

Consumption and Saving over the Life Cycle: How Important are Consumer Durables?*

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Abstract

Micro data show two key patterns of consumption and asset holdings over the life cycle. First, consumption expenditures on both durable and nondurable goods are hump-shaped. Second, young households keep very few liquid assets and hold most of their wealth in consumer durables. The first pattern persists even after controlling for family size and constitutes a puzzle from the perspective of complete market models, in which individuals smooth consumption over their lifetime. The second pattern suggests that we need to explicitly model durables to understand households' life cycle consumption and portfolio allocation. This paper studies the introduction of consumer durables into a dynamic general equilibrium life cycle model with idiosyncratic income shocks and endogenous borrowing constraints. In this setting durables play a dual role: they provide both consumption services and act as collateral for loans. A plausibly parameterized version of the model predicts that the interaction of consumer durables and endogenous borrowing constraints induces durables accumulation early in life and higher consumption of nondurables and accumulation of financial assets later in the life cycle, in an order of magnitude consistent with observed data. We thus conclude that durables are a key feature to explain both the hump in consumption of durables and nondurables and the optimal asset allocation of households.

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1 Introduction

Micro data show two key patterns of consumption and asset holdings over the life cycle. First, consumption expenditures on both durable and nondurable goods are hump-shaped: expenditures are low early in life, then rise considerably and fall again. The average household in the Survey of Consumer Expenditures spends 65% more when the head of the household is 50 than when she is 25 and around 80% more than when she is 65. Second, young households keep very few liquid assets and hold most of their wealth in consumer durables¹. Later in life, then, families accumulate significant amounts of financial assets for retirement. The importance of durables is also mirrored in the aggregate composition of wealth: households hold 35% of their total assets in real estate and other consumer durables and only 28% in equity².

As we will discuss below, the hump in consumption expenditures persists even after controlling for family size and constitutes a puzzle from the perspective of complete market models, in which individuals smooth consumption over their lifetime and across states of the world. Understanding this puzzle is not only interesting from a theoretical perspective, but also crucial for applied policy analysis. As individual behavior changes over the life cycle, so will the effects of social security reform, the public provision of saving incentives or the welfare consequences of progressive taxation vary by age groups. For an accurate quantitative assessment of policy reforms is thus essential to establish a coherent explanation for changes in consumption and savings behavior over the life cycle that gives rise to the hump in consumption.

The second pattern of households portfolio composition suggests that we need to explicitly model durables to understand households' consumption and portfolio allocation decisions, departing from the tradition in the life-cycle consumption literature which has largely ignored the presence of durables. This omission may be dangerous if the purchase of durables and the flow of services generated by them interacts with nondurable consumption in a nonseparable way. For example, recent explanations of the life cycle hump in nondurable consumption provided by Carroll (1997a) or Gourinchas and Parker (1999) rely crucially on agents consuming, up to the age of 40, all of their income, apart from some small buffer stock used to insure against future bad income shocks. We will argue that, in the presence of durables, households behave quite differently: they accumulate durables early in life and consume the rest of disposable income, without any saving in financial assets. In this period of their lives durables not only provide consumption service flows, but are also used as collateralizable insurance against income uncertainty.

We also depart from models of household portfolio choice that explicitly include the presence of durables such as housing. These models usually ignore the life cycle elements and cannot explain why we observe very little accumulation of

¹From now on we will use the term consumer durables or, more simply, durables to include houses and other consumer durable goods. See Section 2 for detailed data on these two empirical observations.

²See Flow of Funds Accounts, second quarter 1998.

liquid assets early in life in the data. Instead of interpreting this fact by saying that young households do not save, as one is forced to when considering a standard life-cycle model of consumption without durables, we will show that the household optimal behavior is to save in durables early in life and to shift to the accumulation of financial assets later in the life cycle.

In order to demonstrate our claims this paper constructs a dynamic general equilibrium life cycle model of consumption and saving with labor income uncertainty and borrowing constraints to formally evaluate whether we can explain the two empirical observations mentioned above in a unified framework. The key elements of our model are a) a highly persistent stochastic labor income process with a b) hump-shaped mean over the life cycle; c) the presence of durables that yield consumption services *and* can be used as collateral, in addition to a standard one-period bond whose short sales are subject to a borrowing constraint; d) endogenous determination of the interest rate in general equilibrium.

We now justify the key elements of our model. The first two elements are fairly standard in the literature on life cycle consumption and mainly motivated by the empirical observation that, even if households face substantial idiosyncratic labor income uncertainty (see Gottschalk and Moffitt (1994)), on average labor income follows a hump-shaped pattern over the life cycle with peak around the age of 50 (see Hansen (1993)). The third and fourth elements of the model are novel features to the literature we wish to contribute to. The presence of durables is motivated by the empirical observation that they constitute a large fraction of households asset holdings. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the life-cycle pattern of nondurable consumption may be intimately related to the life cycle pattern of the accumulation of durables, so that abstracting from them may severely bias any study of the life cycle profile of nondurable consumption and asset accumulation. Finally, we determine the interest rate of the economy endogenously in general equilibrium because the life cycle profile of consumption and asset accumulation depends crucially on the ratio between the subjective time discount factor and the interest rate. The discipline of general equilibrium determines this ratio endogenously in our model and therefore restricts our possibility to predetermine the results by appropriate choice of *both* the interest rate *and* the time discount factor³. In addition, since we want to extend our line of research to the study of the interactions between durables and the business cycle and to evaluations of the welfare effects of different fiscal policies, we view endogenous price and interest rate determination not only as attractive from a theoretical perspective, but also as quantitatively crucial for addressing these questions.

Our main findings are summarized as follows. In the empirical part of the paper we use data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey to show that consumption expenditure of *both* durables and nondurables follows a hump-shape

³A complementary approach, taken by Gourinchas and Parker (1999), fixes the interest rate and estimates the time discount factor from cross-section micro data using the Simulated Methods of Moments. In contrast to Gourinchas and Parker's partial equilibrium model, in our general equilibrium model all markets clear at each point of time.

pattern over the life cycle. We also use data from the Survey of Consumer Finances to document that young households virtually own no liquid financial assets, but hold a major fraction of their wealth portfolio as durables, while only later in life the composition of household portfolios shifts in favor of financial assets.

Our second contribution is to demonstrate that a plausibly parametrized version of our model can quantitatively explain these empirical findings as arising from rational choices of consumers facing an increasing wage profile and income uncertainty. The interaction between consumer durables that provide both consumption and collateral services, and endogenous borrowing constraints gives rise to accumulation of durables (and no accumulation of financial assets) early in life and substitution towards higher consumption of nondurables and the accumulation of financial assets later in life.

This work is related to several strands of the literature. On the empirical side it adds to the discussion about the life cycle profile of consumption observed in cross sectional micro data. Important references include Attanasio and Browning (1995), Attanasio and Weber (1995), Blundell *et al.* (1994) and Gourinchas and Parker (1999). The key question in the context of our paper is whether, once changes in family size are controlled for, consumption still follows a hump-shaped life cycle profile. The key empirical finding of our paper is the presence of a hump-shape profile not only for nondurable consumption, but also for expenditures on consumer durables.

On the theoretical side, the basic building block of our model is the classic income fluctuation problem in which a consumer faces a stochastic income process and decides how much to consume and how much to save. Contributors to this literature include Schechtman (1976), Schechtman and Escudero (1977), and, with stronger focus on macroeconomics, Deaton (1991), Carroll (1992 and 1997a) and Gourinchas and Parker (1999). Following Bewley (1986) the income fluctuation problem has been embedded by Huggett (1993) and Aiyagari (1994) into general equilibrium, giving rise to the endogenous determination of the interest rate as well as a nontrivial income, wealth and consumption distribution in equilibrium. Our paper incorporates consumer durables and endogenous borrowing constraints into Aiyagari's framework; the specification of the borrowing constraint is adapted from the recent endogenous incomplete markets literature (see Alvarez and Jermann (2000) Kehoe and Levine (1993), Kocherlakota (1993), and Krueger and Perri (1999)). Lustig (2000) also presents a model with a durable asset and endogenous borrowing constraints to explain the equity premium puzzle; in his model, however, agents have access to a full set of Arrow securities and are infinitely lived. Our model shares some of his elements, but our focus is on the life-cycle consumption and asset allocation whereas Lustig studies the pricing implications of endogenous borrowing constraints.

Although our focus is on the life cycle pattern of consumption of durables and nondurables, our model also has implications for the optimal portfolio allocation between financial assets and durables at each point of the life cycle. Therefore the paper makes contact to the literature on optimal portfolio choice in the presence of consumer durables, as Chah *et al.* (1995), Eberly (1994), Flavin

and Yamashita (2000) and Grossman and Laroque (1990). Finally, the paper also relates to the literature of Real Business Cycles with a household production sector (see Greenwood *et al.* (1995) for a review). We share their focus on an explicit treatment of the household sector in dynamic general equilibrium and its dynamical behavior; we do not, however, model aggregate uncertainty (see our companion paper, Fernández-Villaverde and Krueger (2000)).

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present empirical results from the Consumer Expenditure Survey documenting a hump-shape in both nondurable and durable consumption expenditures even after controlling for household size. We also discuss the evidence on the life cycle pattern of wealth composition derived from the Survey of Consumer Finances. In Section 3 we present our model and define equilibrium. Section 4 is devoted to a discussion of the model calibration and Section 5 presents the quantitative results obtained from the benchmark calibration of the model. Section 6 performs sensitivity analysis and Section 7 concludes. Technical discussions about our empirical methods, the data used, the computational algorithm and all figures are contained in the appendix.

2 Empirical Findings

This section presents our empirical findings on consumption and wealth accumulation over the life cycle. We first study the life cycle profile of consumption using data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey. We deal explicitly with the problem of household size and discuss how this problem affects the reading of the data. We also argue that standard theory cannot account for the observed consumption profiles, neither of nondurable consumption nor of durables. In the second part of this section we look at the life cycle profiles of wealth derived from the Survey of Consumer Finances. We point out that the structure of household portfolios changes with age, and that housing and durables are of foremost importance in most of households' portfolios. A more extensive discussion of most of the points of this section can be found in Fernández-Villaverde and Krueger (2001).

2.1 Life Cycle Profiles of Consumption

A basic prediction of the life cycle-complete markets model is that the life cycle consumption profile should be smooth: if utility is equally desirable over time up to some discount factor, households would like to equate marginal utility across time and states of the world, possibly with some growth rate, depending on the interest rate and the discount factor. Under CRRA period utility consumption growth itself should be constant across time. With complete markets, consumption smoothing can be achieved through the transfer of contingent claims across periods and states⁴. The first basic question, motivated by standard economic

⁴This statement relies on the further assumption that leisure and consumption are separable in the period utility function. For instance Ghez and Becker (1973) propose a model where

theory is therefore whether we observe these smooth consumption profiles over the life cycle in cross-section micro data.

During the eighties some agreement arose that the answer to this question was negative: complete markets, life-cycle models apparently could not explain observed consumption life cycle profiles (see Deaton (1992) for an overview). The main piece of empirical evidence cited was that consumption tracks income over the life cycle: anticipated changes in income are followed by changes in consumption only when income actually moves and not already when the new information about income arrives, as theory predicts. This evidence suggests the existence of limitations in the opportunities to intertemporal trade due to phenomena such as liquidity constraints. Also, since labor income follows a hump over the life cycle, these limited opportunities to trade imply that consumption follows a hump over the life cycle as the data seem to indicate.

