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. Findings from the 2006 Portraits of American Life Study 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
Some commentators have noted that advice is a “ubiquitous element of supportive interactions” (MacGeorge et al. 2004:43). Advice can be useful for finding a job, getting good health care, locating a romantic partner, or obtaining any number of other desired social resources. Interestingly, as people look back over what types of communication most shaped their lives, they disproportionately recall the long-term impact of personal advice (Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon 1981). On the other hand, people often note that it is even “better … to give than to receive” supportive attention (Thomas 2010:351; Krause, Herzog, and Baker 1992). Offering support, including advice, implies that someone has competent insight and that they have the ability to engage in socially productive behavior.

This article looks at advice with respect to age. Some classic theories from developmental psychology suggests that middle-age adults are highly motivated to invest in others—they struggle to
cultivate a sense of “generativity” rather than falling into stagnation (Erikson 1950). In this type of theory, advice can be a mechanism for contributing to others’ welfare and for making life meaningful. At the same time, the opportunities to provide advice are not equal across the life course. Societies are structured in such a way that adults in middle age and beyond lose some social connections where advice could be exchanged. Furthermore, older people are often viewed as having little to offer others, especially younger generations (Stewart and Vandewater 1998); stereotypes about being “out of touch” or unproductive can become internalized and shape the way that people interact with others (see Levy 2003). Surprisingly, however, little research 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 different types of people. The first research question of this article, then, is whether and why age groups differ in their likelihood of having recently offered advice to a range of social targets.

Our other purpose of this article was to investigate potential implications of giving advice. We explore 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 pressing concern. In the case of advice, the relevant aspect of well-being is life meaning, and the related life stage is middle-age.

Our idea of a developmental alignment between advice and life meaning is grounded in Erik Erikson’s stage theory of human development. It has also been elaborated by more recent theories in social psychology, especially the mattering perspective (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). As a brief backdrop, Erikson (1950) argued that as people age, they go through a series of psychosocial crises in which they strive to attain a particular, positive psychological quality (trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, ego identity, intimacy, generativity, ego integrity). People are vulnerable to a corresponding negative psychological state (mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, role confusion, isolation, stagnation, despair) during each stage of their development. During middle adulthood—according to Erikson, roughly age 40 through the mid-60s (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 struggle to achieve generativity versus falling into stagnation. Parenthood has often been identified as the
quintessential expression of generativity, but Erikson himself came to take a broader view of the concept by deemphasizing its narrow connection to biological parenting alone. 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 contributing to community organizations or helping others through volunteering (Son and Wilson 2011; de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995). Advice, the focus of this article, is a direct expression of generative behavior and a means of being significant to other people.

Advice Provision and the Life Course

Traditional age norms might imply that people become more wise, mature and insightful across middle age and later life—and therefore best-positioned to offer advice or to serve in roles such as “the mentor” (Finkelstein, Allen, and Rhoton 2003). At the same time, there are several reasons to expect that increasing age may actually make people less likely to give advice. In order to understand advice in the life course it is useful to consider different targets of advice. The life course perspective argues that people undergo an age-graded sequence of social roles and transitions that structures their social relationships (e.g., becoming a parent makes one a mother or a father; experiencing retirement removes one from their day-to-day work identity). We propose that life course dynamics should have a direct bearing on general patterns advice provision.

First, early-to-mid-middle age is the time of most intense family activity. Having young, dependent children in their household occupies a lot of young adults’ attention. When kids move out, parents and children often means far less 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 guidance seems to fade 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 children and grandchildren who live in another household). Increased age also boosts the likelihood of widowhood (about 70% of those becoming widowed are 65 or older, Elliot and Simmons 2011). Married adults
frequently cite their spouse as an important confidant (Cutrona 1996), and so losing a wife or husband would remove an important discussion partner with whom to exchange advice. All things considered, we expected that advice transmission—with respect to family life—would peak in middle age and then decrease thereafter because of key life transitions that would eliminate opportunities for advice provision.

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 lead to fewer advice-sharing encounters with friends. A number of studies document that retirement generally decreases social contact (e.g., van Solinge and Henkens 2007), which would reduce opportunities for advice exchange and shrink the pool of potential recipients. Other research finds that working helps people form and maintain social connections because it puts people in the presence of others and exposes people to opportunities for socializing outside of work (Erlinghagen 2010). Each of these factors suggests that older adults will be less likely than their younger counterparts to offer advice to friends, due in part to retirement. Finally, studies on age in the workplace suggest that late-middle-age workers are at an increased risk of feeling undervalued and less connected to co-workers (e.g., Taylor and Walker 2003). These factors may also undercut opportunities to advise.

Further, whether related to retirement or to other age-related change such as declining health or flagging energy, there is evidence 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 and to simply have an advice-related conversation. For these reasons, we might expect young adults, particularly in their 20s and 30s, to have the most opportunities to give advice to friends.

