratios from Ordered Logistic Regression Predicting Life Meaning with Age Contingencies, Portraits of American Life Study

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Advice given—total count	1.10	1.14			
	(.98–1.23)	(1.04–1.25)			
Advice given—total count × 30s		1.21			
		(.86–1.69)			
Advice given—total count × 40s		1.23			
		(.91–1.65)			
Advice given—total count × 50s		1.18			
		(.85–1.64)			
Advice given—total count × 60s		1.67*			
		(1.08–2.58)			
Advice given—total count × 70+		1.29			
		(.85–1.96)			
Advice given to family			.98		
			(.58–1.63)		
Advice to family × 30s			.91		
			(.48–1.75)		
Advice to family × 40s			.91		
			(.42–1.96)		
Advice to family × 50s			.87		
			(.38–2.01)		
Advice to family × 60s			1.61		
			(.59–4.34)		
Advice to family × 70+			1.34		
			(.49–3.66)		
Advice to friend				.75	
				(.42–1.34)	
Advice to friend × 30s				1.32	
				(.67–2.62)	
Advice to friend × 40s				1.24	
				(.61–2.51)	
Advice to friend × 50s				.96	

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Advice to friend × 60s				(.41–2.21)	
				2.63*	
				(1.19–5.81)	
Advice to friend × 70+				.84	
				(.37–1.91)	
Advice to neighbors					1.17
					(.43–3.24)
Advice to neighbors × 30s					1.08
					(.26–4.40)
Advice to neighbors × 40s					1.22
					(.38–3.96)
Advice to neighbors × 50s					1.33
					(.41–4.35)
Advice to neighbors × 60s					1.68
					(.46–6.09)
Advice to neighbors × 70+					1.98
					(.34–11.52)
Age: 30s[a]	.61*	.43*	.63	.48*	.59*
	(.42–.91)	(.23–.81)	(.36–1.12)	(.27–.86)	(.38–.91)
Age: 40s[a]	.89	.60*	.89	.70	.80
	(.59–1.34)	(.36–.98)	(.52–1.53)	(.41–1.19)	(.52–1.25)
Age: 50s[a]	.97	.66	.98	.87	.81
	(.60–1.55)	(.35–1.26)	(.52–1.84)	(.43–1.77)	(.50–1.31)
Age: 60s[a]	.89	.42*	.62	.51	.78
	(.46–1.73)	(.20–.88)	(.29–1.33)	(.26–1.03)	(.40–1.54)
Age: 70s[a]	1.41	.90	1.09	1.21	1.18
	(.70–2.84)	(.38–2.14)	(.46–2.59)	(.55–2.65)	(.55–2.51)
Observations	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583	2,583

Note: Regression estimates are weighted, and standard errors are adjusted for the complex survey design; 95 percent confidence intervals shown in parentheses. Analyses adjust for all additional covariates included in Tables 2.
[a]Twenties is reference group for age.
*$p < .05$.

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one in the past year, and for people of at least 70 years of age, this estimate reaches to over one in four. This striking pattern may signify an important deficit—untapped insight for would-be beneficiaries, but also a sizable proportion of the adult American population who have missed an opportunity to contribute to others' welfare. Just as the alleged rise of Americans with few confidants provoked concerns over increasing "social isolation" in America (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006), the current results should prompt reflection on the social fabric of American communities and how late-middle age and older adults fit into the picture. Compared to their younger counterparts, older adults are less socially active and interact with a more restricted range of people (Ajrouch et al. 2001; Cornwell 2011), factors that account for some portion of the advice gap between older and younger adults. Yet age differences in advice remain pronounced even after adjusting for these variables. All told, the age-based advice gap suggests that older adults have disproportionately few chances to serve in mentorship roles or to pass along time-earned perspective, even when accounting for many of the social roles and opportunities that facilitate advice-giving.

The other key finding was that advice-giving has important implications for purpose in life, but this pattern becomes most evident among adults in their sixties. This supports the idea of psychosocial developmental alignment: life purpose has many sources, and advice has many shades of meaning, but it is mainly during a particular juncture of the life span in which one comes to matter for the other. Age moderation of the advice-purpose association was motivated by Erikson's (1950) theory of adult development, a perspective that supposes that contributing to others' welfare is the crucial psychosocial crisis in the middle age years.

Erikson's theory posits that by people's twilight years, the generativity-stagnation conflict gives way to attention to ego-integrity versus despair, and so the fact that advice-giving has weakening implications for life purpose at the highest end of the age distribution is consistent with Erikson's theory and with the developmental alignment perspective. Likewise, Erikson argues that young adults are driven by an urge to achieve intimacy instead of isolation, and this psychosocial conflict likewise has a comparably weak correspondence to mentorship or guidance interactions. And indeed, there was no evidence that advice-giving enhanced the life meaning of young adults.

Previous research has considered the importance of giving social support for personal well-being (Liang, Krause, and Bennett 2001; Thomas 2010), but we are unaware of studies that have considered the developmental contingencies of transmitting particular forms of assistance, such as advice. Developmental alignment implies a stage-specific connection between a psychosocially relevant support behavior—in this case, advice—with a psychosocially relevant aspect of well-being—in this case, the sense of life purpose. Supplemental analyses (available on request) failed to reveal similar age-moderating patterns of other indicators of prosociality, such as trust, for predicting life meaning. Likewise, we found no evidence of advice having an age-moderated effect on other well-being indicators—such as optimism—that are less connected to the generativity-stagnation psychosocial conflict. We take these additional analyses as supportive evidence of discriminant validity for the developmental alignment perspective. Taken together, we believe the study findings illustrate the merit of using psychosocial crisis frameworks when seeking to understand the consequences of social support exchanges on well-being.