Recently this view has been disputed by Blundell *et al.* (1994), Attanasio and Browning (1995) and especially Attanasio *et al.* (1999). These authors argue that, once the life cycle model is extended to allow for demographic changes, it is possible to generate humps in life cycle consumption and the tracking of income by consumption without the need to introduce credit market frictions.

We will challenge this view and argue that consumption follows a hump even after controlling for demographics. For that we will use 1980-1997 data⁵ from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CEX).

2.1.1 The CEX Data

During the last few years, the CEX has become one of the main sources for empirical work on consumption. The CEX, carried out by the Bureau of the Census under contract with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is a rotating panel. Each household⁶ is interviewed every 3 months over five calendar quarters and every quarter 25% of the sample is replaced by new households. In the initial interview information is collected on demographic characteristics and on the inventory of major durable goods of the consumer unit. Expenditure information is also collected in this interview and used to prevent duplicate reporting in subsequent interviews. Further expenditure information is gathered in the

consumption services are produced with time and consumption goods as inputs. When time becomes more expensive (i.e. labor income is higher), agents substitute time with goods in the production function of consumer services, generating a correlation between labor income and consumption.

⁵ Our sample is only limited by data availability. Prior to 1980, the Consumer Expenditure Survey was conducted about every 10 years and not on a regular basis. Data for years after 1997 are not yet released.

⁶ The CEX definition of a household is a consumer unit that consists of any of the following: (1) all members of a particular household who are related by blood, marriage, adoption, or other legal arrangements; (2) a person living alone or sharing a household with others or living as a roomer in a private home or lodging house or in permanent living quarters in a hotel or motel, but who is financially independent; or (3) two or more persons living together who use their incomes to make joint expenditure decisions. Financial independence is determined by the three major expense categories: Housing, food, and other living expenses. To be considered financially independent, at least two of the three major expenditure categories have to be provided entirely or in part by the respondent.

second through the fifth interviews using uniform questionnaires. Income and employment information is collected in the second and fifth interviews. Finally, in the last interview, a supplement is used to account for changes in assets and liabilities.

Unfortunately the CEX does not report a measure of consumption services, the object of interest based on economic theory, but only expenditures on consumption goods. This distinction is not very relevant for the case of nondurable goods where the flow of services can be easily assumed to be equal to expenditure, but is crucial when dealing with consumer durables. As an alternative to the analysis of expenditures we could impute service flows from the stocks of durables. However, this imputation requires the estimation of this stock and the CEX only provides partial information for that purpose. The survey asks for an estimate of the present rental value of the owned residence and the original cost of vehicles but it only takes inventory of the major household appliances owned by the household in the first interview, without valuing them⁷. These difficulties lead us to focus our analysis on expenditure data. One exception is housing, where, as we will discuss below, we have information about the rental value of the owned residence, arguably a good proxy both for the flow of housing consumption services as well as for the value of the stock of residential durable goods.

The short panel dimension of the CEX (only five observations per household) makes the use of direct panel techniques nearly infeasible. To this problem there are at least two possible answers. One is to pool all the data and treat it as one cross-section. A second alternative is to exploit the repeated nature of the survey and build a pseudo-panel. We explore both alternatives.

2.1.2 A Pool of CEX Data

The first answer is to rely exclusively on the cross-sectional nature of the survey, possibly accounting for time and cohort effects. A simple and flexible way to estimate the consumption life cycle profiles is then to use a nonparametric regression of consumption on age of the form:

$$c_{it} = m(\text{age}_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where c_{it} is the consumption expenditure of the household i at time t , age_{it} is the age of the household i at time t , $m(\text{age}_{it}) = E(c_{it} | \text{age}_{it})$ is a smooth curve and ε_{it} is an independent, zero mean, random error. This conditional expectation can be estimated with a Nadaraya-Watson estimator of the form:

$$\widehat{m}_h(\text{age}_{it}) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n K_h(\text{age} - \text{age}_{it}) c_{it}}{\sum_{i=1}^n K_h(\text{age} - \text{age}_{it})} \quad (2)$$

⁷Also note that, since we do not observe the initial stock of durables of the household and the sample length is small, we cannot use the *perpetual inventory method* to build estimates of the stocks of consumer durables.

where $K_h(u) = K\left(\frac{u}{h}\right)/h$, $K(u) = 0.75(1-u^2)I(|u| \leq 1)$ is an Epanechnikov kernel and h is the bandwidth parameter. In order to associate a household with a particular age we use the age of the reference person as declared in each interview⁸.

We choose an Epanechnikov kernel based on three considerations. First, because of its approximate absence of bias in small samples. Second, because it minimizes the Mean Square Error of the regression. Third, because its bounded support avoids the underflow problems associated with Gaussian kernels. Härdle (1990) provides details about these points.

Two points are worth to point out about (1). First, in our specification the most likely source of error (mismeasurement of consumption) only increases the variance of the estimation residual, provided that the error has a zero mean⁹, but not the point estimate. Our strong prior is that measurement error in age is much less of a concern.

Second, our estimation model does not include the cohort index or the quarter as a variable. Since in general it is not possible to separately identify time, age and cohort effects, we could have at least included either cohort or a quarter dummy variable in a Generalized Partial Linear Model of the form (see Härdle, Liang and Gao (2000)):

$$c_{it} = X'\beta + m(\text{age}_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

where X is the matrix of dummy variables and β a vector of coefficients.

We tested different specifications of the dummy variables and found that their inclusion does not change the existence of a hump in the life cycle profile of consumption¹⁰. This is important since in an economy with income growth, as the U.S. economy, the omission of a variable for cohort or a time index will tend to increase the estimated profile at the beginning of the life (where cohorts with higher permanent incomes are observed) and decrease at the end (where the cohorts with lower permanent income appear in the sample). Since we want to focus on the fact that consumption expenditure is increasing at the beginning of life, not accounting for the presence of income growth in (1) biases the results against us. A similar argument can be applied to the bias induced by the higher ability of younger households to intertemporally trade implied by the development of more sophisticated financial markets in the last years (Krueger and Perri (2001)).

⁸The reference person of the consumer unit is the first member mentioned by the respondent when asked to “Start with the name of the person or one of the persons who owns or rents the home”. It is with respect to this person that the relationship of the other consumer unit members is determined.

⁹This requires that sampling selection problems such as attrition or nonresponse rates do not introduce a bias. We are not aware of any study evaluating these problems for the CEX.

¹⁰In these alternative specifications we also controlled for demographics as discussed below.

2.1.3 Controlling for Family Size

There is, however, a basic problem in applying directly (1) to data: not only consumption, but also household size follows a hump over the life cycle. Households of different sizes face different marginal utilities from the same amount of consumption expenditures, and economic theory only predicts that marginal utilities should be equal across time (up to some constant depending on the discount factor and the interest rate), not the expenditure level per se. Since both humps follow a similar time pattern, the change in household size may well explain the hump in consumption.

This is precisely the argument put forward in two influential papers by Attanasio and Weber (1995) and Attanasio *et al.* (1999). They propose a flexible specification of preferences that allows to control for demographic factors through the use of additional regressors. The usual linear approximation of the Euler condition

$$\Delta \log(\widehat{c_{t+1}}) = \text{constant} + \sigma \log(1 + r_{t+1}) + \epsilon_{t+1}$$

is modified by the inclusion of additional demographic variables z_t (or instruments for them) in their first differences as:

$$\Delta \log(\widehat{c_{t+1}}) = \text{constant} + \sigma \log(1 + r_{t+1}) + \theta \Delta \widehat{z_{t+1}} + \epsilon_{t+1} \quad (4)$$

The estimation of the Euler condition generates estimates of discount factors, corrected for demographic changes. With these discount factors and assuming complete absence of insurance markets, Attanasio *et al.* (1999) simulate a life cycle model and show that consumption is hump-shaped over the life cycle, implying that standard economic theory is able to account for the observed profiles.

There may be several problems with this approach. First, a rich specification of the demographic variables to capture shifts in the utility function may result in overparametrization and loss of efficiency. For instance, Attanasio and Weber (1995) include as regressors both the size of the family and the number of children to account for compositional factors of the family. These two variables are highly correlated. Using our CEX data we find a correlation in levels of 0.82 and of 0.59 in first differences. The resulting reduction in the precision of the parameter estimates may explain why the authors cannot reject the null hypothesis of correct model specification. Second, demographic variables may be proxies for liquidity constraints and, given the model proposed in this paper, we cannot identify each effect separately¹¹. This lack of identification relates closely to a third problem: fertility choices are endogenous. If households have limited access to intertemporal trade, they will modify all their economic decisions, including fertility choices. If labor income is hump-shaped, limited access to intertemporal trade will generate a hump in consumption expenditure and

¹¹In the presence of liquidity constraints, the log-linearization of the Euler condition may have problems on its own. See Attanasio and Low (2000), Carroll (1997b) and Ludvigson and Paxson (1999).

delayed fertility, compared to the situation with no liquidity constraints. If the Euler equation is not estimated simultaneously with a condition for fertility, (4) will try to spuriously pick up the hump in consumption through the estimates for the demographic parameters.

A simple answer to this problem, not free of the problems we will discuss below, is to divide the sample between families of different sizes and estimate a nonparametric regression for each of them separately (an alternative interpretation is to think about this exercise as a bivariate kernel where the bandwidth for the dimension of family size is less than one).

The results of our estimation with CEX data are presented in Figures 2.1-2.3. In Figure 2.1 we plot total consumption expenditure over the life cycle. Consumption follows a clear hump, rising until the late forties and fifties (depending on the family size) and decreasing afterwards. The total increment of consumption expenditure ranges between 80% and 100%. Similar humps in size and timing appear if we plot nondurables consumption expenditure (Figure 2.2) and durables consumption expenditure (Figure 2.3) against age¹².

We try to quantify the precision of our estimates through the bootstrap. Even though, under suitable technical conditions, the kernel estimator is consistent and asymptotically normal, small sample behavior tend to be better reflected by the bootstrap than by asymptotic approximations¹³. We implement a case-based strategy with replacement subsampling to account for the heterokedasticity of the errors with an undersmoothing¹⁴ factor of 0.8 (see Horowitz (2001)). Given space constraints we only provide a sample of the results. Figure 2.4a) plots the 95% confidence interval for the kernel for households of size 1. Clearly the size of the interval indicates we have a tight kernel estimate. Figure 2.4b) plots the widest confidence interval computed from all the bootstrap replications, i.e. the worst possible case. The most interesting figure is however 2.4c) which shows a 95% confidence band as described by Härdle (1990). The importance of this result is that we know that the band covers the whole curve. Since any curve that can be plotted inside the band implies an important hump, this result reinforces strongly our confidence in the point estimates. Finally in Figure 2.4d) we plotted all the 500 simulated profiles so that the reader can assess how the sampling uncertainty affects the results. Other kernels generate similar results except for large families (7-8) sizes where the small number of observations at the beginning and at the end of the life cycle introduce non-trivial sample uncertainty.

¹²For all these regression we use as bandwidth $h = 10$. We checked that the pattern is robust to the choice of a wide range of values for h .

¹³Kernel estimates converge more slowly than $n^{-\frac{1}{2}}$ and their distributions have unconventional asymptotic expressions that are not powers of $n^{-\frac{1}{2}}$.

¹⁴See Horowitz for a theoretical explanation. Undersmoothing is achieved with a choice of $h' = e \cdot h$, where $e < 1$ such that $nh'^{r+1} \rightarrow 0$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$. As shown in Hall (1992), using the Edgeworth expansion of a properly defined pivotal statistics, the bootstrap estimator of the confidence interval will be accurate through $O((nh')^{-1})$. Again this asymptotic result does not provide a clear indication for what is the appropriate e in small samples. We tried several values of e without finding large differences.