We also expected that it would be important to look beyond immediate family or close friends and to ask whether older people give less advice to strangers and neighbors than young adults. Many people give advice as a part of their job (consider, for example, doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers). Working, rather than being a retiree, could provide opportunities to advise people in the role of client, customer, or patron. Other researchers note that older people tend to have smaller, less active, and less diverse social networks relative to younger adulthood (Cornwell 2011; Ajrouch, Antonucci, and
Janevic 2001; Lang, Stuadinger, and Carstensen 1998). Exposure to a diverse circle of contacts, in turn, is associated 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 less diverse networks, 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). Indeed, a majority of older adults now live in low-density suburban and rural areas where it might be difficult to visit family and friends (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2014). Further, residing in less populated areas also likely means reduced exposure to strangers and neighbors, reducing the opportunity for advice transmission with these weaker types of ties.

Advice-Giving and Life Meaning

After documenting whether age is related to advice transmission, we turned to potential implications of this supportive provision. We focused particularly on life meaning. For Erikson, meaning in life is achieved by accomplishing developmental tasks at socially-expected points in the life course. During middle age the key psychosocial crisis on which life meaning hinges is the conflict between generativity and stagnation.

The perspective of development alignment implies that serving as a mentor, providing guidance, or helping someone with life problems becomes especially relevant for life meaning chiefly during a certain window of development when generativity vs. stagnation is in peak psychosocial conflict. These expectations are bolstered by sociological research on mattering, which examines how people feel relevant, needed, and interconnected with others (Elliot, Kao, and Grant 2004; Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). Sociologists argue that occupying significant social roles, such as worker, spouse, or parent, provides a sense of meaning to people’s lives. These types of roles grant the opportunity to be influential and contribute to others (Fazio 2010; Schieman and Taylor 2001). 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 a time of many social role changes (e.g., retirement,
widowhood, the ‘empty nest’), the feeling of mattering may become an especially poignant concern during this stage of life. By this logic, advice-giving counts most for life meaning when mattering is most under threat. We therefore expected that giving advice would have the strongest association with life meaning for adults in late-middle age and beyond.

METHODS

Data
To test these ideas, we used the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), a nationally representative survey of over 2,000 Americans containing unique information about advice—giving.

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. From this information, we identified whether respondents gave any advice to each potential target; we also identified which respondents indicated they gave advice to no one in the past year. Overall, 68%, 58%, 19%, and 15% of the sample reported giving advice to close family, friends, neighbors, and strangers, respectively. Fifteen percent reported giving advice to none of these targets.

Life meaning is the other key variable we wished to study. 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. We coded this variable so that higher scores mean higher meaning in life. Overall, the sample tended to demonstrate high life meaning, with 72% strongly agreeing, 20% agreeing, and 8% reporting less than agreement.

Independent Variable and Covariates
Age was derived from the respondents’ self-reported birth year and categorized in decade groups. We define 70-80+ as the oldest age group (for simplicity, we refer to this group as ‘70-somethings’). For
simplicity, we also refer to respondents aged 18-29 as ‘20-somethings.’ We also studied age as a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 80+ (most figures are drawn from these analyses).

Our analyses adjust for a number of other factors that could be associated with advice-giving. These factors include household size, gender, race/ethnicity, years of formal education, partnership status, children living in the home or outside the home, working vs. non-working, social activity, size of population in respondents’ county, exposure to diversity in daily life, and size of respondents’ social networks.

Analysis
We first show summary statistics by each decade of age represented in the PALS data. Our next analysis intends to show whether the likelihood of giving advice differs across age groups. We use a method called binary logistic regression. In brief, the model shows whether each variable increases or decrease the odds of giving advice above and beyond all the other predictors in the model. The model produces statements about the odds of the event (i.e., advice) occurring (e.g., an odds ratio above 1, say 1.5, would indicate that a one-unit change in the independent variable increases the odds of advice-giving by 1.5 or 50%). Because odds are not always an intuitive way to express findings, we convert these odds ratios into probability values, which range from 0 (i.e., no chance of observing the outcome) to 1 (it is certain that we will observe the outcome). We intend to show whether various age-related factors can explain why there are age patterns in the distribution of advice. Therefore, we show a number of figures which show how the probability of people reporting that they give advice across different ages differs when we factor in different sets of variables. Finally, we examine a technique called ordered logistic regression to analyze whether giving advice is associated with higher life meaning, and whether this association is stronger at certain ages. Again, we convert odds ratios to predicted probability (the probability of reporting high life meaning) to make the findings most interpretable.