Still, it was at the upper end of middle life where advice-giving had the strongest implications for life meaning, not across the entirety of middle age as our Hypothesis 6a supposed. This may reflect a deepening of the psychosocial crisis when adults are approaching or in the immediate aftermath of retirement, when many are increasingly vulnerable to negative age stereotypes, beliefs that their skills are becoming irrelevant or obsolete, and fears about no longer mattering to others (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981:179). The developmental impulse to remain generative may become increasingly difficult and especially acute during this period of "encore adulthood" (Moen and Lam 2015)—a time when career and family-building obligations have ceased but the accelerating risk of debilitating infirmity remains a decade or more away. Another departure from Hypothesis 6a is that the life-meaning findings were driven not by familial advice but by advice offered to a diversity of targets, stronger and weaker type ties alike. All told, the findings support Hypothesis 6b, which builds generally from an Eriksonian framework but leans heavily on the mattering perspective.

Broadly speaking, the current study highlights a mismatch between adult developmental goals and socially structured opportunity structures. Conventional age norms underlying the generativity/stagnation conflict imply that becoming older makes one a more insightful mentor, a wiser guru, or a better advisor (Sternberg 2005). Perspectives such as successful aging, moreover, often intensify this conflict by emphasizing how older adults can continue to make "productive contributions" and by prescribing active social engagement (e.g., "giving back") as the normative ideal (Rowe and Kahn 1997). The age-based distribution of advice, however, is graded in a manner contrary to the conventional age norm model. Future social psychological research could further advance this theme and explore developmental mismatches in other junctures of the life course. For example, Erikson's view of young adulthood articulates the tension between intimacy and isolation, a psychosocial conflict traditionally resolved in the context of marriage. Yet changing economic conditions have challenged the ease into which many postcollege men and women can enter this institutionalized romantic arrangement and pursue family formation, contributing to marked psychological uncertainty during the period of "emerging adulthood" (Eliason, Mortimer, and Vuolo 2015). These and other potential incongruences between social opportunity structures and developmental demands are an area for continued fruitful dialogue between life-course sociologists, social psychologists, and developmental social scientists.

The current study has several limitations. First, interview data used were solely from the perspective of those giving advice. We have no knowledge of whether advice was useful, solicited, or even wanted—a common problem for studies purporting to understand the prevalence and/or implications of social support with survey data. A related limitation is that we have no information about the content of advice given, and so our study takes a broad perspective on advice across different role relations rather than focusing on niche forms of guidance. Another drawback of the advice reports is that we do not know the age of advice recipients. The classic view of generativity is that it involves helping the "next generation," and so it would have been informative to classify immediate family advice into roles such as spouse versus child and to identify the age of friends, neighbors, and strangers to whom respondents gave advice. Accordingly, our analysis draws from the generativity perspective

but does not attempt to delineate "pure" or archetypal generative behavior. Of note, research since Erikson's time has itself expanded the generativity concept to encompass contributions made to the generalized other or to society at large, and indeed, benchmark measurement instruments assess advice-giving apart from specific intergenerational considerations (e.g., Peterson and Klohnen 1995). Nevertheless, associations between advice and life meaning may have been more pronounced had we used measures specifically tailored to examine intergenerational advice exchange. As a fourth data limitation, this study used only a single item to measure meaning in life. Using a multi-item index—such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al. 2006)—would have been ideal. Unfortunately, no such index was available in the PALS study. Neither were there any measures of global well-being, such as happiness or life satisfaction.

Finally, as with all cross-sectional studies, we are limited in making causal assertions. The age-moderated association we report was anticipated on the basis of Erikson's theory of adult development and the mattering perspective, but it is plausible that sixty-somethings who already feel strong life purpose are those who most seek out advice-giving encounters. It is also possible that what we have attributed to age is largely or in part a function of cohort differences. Age marks not only one's position in the life course ("biographical time"); it also captures historical time with respect to membership in a birth cohort (Alwin, Hofer, and McCammon 2006). The two effects can therefore be confounded in cross-sectional research. Our primary purpose was to describe current age-based patterns of advice transmission and evaluate the credibility of a developmental alignment argument, but future research on this topic should use methods and data that are capable of distinguishing age effects from cohort effects.

In conclusion, the meaning of life implications of advice-giving appears most pronounced for late-middle age adults, even as the opportunities for most forms of advice seem to drop off—or their decline is already well underway—during that part of the life course. As Rowe (2015:7) notes, one of the major challenges in our times is to "harness the life-stage appropriate capabilities and goals of people of all ages"—particularly those in their encore years—as "older people have much to offer, including accrued knowledge, stability, unique creative capacities for synthetic problem solving, and increased ability to manage conflicts and consider the perspectives of other age groups." The findings from this study provide an illustration of how current social configurations undermine important contributions of older adults, specifically in the flow of advice.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Additional supporting information may be found at spq.sagepub.com/supplemental.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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