Certainly the division of the sample by family size is not free of problems. Households size is endogenous, and not accounting explicitly for it induces a bias in the results. Trying to account for this bias is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is our prior that such bias is unlikely to turn around the main results about the hump in life cycle profiles of consumption because of the mere size of the hump (for households of size one over a 100%) and the probable sign of the bias (for instance, households of size one that can consume more as they grow older will probably have a higher probability of increasing their family size).

An alternative to dividing the sample by family size is to exploit the information implicit in the expenditures breakdown: if we observe the variations in particular items of consumption, we can impute them either to changes in household size or to changes in the life cycle profile. This accounting exercise is undertaken by household equivalence scales that measure the variation in consumption needed to keep the welfare of a family constant when its size changes. With the information provided by the scale, we can transform consumption data from households of different sizes into a single base and repeat our estimation. This exercise is undertaken in detail in Fernández-Villaverde and Krueger (2001), who review the literature on household equivalence scales, apply them to the CEX sample and show that this approach produces a very similar result: consumption expenditure follows a clear hump over the life cycle.

2.1.4 Is Housing Driving the Results?

A concern about our results for durables goods is to what extent housing is driving the results. To partially answer that concern, Figure 2.5 plots the results for durable goods *without* housing. Again we can see the clear presence of a hump over the life cycle. To further illustrate this point Figure 2.6 plots expenditure on owned residential housing (that again follow a hump) and Figure 2.7 plots the expenditures in rented housing. From this last figure we can see how renting payments decrease over the life cycle except for households of size one. For that group (where renting is much more prevalent than in other family sizes) the expenditures for rent go up until the early thirties for more than a 50%, again suggesting the inability to perfectly smooth durable services during the earlier years of life.

And, as we mentioned before briefly, housing gives us the only reasonable proxy for the value of the stock of some part of household durables available in the CEX, as the CEX contains information about the equivalent monthly rental value of the owned residential house. We plot that as our Figure 2.8. This value increases steadily from the beginning of the life cycle until the forties when it stabilizes. This pattern is consistent with a hypothetical world where households face constraints that prevent them from obtaining their desired stock of durables as soon as they would desire: they progressively build the stock until they reach the target level, which is kept until the end of their life cycle.

2.1.5 A Pseudopanel Approach

The second answer to the lack of a true panel component of the CEX data is to build a pseudopanel. The new entry households, a randomly chosen large sample of the US population, carry information about the means of the groups they belong to. For example, the sample consumption mean of households born in 1972 and observed in 1997 should be close to the population consumption mean of the same cohort in 1997. This information can be exploited by interpreting the observed group means as a panel for estimation purposes. This method, pioneered by Browning, Deaton and Irish (1985) and developed by Deaton (1985) and Heckman and Roob (1985), is known as a pseudo-panel or synthetic cohort technique.

Beyond increasing the panel dimension of the data, a pseudo-panel presents several advantages over pure panels. First, it eliminates the attrition problem and the sample selection bias associated with it. Second, the long temporal dimension of the pseudo-panel approximately averages out expectational errors. Third, with pseudo-panels we are not required to control for individual effects. Fourth, pseudo-panels smooth out within-cohort heterogeneity by simply aggregating over agents as dictated by theory, e.g. by using the mean of logs and not the log of the mean when estimating Euler equations, as one is forced to do when using aggregate time series data¹⁵.

In Fernández-Villaverde and Krueger (2001) we show the results of building a pseudo-panel from CEX data and using it to estimate life cycle profiles of consumption corrected by demographics. The results of our estimation fully confirm our results with a CEX pool: consumption expenditure follows a hump over the life cycle, with a peak around late forties and an a total size increment around 45% when corrected by changing family sizes. This result is also robust to different expenditure breakdowns and to the exclusion of housing.

2.1.6 Conclusion

The lesson to draw from this subsection is simple: the complete market-life cycle model cannot account for the hump-shape of nondurable consumption expenditure over the life cycle even after controlling for demographics. This failure is even bigger for expenditures on durables. In the standard complete markets life cycle model an optimizing agent will build up his stock of durables immediately and then just cover depreciation from that point onward. This is not what we observe in the data: households' expenditures on durables keep increasing until quite late in their lives¹⁶.

¹⁵ Also this aggregation does not hide common cohort effects, which are more easily controllable in the longer sample created by the pseudo-panel.

¹⁶ There is some related evidence in the literature that households cannot perfectly smooth their consumption of durables services. Among others, Attanasio *et al.* (2000) and Eberly (1994) provide evidence of credit constraints for car purchases, while Barrow and McGranahan (2000) document a spike in durables purchases by low income households at the time Earned Income Credit checks are received.

2.2 Life Cycle Profiles of Wealth

How do the findings in the previous subsection relate to observed patterns of wealth accumulation and portfolio composition over the life cycle? One of the most authoritative sources on households' asset holdings is the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), a triennial survey of U.S. households undertaken by the Federal Reserve System. The SCF interviews a representative cross section of over 4000 households, and collects data about their demographics characteristics, assets and debts. Since the short number of repeated surveys (six, of which only four are directly comparable) precludes the building of a pseudo-panel, we will focus on the cross-sectional aspect of the data. We will use the 1995 survey information to document several important aspects of the life cycle profile of households assets.

The pattern of life cycle wealth is shown in Figure 2.9. We plot the households mean and median net worth along the life cycle¹⁷. Two main points arise from this figure. First, as for consumption expenditures, wealth also follows a hump-shaped pattern over the life cycle. Households accumulate wealth from the beginning of their lives until retirement, the moment at which they begin to run down their wealth. It is noticeable, however, that wealth stays relatively high even after the age of 80. Second, wealth is highly unequally distributed, as can be seen from the large ratio between household mean and median net worth; this ratio attains its maximum over the life cycle at around 400 per cent just before retirement.

Additional interesting information is contained in data on the composition of household wealth. Figure 2.10¹⁸ shows the importance of durables in most households' portfolios. We order households along the dimension of total wealth and plot the percentage of their portfolio held in real estate (which consists of the primary residence for most households) and the percentage invested in corporate equity. For 60 per cent of all families, those between the thirtieth and ninetieth percentile, real estate represents most of their total assets while vehicles and other durables are an important part of the remaining portfolio. Below the thirtieth percentile, households have none or low wealth, most of it in vehicles and other durables. For example, note that 65.4 per cent of the households in the lowest quartile of the net worth distribution own vehicles with median value of \$4800 while only 7.9 per cent of this group have financial assets beyond a transaction account. If we include the transaction accounts as financial assets, 78 per cent of these last quartile households have some financial assets, but with a median value of only \$1100. These facts leave the highest 10 per cent of the wealth distribution as the only households for which financial assets are a fundamentally important part of their portfolio. A theory of life cycle consumption and saving should account for the low levels of financial wealth of

¹⁷The age used is the age of the "head" of the family as defined by the SCF: the male in a mixed-sex couple, the older person in a same-sex couple or the main individual earner otherwise.

¹⁸The data on asset composition by wealth percentiles was kindly supplied to us by Joseph Tracy. See Tracy *et al.* (1999) for the study in which these data were first used.

most households.

Even more important, given our focus on life cycle consumption, is the portfolio composition of assets along the life cycle. Figure 2.11 shows that the primary residence is a basic component of the median assets of households over their lives. Before households reach the age of 40, the median value of a homeowners' primary residence exceeds the median value of total assets for households holding some assets. After the age of 40, the median primary residence value stays always above 50 percent of the median of total assets. The same picture arises in a percentile decomposition of homeowners' portfolios. Up to the age of 45, the portion of homeowners' assets in real estate is around two thirds. After that time and until retirement it decreases, but never falls below 57 per cent¹⁹. Again, theory needs to explain why housing and other durable goods have such a primary role in the life cycle accumulation of wealth for the median wealth household.

To summarize the empirical part of this paper: expenditures on nondurable and durable consumption goods follow a hump over the life cycle and the stock of durables seem to accumulate only progressively. At the same time young household hold most of their wealth in consumer durables, with financial assets gaining importance in later periods of a households life. We now present a model to jointly reproduce these stylized facts of life cycle consumption and portfolio decisions.

3 The Environment

In this section we present a dynamic general equilibrium model of life cycle consumption. We use a standard dynamic general equilibrium, life cycle model with income uncertainty, with two novel features: first we will introduce service flows of consumer durables into the utility function and second, we will restrict intertemporal trade by endogenous borrowing constraints, as explained below in detail.

3.1 Demographics

There is a continuum of individuals of measure 1 at each point of time in our economy. Each individual lives at most J periods. In each period $j \leq J$ of his life the conditional probability of surviving and living in period $j + 1$ is denoted by $\alpha_j \in (0, 1)$. Define $\alpha_0 = 1$ and $\alpha_J = 0$. The probability of survival, assumed to be equal across individuals of the same cohort, is beyond the control of the individual and independent of other characteristics of the individual (such as income or wealth). We assume that α_j is not only the

¹⁹It can be argued that concentrating on homeowners' portfolios does introduce a selection bias in favor of primary residences. However, since most non-homeowners households hold very little wealth, including these non-homeowners in Figure 2.10 will reduce the level of the curves, but not necessarily the relation between them. We do not include non-homeowners to avoid the jump in primary residence value associated with the median households acquiring its first home.

probability for a particular individual of survival, but also the (deterministic) fraction of agents²⁰ that, having survived until age j , will survive to age $j + 1$. Annuity markets are assumed to absent and accidental bequests are assumed to be uniformly distributed among all agents currently alive. In each period a number $\mu_1 = \left(1 + \sum_{j=1}^{J-1} \prod_{i=1}^j \alpha_i\right)^{-1}$ of newborns enter the economy, and the fraction of people in the economy of age j is defined recursively as $\mu_{j+1} = \alpha_j \mu_j$, with $\mu_{J+1} = \alpha_J = 0$. Let $\mathcal{J} = \{0, 1, \dots, J\}$ denote the set of possible ages of an individual.

3.2 Technology

There is one good produced according to the aggregate production function $F(K_t, L_t)$ where K_t is the aggregate capital stock and L_t is the aggregate labor input. We assume that F is strictly increasing in both inputs, strictly concave, has decreasing marginal products which obey the Inada conditions and is homogeneous of degree one. As usual with constant returns to scale production technologies, in equilibrium the number of firms is indeterminate and without loss of generality we assume that there is a single representative firm.

The final good can be either consumed or invested into physical capital or consumer durables. Let by K_t^d denote the aggregate stock of consumer durables in period t . The aggregate resource constraint then reads as:

$$C_t + K_{t+1} - (1 - \delta)K_t + K_{t+1}^d - (1 - \delta^d)K_t^d = F(K_t, L_t) \quad (5)$$

where C_t are aggregate consumption expenditures and δ and δ^d are the depreciation rates on physical capital and consumer durables, respectively.

3.3 Preferences and Endowments

Individuals are endowed with one unit of time in each period that they supply inelastically in the labor market. Individuals differ in their labor productivity due to differences in age and realizations of idiosyncratic uncertainty. The labor productivity of an individual of age j is given by $\varepsilon_j \eta$, where $\{\varepsilon_j\}_{j=1}^J$ denotes the age profile of average labor productivity. The stochastic component of labor productivity, η , follows a finite state Markov chain with state space $\eta \in E = \{\eta_1, \dots, \eta_N\}$ and transition probabilities given by the matrix $\pi(\eta'|\eta)$. Let Π denote the unique invariant measure associated with π . The initial realization of the stochastic part of labor productivity is assumed to be drawn from Π for all agents.