RESULTS
Descriptive Statistics
Table 1 presents weighted means and proportions for each study covariate according to age group. These findings show that adults are most likely to be partnered between their 30s and their 60s, far more likely to have children living at home in their 30s and 40s than in other decades, and more likely than not to have non-residential children in their 50s and beyond. Likelihood of working nosedives for adults in their 60s, while scores on the social activity and exposure to diversity scales tend to drop off more incrementally across the age groups. Adults in their 20s 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 from our first model provide the broadest statement about age differences in advice-giving: what is the overall age gap when we look across all four social targets? 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 60s and their 70s have odds approximately 2 ½ and 4 times higher, respectively, than their 20-something of having offered advice to none of the four target social roles within the past year. The age gap changes little when different sets of variables are controlled for in subsequent models. Predicted probabilities from the fully-adjusted model (A3) indicate that over one in five 60-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. Figure 1 shows how the probability of giving advice to no one changes across the full range of ages on the basis of the three models.

The remainder of the figures shows binary logistic regression results for each target of potential advice as its own dependent variable. Family members comprise the first set of models shown in Figure 2. The baseline model, which adjusts only for demographic covariates, suggests that adults in their 50s are significantly more likely than young adults to have offered advice to family members in the past year. The next two “B” models account for additional variables, none of which change the overall age pattern of advice-giving.
Evidence for age-grading is more pronounced when it comes to advice given to friends (Figure 3). Twenty-somethings are most likely to report having given advice to friends, and the odds of such transmission drop from one age decade to the next. Results suggest that age differences in social activity explain a small fraction of the gap between young adults and their older counterparts.

Neighbors and strangers represent the third and fourth social targets, respectively, to which respondents could report extending advice. Middle-age adults are most likely to report offering advice to those living nearby, a pattern which was consistent after controlling for a number of factors (see Figure 4). When it comes to strangers, we see that those in their 60s and 70s are less likely than younger adults to report offering advice (though the decline is not linear across age groups). Figure 5 shows that Twenty- and thirty-somethings are most likely to give advice to strangers and that the probability begins to drop somewhere around age 40.

Advice and Life Meaning
The final analysis seeks to understand whether giving advice has implications for adults’ sense of meaning in life. The results show that advice given is only associated with higher life meaning among adults in their 60s. The findings suggest that that advice-granting adults in their 60s report significantly higher levels of life meaning the more they report having given advice in the past year, even though the same association is not statistically significant for young adults. Figure 6 depicts this interactive association. The line for 60-somethings is set in bold, highlighting that the probability of strongly agreeing that life has “real purpose” goes from just above 0.6 for those who gave advice to none of the four targets to 0.86 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.
DISCUSSION

A main finding from this study 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 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 advice beneficiaries, but also a sizeable proportion of the adult American population who have missed an opportunity to contribute to others’ welfare. Just as others have called alarm to the apparent rise of socially isolated Americans (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 (Cornwell 2011; Ajrouch et al. 2001), factors which 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 lifespan in which one comes to matter for the other. Age moderation of the advice-purpose association was predicted by Erikson’s (1950) theory of adult development, a perspective which 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 vs. 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 rather weak correspondence to mentorship or guidance interactions. And indeed, there was no evidence that advice-giving enhanced life meaning of young adults.

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. 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.

This study highlights a mismatch between adult developmental goals and the way that modern societies are structured. 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). The age-based distribution of advice, however, is graded in a manner contrary to the conventional age norm model. We are intrigued about developmental mismatches in other junctures of the life course. For example, Erikson’s view of young adulthood is that people in their 20s face tension between intimacy and isolation. This psychosocial conflict was traditionally resolved in the context of marriage. Yet changing economic conditions and the necessity of more years in school have made long-term, institutionalized romantic relationships far less common among young adults. Does this create a mismatch between developmental demands and social opportunity structures? Or is the idea of a psychosocial conflict between intimacy and isolation during people’s 20s an outdated notion? These and related questions 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 (e.g., advice for finding a job). 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 vs. 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 capture “pure” or archetypal generative behavior. Of note, research since Erikson’s time has itself expanded the generativity concept to encompass contributions made to society at large. Nevertheless, associations between advice and life meaning may have been more pronounced had we used measures specifically tailored to examine inter-generational advice exchange.

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 60-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. That is, it may be that people born during earlier times are more guarded about giving advice than people born more recently. This is an alternative way to interpret the associations we show in Figures 1-5, as age and birth cohort cannot be distinguished in our analysis.

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.
REFERENCES


TABLES

TABLE 1 from SAGE version of article here

TABLE 3 from SAGE version of article here

Figure 1. Predicted probability of giving advice to no one across models of Table 2

Note: All covariates held at their means.
Figure 2. Predicted probability of giving advice to family members across models of Table 2
Note: All covariates held at their means.

Figure 3. Predicted probability of giving advice to friends across models of Table 2
Note: All covariates held at their means.

Figure 4. Predicted probability of giving advice to neighbors across models of Table 2
Note: All covariates held at their means.
Figure 5. Predicted probability of giving advice to strangers across models of Table 2
Note: All covariates held at their means.

Figure 6. Predicted probability of reporting highest life meaning, Portraits of American Life Study.
Note: Values are predicted from Model 2 in Table 3, all covariates held at their mean.