We assume that all agents, independent of age and other characteristics face the same Markov transition probabilities and that the fraction of the population experiencing a transition from η to η' is also given by π . This law of large numbers and the model demographic structure assure that the aggregate labor

²⁰In other words, we assume a law of large numbers to hold in our economy. See Feldman and Gilles (1985) for a justification; note that we do not require realizations of the underlying stochastic process to be independent across agents.

input is constant. As with lifetime uncertainty we assume that individuals cannot insure against idiosyncratic labor productivity by trading contingent claims. Moral hazard problems may be invoked to justify the absence of these markets.

In addition to her time endowment an individual also possesses an initial endowment of the durable consumption good, $k_1^d \geq 0$ and an initial position of capital, $k_1 \geq 0$. In most of our applications we will assume that $k_1 = k_1^d = 0$.

Individuals derive utility from consumption of the nondurable good, c , and from the services of the stock k^d of durable good. Individuals value streams of consumption and durables $\{c_j, k_j^d\}_{j=1}^J$ according to

$$E_0 \left\{ \sum_{j=1}^J \beta^{j-1} u(c_j, k_j^d) \right\} \quad (6)$$

where β is the time discount factor and E_0 is the expectation operator, conditional on information available at time 0. The period utility function u is assumed to be strictly increasing in both arguments, strictly concave, with diminishing marginal utility from both arguments and obeying the Inada conditions with respect to nondurable consumption. The instantaneous utility from being dead is normalized to zero and expectations are taken with respect to the stochastic processes governing survival and labor productivity.

3.4 Timing and Information

The timing of events in a given period is as follows. Households observe their idiosyncratic shock η and receive transfers from accidental bequests. Then labor and capital is supplied to firms and production takes place. Next households receive factor payments and make their consumption and asset allocation decision. Finally uncertainty about early death is revealed. Durables are not transferred until the end of the period. In that way, even if the household sells its stock of durables and use the payment to finance present consumption of nondurables, it will hold the durables (and receive utility from the service flow) until the end of the period. Analogously, the addition or subtraction to the stock will not influence the present period service flow. All information is publicly held and the idiosyncratic labor productivity status (as well as survival status) becomes common knowledge upon realization.

3.5 Equilibrium

We will limit our attention to stationary equilibria in which prices, wages and interest rates are constant across time. Individuals are assumed to be price takers in the goods and factor markets they participate in. In each moment of time individuals are characterized by their position of capital and holdings of consumer durables, as well as their age and labor productivity status (k, k^d, η, j) .

Let by $\Phi(k, k^d, \eta, j)$ denote the measure of agents of type (k, k^d, η, j) , constant in a stationary equilibrium.

We normalize the price of the final good to 1 and let by r and w denote the interest rate and wage rate for one efficiency unit of labor, respectively. Also let by Tr denote transfers from accidental bequests. The consumer problem can now be formulated recursively as

$$\begin{aligned} V(k, k^d, \eta, j) &= \max_{c, k' k^{d'}} u(c, k^d) + \beta \alpha_j \sum_{\eta'} \pi(\eta' | \eta) V(k', k^{d'}, \eta', j+1) \quad (7) \\ &\text{s.t.} \\ c + k' + k^{d'} &= w\eta\varepsilon_j + (1+r)k + (1-\delta^d)k^d + Tr \\ k' &\geq \bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j) \\ c &\geq 0, k^{d'} \geq 0 \end{aligned}$$

Several specifications of the constraints \bar{b} that limit short-sales of capital will be discussed below. Note that these constraints are allowed to vary by age and current labor productivity status²¹ to reflect differences in future earning potentials among agents, and are allowed to vary by durable holdings next period to allow for collateralized borrowing.

We are now ready to define a stationary equilibrium. Let \mathcal{J} and \mathcal{E} be the power sets of J and E , respectively and \mathcal{B} be the Borel sets of \mathbf{R} . Let $S = \mathbf{R} \times \mathbf{R} \times \mathbf{E} \times \mathbf{J}$ and $\mathcal{S} = \mathcal{B} \times \mathcal{B} \times \mathcal{E} \times \mathcal{J}$ and M be the set of finite measures over the measurable space (S, \mathcal{S}) .

Definition 1 A stationary equilibrium is a value function V , policy functions for the household, $(c, k', k^{d'})$, labor and capital demand for the representative firm, (K, L) , prices (w, r) , transfers Tr , and a finite measure $\Phi \in M$ such that

1. Given (w, r) and Tr , V solves the functional equation (7) and $(c, k', k^{d'})$ are the associated policy functions
2. Input prices satisfy

$$\begin{aligned} r &= F_K(K, L) - \delta \\ w &= F_L(K, L) \end{aligned}$$

3. Markets clear:

$$\int c(k, k^d, \eta, j) d\Phi + \delta \int k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) d\Phi + \delta^d \int k^{d'}(k, k^d, \eta, j) d\Phi = F(K, L) \quad (\text{Goods Market})$$

$$\int k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) d\Phi = K \quad (\text{Capital Market})$$

²¹As markets for contingent claims are assumed to be inoperative the borrowing constraints cannot depend on the realization of the productivity shock next period.

$$\int \eta \varepsilon_j d\Phi = L \text{ (Labor Market)}$$

4. Transfers are given by

$$Tr = \int [k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) - k] d\Phi + \int [k^{d'}(k, k^d, \eta, j) - k^d] d\Phi$$

5. The measure follows:

$$\Phi = T(\Phi)$$

where T is the law of motion generated by π and the policies k' and $k^{d'}$ as described below.

This definition is standard, possibly apart from the definition of transfers. The distribution of over agents at the beginning of the period, Φ does not include the individuals that died at the end of last period. Hence total accidental bequests of capital from deceased households at the end of last period equal

$$\int [k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) - k] d\Phi \tag{8}$$

where we also used the fact that the total number of agents in the economy is normalized to 1. A similar argument holds for bequests of consumer durables.

We now describe what we mean by the law of motion T being generated by π and the policies k' and $k^{d'}$. The operator T maps M into M in the following way. Define the transition function $Q : (S, \mathcal{S}) \rightarrow [0, 1]$ by:

Definition 2 For all $S' = R' \times Z' \times E' \times J' \in \mathcal{B} \times \mathcal{B} \times \mathcal{E} \times \mathcal{J}$ and all $s = (k, k^d, \eta, j) \in S$

$$Q(s, S') = \sum_{\eta' \in E'} \begin{cases} \alpha_j \pi(\eta' | \eta) & \text{if } j+1 \in J', k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) \in R', k^{d'}(k, k^d, \eta, j) \in Z' \\ 0 & \text{else} \end{cases}$$

Then for all $J' \in \mathcal{J}$ such that $0 \notin J'$ we have

$$T(\Phi)(S') = \int Q(s, S') d\Phi$$

For $J' = 0$ we have

$$T(\Phi)(R' \times Z' \times E' \times \{0\}) = \sum_{\eta' \in E'} \begin{cases} \Pi(\eta') \mu_1 & \text{if } 0 \in R', 0 \in Z' \\ 0 & \text{else} \end{cases}$$

Note that this definition implicitly assumes that individuals are born with zero assets (capital and consumer durables).

To complete the description of the model, our specifications of the borrowing constraints are as follows. In our benchmark economy we specify the borrowing constraints $\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j)$ to be the smallest number to satisfy

$$V(\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j), k^{d'}, \eta', j+1) \geq V(0, 0, \eta', j+1) \text{ for all } \eta' \in E$$

i.e. households can borrow up to the point at which, for all possible realizations of the stochastic labor productivity shock tomorrow, they have an incentive to repay their debt rather than to default, with the default consequence being specified as losing their debt, but also their consumer durables. Thus consumer durables play an important role not only in generating consumption services, but also as collateralizable assets against which agents can borrow.

We will also report results for economies in which borrowing constraints are specified as

$$\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j) = 0$$

and as

$$\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j) = -\kappa k^{d'}$$

The first specification prevents borrowing altogether. Although we do not view this specification as reasonable in an economy with collateralizable assets, since a large fraction of previous work on life-cycle consumption (in the absence of durables) has explicitly or implicitly (via judicious choice of the income process) used this specification we want to present similar results for comparison. The second specification allows households to borrow up to a percentage $1-\kappa$ against their stock of consumer durables.

We finish this section by discussing an important element of our model: the absence of a durable goods rental market. Suppose households, in addition to buying durable goods, can also rent them from competitive providers of durable services for a rental rate of p_r . Consistent with the timing of the model, suppose a unit of durables rented today yields consumption services tomorrow. Then the rental price has to satisfy $p_r = r + \delta^d$, and the net cost of renting one unit of services for tomorrow is $r + \delta^d$ whereas the net cost of obtaining one unit of durables services via buying is $1 - \frac{1-\delta^d}{1+r} = \frac{r+\delta^d}{1+r} < r + \delta^d$ as long as the interest rate is positive.²² In addition, purchased consumer durables relax the borrowing constraint and thus make buying instead of renting even more attractive. Therefore our modeling choices (households can buy and sell durables without adjustment cost) would imply that the option to rent the durable is strictly dominated by purchasing it, using it and selling it afterwards. are equivalent. However, distortions arise because of our market structure.

²²Note that if the providers of the durable rental could rent the durable in the same period in which it is acquired by them, then the rental price would satisfy $p_r = \frac{r+\delta^d}{1+r}$ and both the rent and buy option have the same cost associated with it. Still, since consumer durables have collateral value (they relax the borrowing constraint) for agents that face binding borrowing constraints, at least for these agents buying strictly dominates the renting option.

Obviously the introduction of transactions and agency costs associated with purchases of consumer durables (but also for repeatedly renting them) changes the argument; in our model with cross-sectional heterogeneity both positive rentals and purchases of durables would potentially occur in equilibrium.²³ Are these effects important? Our answer is that, even if they may be of some importance, the insights of including an explicit rental market may not compensate for the additional computational burden involved. Note also that the existence of collateralized loans reduce the theoretical role of rental markets. Households, by judicious choice of when and how much to borrow will be able to reproduce nearly the same intertemporal allocation of consumption in our model as compared to a model with an explicit rental market.

4 Calibration

We choose the benchmark parametrization of our economy partly on the basis of microeconomic evidence and partly so that the stationary equilibrium for our economy matches selected long-run averages of US data.

4.1 Demographics

We define a year as our unit of time. Then, with respect to demographics, we will have $J = 81$ generations. Therefore we can interpret our model as one in which households become economically active at age 20, and live up to age 100. The conditional survival probabilities $\{\alpha_j\}_{j=1}^J$ are taken from Faber (1982)²⁴. We plot these survival probabilities in Figure 4.1.

4.2 Technology

We select a Cobb-Douglas production function $F(K_t, L_t) = AK_t^\alpha L_t^{1-\alpha}$ as a representation of the technology that produces the final good. We normalize $A = 1$ and set $\alpha = 0.3$ so that the equilibrium of our economy matches the long-run labor share of national income for the US of approximately $1 - \alpha = 0.7$.

We choose the depreciation rates δ and δ^d of physical capital and consumer durables to match investment shares of output and capital-output ratios for the US economy. In the steady state of our model $I = \delta K$ and $I^d = \delta^d K^d$ and hence $\delta = \frac{I/Y}{K/Y}$ and $\delta^d = \frac{I^d/Y}{K^d/Y}$.

We use data from the 2000 comprehensive revision of NIPA and *Fixed Assets and Consumer Durable Goods* of the Bureau of Economic Analysis (see <http://www.bea.gov> for detailed information and downloadable tables) to compute K defined as Private Nonresidential Fixed Assets (equipment, software

²³See Platania and Schlagenau (2000) for an explicit life-cycle analysis of the purchase vs. renting decision for housing.

²⁴Since we care about the life cycle consumption of households after demographic adjustments we do not need to worry about the different mortality rates in the household. Faber's numbers refer to women survival probabilities.

and nonresidential structures) and K^d defined as Private Residential Structures and Consumer Durable goods. Since the NIPA are somewhat inconsistent in the treatment of the household sector (the accounts do include the imputed flow of services from owner-occupied housing as part of GDP but not the services from other durables), we adjust NIPA data when needed to reflect the measurement definitions in our economy: final, physical goods produced in the period. We use as our benchmark calibration $\delta = \frac{I/Y}{K/Y} = \frac{0.135}{1.2} = 0.1125$ and $\delta^d = \frac{I^d/Y}{K^d/Y} = \frac{0.12}{1.45} = 0.0857$.

4.3 Preferences and Endowments

In each period agents supply one unit of time, the productivity of which is given by $\varepsilon_j \eta$. The deterministic age profile of the unconditional mean of labor productivity $\{\varepsilon_j\}_{j=1}^J$ is taken from Hansen (1993). We take $\varepsilon_j = 0$ for $j \geq 46$, in effect imposing mandatory retirement at the age of 65.

In the parametrization of the stochastic idiosyncratic labor productivity process we follow Storesletten *et al.* (1999). They build a rotating panel from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to estimate the stochastic part $u_{it} = \ln(\eta_{it})$ of the labor income process for household i at time t

$$\begin{aligned} u_{it} &= z_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \\ z_{it} &= \rho z_{it-1} + \nu_{it} \end{aligned} \tag{9}$$

where $\varepsilon_{it} \sim N(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2)$ and $\nu_{it} \sim N(0, \sigma_\nu^2)$ are innovation processes. Their point estimates are $\rho = 0.935$, $\sigma_\varepsilon^2 = 0.017$ and $\sigma_\nu^2 = 0.061$.

This process differs from other specifications in the literature (see Abowd and Card (1989), Carroll (1992) or Gourinchas and Parker (1999) among others) in two aspects. First we do not allow labor income to go to zero. Even if this event has a very low probability (Carroll (1992) estimates this probability as 0.003 for a year), its effects are substantial on intertemporal allocations: households will not borrow any positive amount since they may face a life-long sequence of zero labor income and may be unable to consume a positive amount and repay their debt in some period. This implication seems debatable, in particular in light of the existence of a collection of public income support programs in the U.S., given that the notion of labor income in the model should be interpreted as after tax, after government transfer labor income. Second, we do not impose a unit root in the autoregressive process for z_{it} since Storesletten *et al.* (1999) are able to reject the null of a unit root²⁵. This choice remains, however, an open and debated issue. In small samples it is very difficult to separate a unit root from our value $\rho = 0.935$, especially since with finitely lived families, the stochastic process can not drift away too much from its initial condition.²⁶ Fortunately, our

²⁵Part of the appeal of the unit root assumption derives from the fact that, as pointed out by Deaton (1991), it simplifies the computation of the household problem since one state variable can be eliminated.

²⁶We performed Monte Carlo simulations to check that, when individual wages generated with our chosen process are estimated with a unit root process we in general cannot reject the null of nonstationarity.

results are not very sensitive to this choice, as shown below when we perform sensitivity analysis by increasing ρ towards unity.

Using the method proposed by Tauchen and Hussey (1991), we approximate this continuous state $AR(1)$ process with a three state Markov chain²⁷, which results in:

$$E = \{0.57, 0.93, 1.51\} \quad (10)$$

$$\pi = \begin{bmatrix} 0.75 & 0.24 & 0.01 \\ 0.19 & 0.62 & 0.19 \\ 0.01 & 0.24 & 0.75 \end{bmatrix} \quad (11)$$

$$\Pi = [0.31, 0.38, 0.31] \quad (12)$$

As initial endowments of physical capital and durables we assume $k_1 = k_1^d = 0$.

With respect to preferences we assume that the period utility function is of CRRA type:

$$u(c, k^d) = \frac{(g(c, k^d))^\sigma - 1}{1 - \sigma} \quad (13)$$

where $g(\cdot, \cdot)$ is an aggregator function of the services flows from durables and nondurables. A simple but quite general choice for the aggregator is an CES aggregator of the form:

$$g(c, k^d) = \left[\theta c^\tau + (1 - \theta) (k^d + \varepsilon)^\tau \right]^{\frac{1}{\tau}} \quad (14)$$

where ε is a number small enough to be irrelevant for our quantitative exercises, but makes the utility function finite for $k^d = 0$ (the intuition being that one can survive without a house and other consumer durables, but one cannot survive without food).

Unfortunately, we do not have conclusive empirical evidence about the value of τ . Eichenbaum and Hansen (1990) find that the substitutability between durables and nondurables is highly sensitive to the overall specification of preferences. McGrattan *et al.* (1997) use aggregate data to estimate, in a model where labor input is needed to complement durables to produce consumption services, a value of $\tau = 0.429$ with standard error of 0.116. Rupert *et al.* (1995) explore a number of different specifications of a model similar to McGrattan *et al.* (1997) using PSID data. They find that the estimated values of τ differ greatly with changes in the sample composition and that overall, their results are not particularly informative. For example, they estimate $\tau = -0.065$ with standard error of 0.471 for single males while the equivalent estimates for single females are 0.445 and 0.121 and for couples 0.083 and 0.292. It is interesting that two of the three results are not significantly different from zero. Ogaki and Reinhart (1998), using aggregate data and a similar specification to ours, estimate $\tau = 0.143$, not significantly different from zero at the 5% level. Given

²⁷An approximation with more than three states would be desirable; computational constraints prevents this at the moment.

this range of estimates, we find it reasonable to adopt as a benchmark the case $\tau = 0$ (the aggregator function takes a Cobb-Douglas form) and test later for sensitivity of the results to our choice. The resulting period utility function is then given by

$$u(c, k^d) = \frac{\left(c^\theta (k^d + \varepsilon)^{1-\theta}\right)^\sigma - 1}{1 - \sigma} \quad (15)$$

Also, for our benchmark calibration we choose a coefficient of relative risk aversion $\sigma = 2$, a value in the middle of the range commonly used in the literature.

We jointly pick the parameters θ and the time discount factor β so that the steady state equilibrium for our benchmark calibration has an interest rate of $r = 4\%$ (see McGrattan and Prescott (2000) for a justification of this number based on their measure of the return on capital and on the risk-free rate of inflation-protected U.S. Treasury bonds) and a ratio of expenditures on nondurables and durables of $\frac{C}{I^d} = \frac{C/Y}{I^d/Y} = 6.2$, the long-run average for US data. This results in choices $\beta = 0.9375$ and $\theta = 0.81$.

5 Results

5.1 Aggregate Variables

In Table 5.1 we report values for aggregate variables for our benchmark economy.

Table 5.1

Variable	Steady State Value
r	4%
$\frac{C}{Y}$	0.67
$\frac{I}{Y}$	0.22
$\frac{I^d}{Y}$	0.11
$\frac{w}{Y}$	0.54
L	1.29
$\frac{K}{Y}$	1.97
$\frac{K^d}{Y}$	1.26
$\frac{C}{I^d}$	6.2

Since we calibrated β and θ to match an interest rate of 4% and a ratio between expenditures on nondurables and durables of 6.2, the first and last entry of Table 1 are obtained by construction. GDP in our economy is used for consumption (78%) and investment into physical capital (22%). These figures are in line with long-run averages for the US economy (remember that our

definition of GDP does not include housing services). The capital-output ratio $\frac{K+K^d}{Y}$ equals approximately 3.23, and the aggregate capital stock is composed to 60% of physical capital and to 40% of consumer durables. The average annual wage wl amounts to about 100% of GDP per capita Y , where l is the average labor productivity of the working population, given by

$$l = \frac{L}{\text{fraction of pop. that works}} = \frac{1.29}{0.7}$$

Note that the capital-output ratio for physical capital is quite a bit higher than the one used in the calibration section. There are two possible explanations for this finding. First, it may indicate that the interest rate we try to match is too low. However if we insist on our choices $\delta = 11.25\%$ and $\alpha = 0.3$, then to obtain a $\frac{K}{Y} = 1.2$ would require $r = 13.75\%$ since in a stationary equilibrium:

$$\frac{K}{Y} = \frac{\alpha}{r + \delta}$$

This interest rate is well beyond the plausible range for risk-free rates.

A second explanation for the high ratio of physical capital is the absence of social security in our model. It is known that, in a standard dynamic general equilibrium model, a pay-as-you-go social security system that is not perfectly linked to contributions but redistributive, as the current system in the US, tends to reduce the level of asset accumulation in equilibrium²⁸. As a consequence, our model should overpredict the amount of physical capital in the economy. The absence of social security biases the results against our main argument: the importance of durables to explain the life cycle profiles of consumption and assets accumulation. If we show that durables are key to explain these profiles even when no social security exists and the incentive for financial accumulation is higher, the result will hold even more tightly with a redistributive social security system. The size of this bias is, however, uncertain and the effects of social security in an economy with durables deserve further research.

5.2 Life Cycle Profiles

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the average life-cycle pattern of labor income, non-durable consumption expenditures and the stocks of consumer durables, financial assets and total net worth. We plot age on the x-axis, following our interpretation that agents start their economic life at the age of 20 and live up to the age of 100.

These averages are obtained by integrating the policy functions with respect to the equilibrium measure of agents, holding age fixed. For example, average nondurable consumption expenditures by cohort j is given by

$$C_j = \int c(k, k^d, \eta, j) \Phi(dk \times dk^d \times d\eta \times \{j\})$$

²⁸See Conesa and Krueger (1999) for a quantitative exploration.

Note that due to stochastic death cohorts are not of the same size, so that population averages are *weighted* averages of cohort averages.

From Figure 5.1 we see the hump shape of average labor income. This hump shape arises by construction since the life cycle profile for labor income parallels the life cycle profile of average labor productivity $\{\varepsilon_j\}_{j=1}^J$ which obeys a hump-shape over the life cycle, with peak around the age of 50. Also note that at the age of 65 agents retire in our model, which is induced by assuming $\varepsilon_j = 0$ for $j \geq 46$.

Also, in Figure 5.1 we can see that expenditures on nondurable consumption obey a hump-shaped life cycle pattern, with peak around the age of 45²⁹ and a pattern and, more importantly a *size* (about 40% bigger than age 20), quite similar to the one reported in Figure 2.6. The increase in nondurable consumption in the early part of life is due to two factors in our model, both of which are crucially dependent on the presence of consumer durables. First, since durables generate service flows, early in life it is optimal to build up the stock of consumer durables and compromise on consumption of nondurables. Second, once the stock of nondurables is built up, due to the nonseparabilities in the utility function the marginal utility from nondurable consumption is higher, due to a higher stock of durables. The hump shape in nondurable consumption is *not* due to buffer stock behavior per se as in Carroll (1992) or Gourinchas and Parker (1999): households in our model, once they have accumulated consumer durables, can use these as collateralizable insurance against unfavorable labor productivity shocks as their borrowing capacity increases with their holding of durables.

It is important to note the increase of consumption late in life. This small increase is due to lifetime uncertainty. Households want to buffer until almost the end of their life; then they consume in the last periods since survival probabilities are low or zero. Also, from Figure 5.1 we see how average consumption tracks deterministic average labor income. Since this income increase is perfectly forecastable, our model displays excess sensitivity of consumption to income as suggested by empirical data and contrary to the predictions of the basic Life Cycle-Permanent Income model (see Deaton (1992) for a review).

In Figure 5.2 we show how the average wealth portfolio evolves over the life cycle. Early in life households borrow as much as possible to buy houses and other consumer durables. As time goes by, the stock of durables is built up and holdings of financial assets as well as nondurable consumption increases. Since households can borrow against their durable assets, the accumulation of financial assets occurs for life-cycle, and not for insurance purposes. Our model reproduces important facts about the life cycle composition of wealth: young households do save (net worth becomes significantly positive by the age of 35), but they do not save in financial assets, but rather in consumer durables. As households become older, financial assets become a more important part of the household's wealth portfolio, with these assets being accumulated primarily to

²⁹The spike in the first period is due to the fact that agents start with $k^d = 0$. To avoid very low utility households choose a high consumption of nondurables. A possible remedy would be to endow agents with a small positive stock of consumer durables at birth.

finance consumption in retirement. Note that total net worth peaks at age 64, the year prior to retirement. Also note that households hold substantial net worth until high ages, mainly for insurance purposes against living too long. This correspond to the observation that elderly households seem to overaccumulate assets (or more precisely they do not run down their wealth fast enough). This peak in net worth at age 64 would be far less pronounced in the presence of a pay-as-you go social security system, because part of the life cycle motive of savings and the precautionary savings motive due to stochastic mortality disappears.

In Figure 5.3 we plot the total stock of consumer durables. The stock follows a hump shape, differing from a complete markets model where the desired stock is built up in the first period and only an amount equal to depreciation is spent each period thereafter. We plot the average expenditure on durables in Figure 5.4. From this graph we notice that the model generates a pattern of consumer durables that somehow diverges from the observed pattern: there is a big peak in the first years and then it falls, even though it is possible to see somewhat of a hump after the first spike. One possible explanation is that in the data young families obtain bequests, which in large part come as consumer durables. A second possible explanation is the endogenous formation of households in the data. In our model, all households enter their active economic life at age 20, a time period where they want to build up the desired stock of capital. In the data, however, economically active (in the sense of our model) households are created endogenously due to differences in marriage timing and education. This endogeneity smooths out the first big spike of durable expenditures in the data and leads to a pattern of life cycle durables expenditure reported in Section 2.³⁰

In Figure 5.5 we plot several simulated life cycle patterns, from which we observe how households adjust their consumption decisions to labor income shocks. These shocks, although quantitatively important, are not able to overcome, however, the general pattern of a life cycle hump in consumption on average.

The stochastic patterns in Figure 5.5 raise the question of the role of idiosyncratic income uncertainty. To address this issue we solve the model setting the variances of the labor income innovations to zero, i.e. computing the model without labor income uncertainty. The results are plotted in Figures 5.6-5.7. Two results are worth mentioning. First, from the life cycle pattern of nondurable consumption in Figure 5.6 we can see that, once uncertainty is eliminated, half of the hump in nondurable consumption disappears: the new profile is substantially smoother than before (see Figure 5.1). With uncertainty borrowing constraints are tighter because default has to be prevented in all income states tomorrow, in particular in the high income states. A tighter borrowing constraint makes consumption co-move more with income. In addition risk averse households postpone a larger fraction of consumption until an important degree of uncertainty is revealed. In contrast, without labor income uncertainty this

³⁰This divergence between data and model may also indicate that our borrowing constraint is specified too loosely, allowing households to invest into consumer durables at too rapid pace when young.

effect is absent and higher nondurable consumption sets in earlier in life.

Second, the average holding of durables is smaller. As explained before, in an environment with uninsurable stochastic labor income, durables are also accumulated because the collateral services they provide in allowing borrowing to smooth nondurable consumption. Comparing the stock of durables from Figure 5.7 with the stock of durables from Figure 5.2 we can see that, for prime age households, the average holding of durables is reduced by around 15%.

Finally our model is also able to cast some light on two other important issues. First, the model predicts that only 58% of the households hold any financial wealth in equilibrium, and these are households in later periods of their life. This low participation corresponds to the evidence on financial assets from the Survey of Consumer Finances and is obtained without the need of model elements such as a very high elasticity of intertemporal substitution or transaction costs commonly used in the literature to generate similar results. The presence of an alternative asset that also generates consumption and collateral services is enough to discourage 42% of households from participating in financial markets.

Second, consumer durables can help to explain why households with higher life cycle income save proportionally more than poor households (see the empirical evidence presented in Dynan *et al.* (2000)). Figure 5.8 plots the life-cycle profile of financial assets for the average household, for a household that always enjoys the high labor income shock, *ex-post*, and for a household that always suffers the low income shock, also *ex-post*. We can see from this plot how the high income household, despite of having a realized lifetime income that is only 2.6 times higher than the low income households, has accumulated over six times more financial assets at age 65. This result comes from the strong nonhomogeneity introduced by the dual role of durables as a saving instrument and a consumption good: as the household becomes richer the marginal utility of durables decreases and financial assets become relatively more attractive. Quantitatively, around 50, the high income household only has around twice as many durables as the low income household but has accumulated already an important stock of financial assets while the poor household still has negative financial wealth.

6 Sensitivity Analysis

In this section we will consider two different issues. First, subsection A and B will study the behavior of the model under the alternative two borrowing constraints outlined in Section 3. Second, in Subsection C we will check the robustness of our calibration to different changes in parameter values.

6.1 Ad-Hoc Borrowing Constraints

In this subsection we describe how our main results change as we adopt a different form of borrowing constraint. The case on which most of the literature on life cycle consumption without durable goods has focused is an ad-hoc spec-

ification limiting short-sales of bonds to a fixed number \bar{b} . Often this number is set to $\bar{b} = 0$ (see Aiyagari (1994) and Krusell and Smith (1998) among others).³¹ Although such a specification of the borrowing constraint in the presence of a collateralizable asset seems somewhat unreasonable we want to relate our results to the existing literature and hence adopt the constraint $\bar{b} = 0$. Then, durables, while still providing services and hence utility to households, lose their role as collateralizable assets. We leave all other parameters unchanged from the benchmark calibration.

Table 6.2

Variable	Steady State Value
r	2.25%
$\frac{C}{Y}$	0.65
$\frac{I}{Y}$	0.25
$\frac{I^d}{Y}$	0.1
$\frac{w}{Y}$	0.54
L	1.29
$\frac{K}{Y}$	2.21
$\frac{K^d}{Y}$	1.17
$\frac{C}{I^d}$	6.5

In Table 6.2 we report values for aggregate variables for the economy in which agents are prevented from borrowing. The main difference between the economy with the endogenous borrowing constraint and the economy with no borrowing and is that the interest rate is significantly lower in the latter case. This is a direct consequence of less demand for capital (loans), due to the fact that households are prevented from borrowing. It can also be argued that households now are prevented from smoothing bad income realizations and hence wish to hold a higher buffer stock of financial assets to self-insure against this income risk, particularly early in life, when mean income is low. We will argue below when discussing life cycle patterns of consumption and asset accumulation that, in the presence of consumer durables, this is not the case.

The total stock of physical capital is higher in the no-borrowing economy, and since by construction total labor input is fixed exogenously, total output in the economy increases. This results mirrors the theoretical findings of Aiyagari (1994) with infinitely lived agents. The higher physical capital stock requires higher investment to replace the depreciated capital, hence the investment share

³¹Other important contributors to the life-cycle consumption literature specify income processes with positive probability of zero lifetime income. The Inada condition on the utility function then leads to a self-imposed borrowing constraint at 0: no agent facing a chance of zero lifetime income would ever borrow and risk zero or negative consumption for certain realizations of the stochastic income process. See, e.g., Carroll (1992, 1997a) and Gourinchas and Parker (1999).

of output increases from 22% to 25% of GDP. Consumption as share of GDP, of both nondurables and durables declines to 65% and 10%, respectively

In Figure 6.1 we plot the life cycle pattern of average labor income and consumption. By construction the income profile is identical across the two economies. Comparing the consumption profiles we see that in the economy with no borrowing the hump-shape in consumption is more pronounced, the peak of consumption occurs later in life and consumption declines more rapidly toward the end of life. Also, the size of the hump is much bigger than the one reported in Figure 2.6, indicating that this specification of borrowing constraints is too extreme in imposing frictions on intertemporal trade. Since the interest rate is lower in the no-borrowing constraint economy, agents, *ceteris paribus*, prefer a consumption profile that declines more rapidly toward the end of life, compared to the economy with endogenous borrowing constraints. This governs the behavior after the age of around 45. Prior to that the constraint on borrowing determines the consumption choice. Young households expect increasing labor income, hence would like to borrow, which they are prevented from doing. Consequently they spend all their income and accumulate no financial assets (see Figure 6.2). Conditional on this fact, a decision that remains is the allocation of income between expenditures on nondurables and investment into consumer durables. Figure 6.1 shows that between the age of 20 and 30 an increasing fraction of income is devoted to nondurables: at the beginning of life agents build up the stock of consumer durables as with endogenous borrowing constraints. Since this accumulation cannot be credit-financed and hence comes at the expense of nondurable consumption, however, this process is slower in the economy with borrowing constraints that prevent all borrowing.

>From Figure 6.2 we also see that financial assets are not used to buffer bad income shocks early in life; this is accomplished by holding durables which both yield services and can be sold if necessary. Financial assets are used for retirement saving, as they become the dominant asset in the average household's portfolio after the age of 40.

One important difference between the two economies is that with endogenous borrowing constraints the net worth of the average young generation is (slightly) negative: even when taking account of consumer durables, households up to the age of 30 borrow, on net, against their higher expected future labor income; mostly to finance the accumulation of durables, but also to smooth consumption over time and states (in equilibrium the low interest rate relative to the time discount factor implies that a declining consumption profile is optimal).

6.2 Consumer Durables and Fixed Down Payment

As argued before, the presence of durables suggests that, using them as collateral, households should be able to borrow up to some amount. This consideration motivates a borrowing constraint of the form $\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j) = -\kappa k^{d'}$. We pick $\kappa = 0.8$ which corresponds to a down payment requirement for purchases

of consumer durables of 20%, following the real estate market practices.³² We leave all the remaining parameters of the benchmark calibration unchanged.

Table 6.3

Variable	Steady State Value
r	2.24%
$\frac{C}{Y}$	0.63
$\frac{I}{Y}$	0.25
$\frac{I^d}{Y}$	0.12
$\frac{w}{Y}$	0.54
L	1.29
$\frac{K}{Y}$	2.15
$\frac{K^d}{Y}$	1.37
$\frac{C}{I^d}$	5.25

We present the results for aggregate variables for this economy in Table 6.3. As in the previous case, the main difference, compared to the endogenous borrowing constraint economy, is that the interest rate is substantially lower. Also the stocks of physical capital and durables are higher. In fact, the stock of durables is even higher than in our benchmark economy. The result is closely related with the dual role of durables as collateral and as a generator of utility. The use of durables as collateral also reduces the importance of physical capital as a buffer to smooth income fluctuations and, as a consequence the stock of physical capital is lower than in the case in borrowing is not permitted altogether.

In Figure 6.3 we plot the life cycle pattern of average labor income and consumption. The possibility to partially finance the acquisition of durables reduces the hump with respect to the case of no borrowing, but it is still bigger than in our benchmark economy. In Figure 6.4 we plot the life cycle patterns of consumer durables, financial wealth and total wealth. In this picture we can see how households take advantage of durables as a collateral and how they have negative financial wealth until their mid-forties, a point at which they begin to save for retirement. However, in comparison to the benchmark case with endogenous borrowing constraint, total wealth is always strictly positive since all borrowing has to be fully collateralized.

6.3 Changes in Parameters

In this subsection we will check the robustness of the results to changes in parameters. First we study the effects of increasing the persistence parameter ρ . The main consequence of this increment is a bigger hump in nondurable

³²Grossman and Laroque (1990) justify this practice based on liquidity costs associated with durables.

consumption. Here the reverse arguments we used to discuss the effects of uncertainty apply. A higher persistence of labor income makes borrowing constraints tighter. High shock households have a higher incentive to default on debts when the shock is more persistent: they can leave behind their debts and rebuild their durables stock under the better labor income perspectives. Also, as a higher degree of uncertainty needs to be revealed through life when shocks are more persistent (the reversion to the mean of a particular realization of the shock is lower or nonexistent if a unit root is present), risk-adverse households will wait until more of this uncertainty is revealed before increasing their consumption. Quantitatively we found that the effects of moving ρ from our benchmark calibration to 0.99 are small.

Also small are the effects of changing the elasticity of substitution between durables and nondurables. Even if this elasticity is crucial in the case of real business cycles models with household production (see Greenwood et al. (1995)) since it governs the margin of substitution between the two sectors in the economy, in our model without endogenous labor choice it is of minor quantitative importance. Higher elasticities of substitution help to slightly delay the building of a stock of durables, improving the performance of the model to match the hump in durables but they decrease the hump in nondurables consumption.

Finally, to assess the importance of durables we drive the weight of durables in the utility function to zero. In this case our models nests a dynamic general equilibrium version of Carroll (1997a) and Gourinchas and Parker (1999)³³. We find two main differences with respect to our benchmark calibration. First the hump in consumption is too big in size. Second households accumulate a buffer stock of financial assets at the beginning of their lives. With our benchmark choice of endogenous debt constraints, in the absence of durables, the constraints collapses to a standard positive borrowing condition because without the punishment associated with the loss of durables, households do not have any incentive to pay back any negative amount of debt³⁴. This highlights the importance of durables: they interact with nondurables to get the profile of life cycle right, they serve as a self-insurance device and they are key to properly account for the size and composition of household wealth.

7 Conclusion

In this paper we demonstrate that consumer durables are crucial to explain the life cycle profiles of consumption and savings. Households begin their economic life without a stock of durables and they are precluded from building this stock immediately because of the presence of limited intertemporal mar-

³³Even if some details as the labor income process or the treatment of retirement are different, the households problems are essentially equivalent.

³⁴A specification like Alvarez and Jermann's (2000) borrowing constraints would allow some borrowing since there is an effective punishment to default: agents are forced to autarchy from the moment of default on. The quantitative effect of this specification in a life cycle model is an open question and deferred to future research. See Azariadis and Lambertini (2000) for a treatment in a three period OLG economy.

kets. As a consequence, during the first part of their life cycle, households are forced to progressively accumulate durables and compromise on their consumption of nondurables and accumulation of financial assets. This phenomenon can explain why we observe that empirical life cycle consumption profiles, both of durables and nondurables, are hump shaped, even after controlling for demographics characteristics and why most households do not hold any substantial financial wealth until they enter into their forties.

To quantitatively explore this mechanism, we build a dynamic general equilibrium life cycle model with exogenous and uninsurable labor income risk and borrowing constraints. We parametrize the model using long run considerations and microeconomic evidence and we use it to generate life cycle profiles of durables and nondurables consumption.

The model is able to match two basic aspects of the data: the hump in nondurables consumption and the life cycle component of wealth level and composition. The model also accounts for most of the hump in durables expenditures although some improvements still remain along this dimension. In addition, the model casts some light on several other important issues such as a) the tracking of income by consumption, b) the amount of savings undertaken by young households, c) the importance of insurable labor risk, d) the low participation of households in financial markets and e) the higher savings rate of households with higher life cycle income. An interesting final point is that, checking the behavior of the model under different borrowing constraints, we find that our choice of endogenous borrowing constraint outperforms the more commonly used exogenous specification of the constraint.

The humps in life cycle consumption are, however, just some of the empirical puzzles concerning consumer durables. In this paper we have abstracted from the business cycle behavior of aggregate and individual expenditures on consumer durables. In a companion paper (Fernández-Villaverde and Krueger (2000)) we discuss the well-known result that the Euler condition of durables consumption implies that the aggregate time series of durable consumption expenditures should follow an ARMA(1,1) process. We show that this result carries over to the context of a wholly specified general equilibrium model. This prediction of theory is clearly contradicted by aggregate data. We are in the process of exploring the microeconomic evidence regarding the moving average component of consumer durable expenditures. In addition we study the role of borrowing constraints and their interaction with durables to propagate and amplify business cycles. Preliminary results indicate that consumer durables may be crucial importance for the macroeconomy along this dimension, since the value of the durable, and hence a households' ability to borrow to smooth consumption contracts in a recession, i.e. in exactly the time where a large credit line would be needed most.

8 Technical Appendix

This technical appendix includes a detailed description of the consumption, wealth and income data used in the paper. It also explains the computation of the model.

8.1 Consumption Data

Our consumption data comes from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CEX) as provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Our sample years are 1980-1981 and 1984-1997 with a total of 64 longitudinal surveys.

We take each household as one observation. We use the demographic data of the reference person, independently of this person's gender. We select only those households with both positive income and consumption expenditure and with all the necessary demographic information for household size adjustment. We use information from all five interviews. As a sensitivity check we repeated our estimation exercises constraining ourselves to information from the fifth interview. This restriction eliminates the (limited) panel component of the CEX and issues as selection problems for those families that do not complete the set of five interviews. We found that results were basically unchanged except for those combinations of age and family size (like households with a reference person of 16 and family size of 6) where the very low number of observations implied a substantial loss of information from using only one interview. We disregard the issues involved in a complete treatment of topcoding. The very high limits in consumption topcoding (or their nonexistence as in food consumption and other items) and the very low response rate of the wealthiest families to government surveys imply that only a very small fraction of our sample is right-censored. Also, since the empirical proportion of households with consumption items top-coded is higher in the middle years of adulthood than at the beginning or at the end of life, our strategy introduces a bias *against* the existence of a hump.

We compute "total expenditure" using the variable of the same name in the detailed expenditure files. We divide consumption in these files into three different groups. The data on "expenditure on nondurables" includes food, alcohol beverages, tobacco, utilities, personal care, household operations, public transportation, gas and motor and miscellaneous. The data on "expenditure on durables" sums expenditures on owned dwelling, rented dwelling, house equipment, entertainment and vehicles last quarter. We left out as ambiguous expenditure apparel, out-of-pocket health³⁵, education and reading. We take account of changes in consumption classification methodologies over the sample years in the CEX to assure consistency of our consumption measures.

Finally, we use consumer price index (CPI) for all urban consumers as our price index. Each expenditure category is deflated using its particular, not seasonally adjusted, CPI component. The dollars figures are adjusted into 1982-84 dollars using the "current methods" version of the CPI for all urban consumers.

³⁵Insurance payments are not considered consumption expenditures by the CEX.

This version rebuilds past CPI's with the present CPI methodology to produce a historically consistent series.

8.2 Wealth Data

We use the SCF 1995 survey as our main source of wealth data in Sections 1 and 2. This survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago between July and December of the reference year, interviewed 4299 families selected through a random sample with over-representation of wealthy families³⁶. The survey gathers information on families' balance sheets (including pensions), income, labor force participation and demographics characteristics.

Several important methodological details should be noticed. First, the term "household" used in the paper corresponds to the term "family" in the SCF. "Household" is reserved by the SCF to denote the set of the "family" (technically known as the "primary economic unit") and any other individual that lives in the same household but it is economically independent. The definition of "family" closely resembles then the definition of "household" in the CEX. For convenience we follow the CEX language and equate both terms. Second, appropriate weights need to be used to correct for the different response rates of the wealthiest households³⁷ and for the under-reporting of ownership of Hispanic and non-white families suggested by comparison of SCF data with the Current Population Survey (see Kennickell and Louise (1999) for details and references). The weights are recorded as file X24001 at <http://federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/scfindex.html>. These weights are used in Figures 2.9 and 2.11 but not in Figure 2.10 to avoid problems in the definition of percentiles. Finally, the dollar figures from 1995 are adjusted into 1998 dollars using again the "current methods" version of the CPI for all urban consumers. The CPI index for 1995 is 1.0904.

Additional information on the total stocks of capital and durables comes from the updated tables of *Fixed Assets and Consumer Durable Goods* (formerly known as *Fixed Reproducible Tangible Wealth*) released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (for details see <http://www.bea.doc.gov/bea/dn2.html>).

8.3 Income Data

Our parametrization of the labor income process is taken form Storesletten *et al.* (1999). The source for their estimation are the family and individual files of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) for 1969-1992. They excluded the households in the Survey of Economic Opportunity which oversamples minorities. The sample choice results in 22 overlapping panels, each of them 3 years

³⁶Of the 4299 completed interviews, 2780 came from a pure area random sampling and 1519 from a list of statistical records derived from the Individual Tax File of the Statistics of Income Division at the IRS. This overrepresentation can be corrected for using appropriate weights.

³⁷Only 30.4 of the list sample families completed the interviews (and 12.8 percent among the wealthiest) while 66.3 percent of households did in the area probability. These numbers are somehow lower than the usual response rates for other cross-sectional surveys.

in length, with an average of 2045 households per sample and a standard deviation of 228. This combination of panel and repeated longitudinal surveys allows for the identification of the estimating equations while maintaining a stable age distribution and a representative coverage of the population due to the inclusion of new households. In addition, the authors incorporate the overlapping nature of the panel into the estimate of the covariance matrix. Earnings are defined as wage earnings plus transfers and deflated using the CPI and divided by the number of household members.

8.4 Nonparametric Regressions

We estimate the conditional expectation function $m(\text{age}) = E(c|\text{age})$ through the nonparametric regression model:

$$\bar{c}_t = m(\text{age}_t) + \varepsilon_t$$

where \bar{c}_t is the average consumption of the households at time t , age_t is the age of the household at time t , $m(\cdot)$ is a smooth curve and ε_t is an independent, zero mean, random error.

We use an Epanechnikov kernel as our smoother. We choose this kernel based on three considerations. First, since the bias of this kernel is given by:

$$h^2 \frac{m''(x)}{2} \int u^2 K(u)$$

in small samples, we obtain an approximate absence of bias. This will prove useful below in our choices of bandwidth and bootstrap methods. Second, it is optimal in the sense that it minimizes the Mean Square Error of the regression. Finally, numerically, its bounded support avoids the underflow problems associated with Gaussian kernels. Härdle (1990) provides mathematical details.

The principal burden of the nonparametric regression is the correct choice of the bandwidth h . This parameter determines the degree of smoothness of the estimate of the curve m , \widehat{m}_h , and it determines the trade-off between small sample bias and variance (a small h gives small bias and large variance whereas a large h gives the opposite results). Consistency of the estimation only requires that, as $n \rightarrow \infty$, h should satisfy that $h \rightarrow 0$ and $nh \rightarrow \infty$. As a consequence, asymptotic theory does not provide a tight advice for a small sample choice of h . Cross-validation methods³⁸ tend to suggest a lower value for h than the one we find preferable for our application: we search for a hump (or the absence of it) in consumption, a low frequency pattern, while cross validation tries to capture the short run action in consumption. Our intention implies that we are

³⁸Cross-validation attempts to search for the smoothing parameter that minimizes the mean of a penalizing function (as the Mean Square Error) when different parts of the sample are eliminated. This minimization tries to trade off bias for variance to optimize the objective function of the researcher. Intuitively, this procedure is trying to maximize the ability of the regression to forecast within the sample.

more concerned about increasing the “signal to noise” ratio of the raw data as much as possible and suggests that a slightly “oversmoothed” curve is a better choice³⁹. We check the robustness of our results computing the regressions for different values of h . Figure A.1 plots three of these values for the mean of log total consumption expenditure. The fact that even for $h = 20$ we still see the same pattern of life cycle hump strongly suggest that the finding is not an artefact of the nonparametric procedure. Quite similar graphs can be plotted for the other regressions.

Even though, under suitable technical conditions, the kernel estimator is consistent and asymptotically normal, we prefer to assess the performance of the estimation approximating the distribution $\sqrt{nh}(\widehat{m}_h - m)$ through the bootstrap. Care need to be taken because the small sample bias of the kernel estimator distorts both the fitted values and the residuals and hence transmits the bias to the standard error computation. One common strategy consists of a choice of h' that implies undersmoothing relative to the point estimate and to perform the bootstrap using the residuals $\widehat{\varepsilon}_i^{h'} = c_i - \widehat{m}_{h'}(\text{age}_i)$ and the nonstochastic covariate to build the simulation sample. Undersmoothing for a confidence interval is achieved with a choice of $h' = e \cdot h$, where $e < 1$ such that $nb'^{r+1} \rightarrow 0$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$ ⁴⁰. As shown in Hall (1992), using the Edgeworth expansion of a properly defined pivotal statistics, the bootstrap estimator of the confidence interval will be accurate through $O((nh')^{-1})$. Again this asymptotic result does not provide a clear indication for what is the appropriate e in small samples. We tried several values of e without finding large differences.

8.5 Computing the Model

To compute the steady state of our model, first we discretize the state space for durable goods and asset holdings $\mathcal{K} \times \mathcal{D} = \{k_1, \dots, k_n\} \times \{k_1^d, \dots, k_m^d\}$. We do not restrict the choices, though, to lie in the grid, but use interpolation to cover any intermediate choices. The upper bounds on the grids are chosen large enough so that they do not constitute a constraint on the optimization problem. Using this grid we can store the value function V and the distribution of households Φ as finite-dimensional arrays.

We solve for the steady state equilibrium as follows:

1. Guess r and use the equilibrium conditions in the factor markets to obtain the w .
2. Given $V(\cdot, \cdot, \cdot, J + 1) = 0$, we solve the value function for the last period of life for each of the points of the grid setting consumption to the total level of labor income plus the value of assets and the undepreciated stock of durables.

³⁹ Other practitioners have argued in favor of this less formal approach to the choice of bandwidths. See Härdle (1990) for examples.

⁴⁰ Alternatively, we could have carried out explicit bias removal in the regression. Our concern with the general pattern of consumption over the life cycle advices against that alternative.

3. Given $V(\cdot, \cdot, \cdot, J)$, find the value of the borrowing constraints $\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, J - 1)$ that makes the participation constraint hold with equality. If the borrowing constraint is specified as exogenous, this value is trivially set equal to zero.
4. With the value of the borrowing constraint and $V(\cdot, \cdot, \cdot, J)$, solve for $V(\cdot, \cdot, \cdot, J - 1)$ following the optimization routine described below in detail.
5. By backward induction, repeat the steps (3) and (4) until the first period in life. This yields policy functions $k', k^{d'}, c$
6. Compute the associated stationary distribution of households Φ . Note that, since lives are finite, only forward induction using the policy functions is needed, starting from the known distribution over types of age 1.
7. Given the stationary distribution Φ and prices, compute factor input demands and supplies and check market clearing.
8. If all markets clear, we found an equilibrium. If not, go to step 1 and update r .

We now comment in more detail on several aspects of this computation. The presence of state dependent borrowing constraints presents a challenge for the grid generation. In the simplest case, when these constraints are exogenously set to zero, the grid along the asset dimension can be generated using a standard procedure, distributing the different points along the positive real line. The case for endogenous borrowing constraints is more involved. We generate a dynamic multigrid for assets with the following procedure. Given a price vector, we compute the “natural debt” limit implied by the discounted value of the remaining life cycle income at the worst possible realization of the shock. With these limits, we generate a different grid for each period of life, ranging from this lower limit to some arbitrary, age dependent, positive number⁴¹. Since in general these “natural debt” limits will be lower than the borrowing constraint limit, the household may face the situation that, for a particular point of the grid, no positive consumption is feasible. Because for negative consumption, the utility function is not defined, we address this issue numerically using a penalty correction in the utility function: negative consumption implies such a huge negative utility that the household will never visit the areas of the multigrid that imply this negative consumption even after an arbitrary sequence of the worst possible realizations of the stochastic shock. The highest points in the grid for all type of borrowing constraints were chosen in such a way that the

⁴¹The presence of durables makes the computation of this “natural debt” limit dependent on the stock of durables. To avoid this problem we take the limit implied by the first point in the grid of durables. This limit is strictly above the real “natural debt” limit for households with higher quantities of durables and was chosen to avoid optimizing in highly negative points of assets holdings. We check that in the optimization routine the borrowing constraint is always equal or higher than the lower bound of the grid.

stationary distribution Φ does not put mass in these points. The distribution of point in the grid is uniform.

Finding the level of the borrowing constraint \bar{b} at time j amounts to invert the value function $V(\cdot, \cdot, \eta', j+1)$ along its first dimension. To do so, we solve the root of the linear equation $V(\cdot, k^{d'}, \eta', j+1) - V(0, 0, \eta', j+1)$ at each point of the grid of durables and each possible point η' . Then, since we are looking for the tightest of borrowing constraint values in the stochastic income process, we find the vector of maximum values in η' for each possible choice of durables stock. This vector contains the value of the borrowing constraint $\bar{b}(k^{d'}, \eta, j+1)$ evaluated at each point in the durables grid, for each η and each age.

With this vector as an input, the optimization routine searches on the grid of durables and performs a Quasi-Newton update⁴² on asset holdings conditional on each point of the durables grid except for values of the asset holding close to the borrowing constraints. For these values we substitute the Quasi-Newton with a variant of the bisection method. This change allows for a correct treatment of the borrowing constraint in which the derivative of the objective function is not zero. We computed the needed numerical derivatives using a forward scheme. To improve efficiency, we tried a two dimensional Newton search instead of the combination of grid search and Quasi-Newton. This alternative, however, was not adopted because of numerical instability problems.

Where needed, we use a simple linear or bilinear interpolation scheme. As a robustness check, we also tried a cubic spline interpolation with a “not-a-knot” condition. Cubic splines match exactly the function values at the grid points with continuous first and second derivatives. The “not-a-knot” condition requires that the third derivative of the spline be continuous in the last $n-1$ and $n-2$ points of the grid. We found that this more sophisticated interpolation scheme implied outcomes that were virtually indistinguishable from the ones reported in the text and resulted in an important degradation of time performance.

In order to simulate the stationary distribution Φ and life cycle profiles and since we store only finite-dimensional arrays, an individual choice $k'(k, k^d, \eta, j)$ is interpreted to choose asset holdings k_1 and k_2 with probabilities ν and $1-\nu$. These probabilities solve the linear equation $k'(k, k^d, \eta, j) = \nu k_1 + (1-\nu) k_2$. A similar procedure is followed for the durable stock choice. We build average life-cycles with a simulation of a cross-section of individuals and check the law of large numbers with the first two moments of the distribution.

All the programs needed for the computation of the model were programmed in Fortran 95 and compiled in Compaq Visual Fortran 6.1 to run on Windows PC. The computational materials are available upon request from the authors.

⁴²Our most important deviation from the standard Newton-Raphson is that we impose relatively conservative bounds in the size of the update to avoid overshootings. These bounds proved more reliable than cooling down the algorithm because of the discontinuity in the computable objective function caused by the penalty correction.

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Figure 2.1: Total Consumption Expenditure

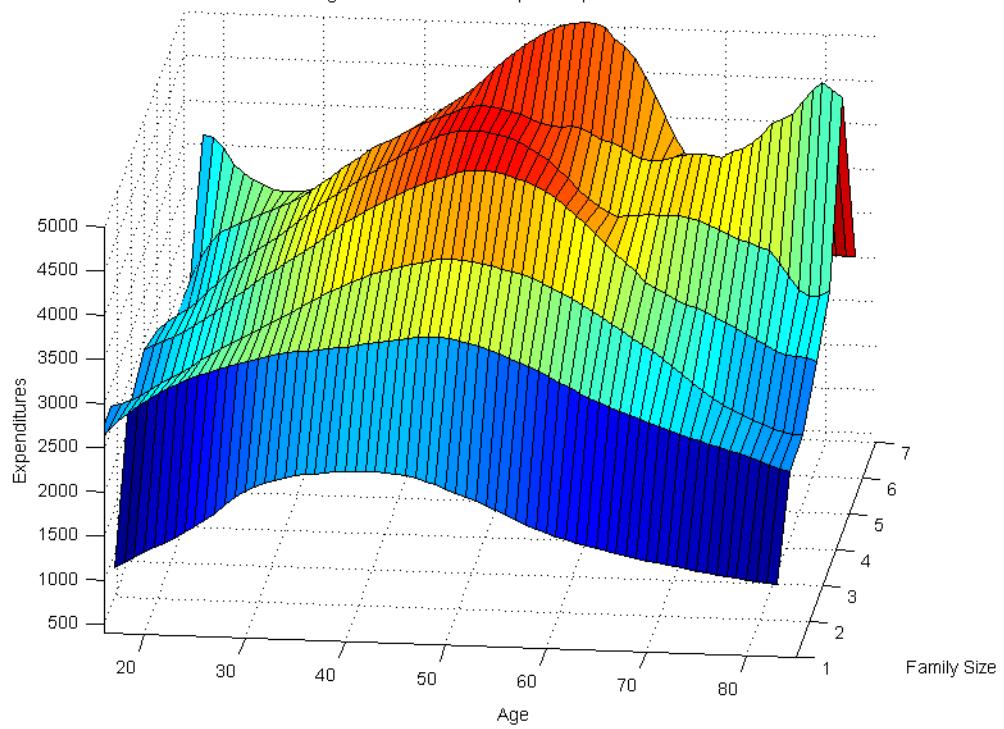


Figure 2.2: Nondurable Consumption Expenditure

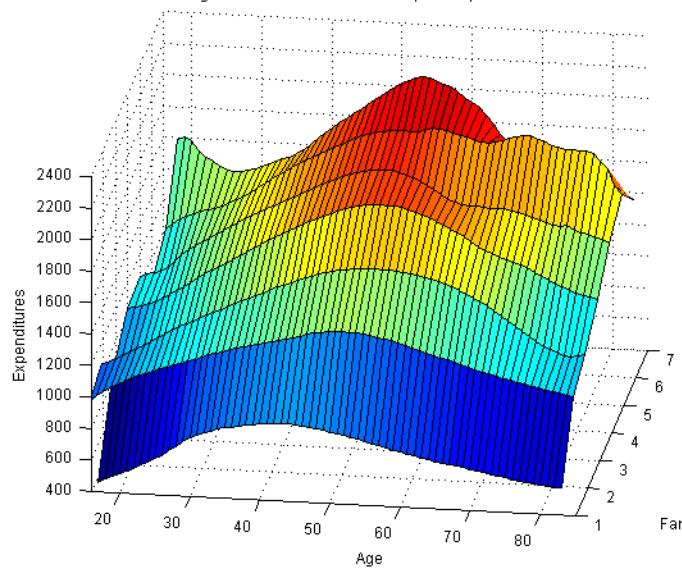


Figure 2.3: Durable Consumption Expenditure

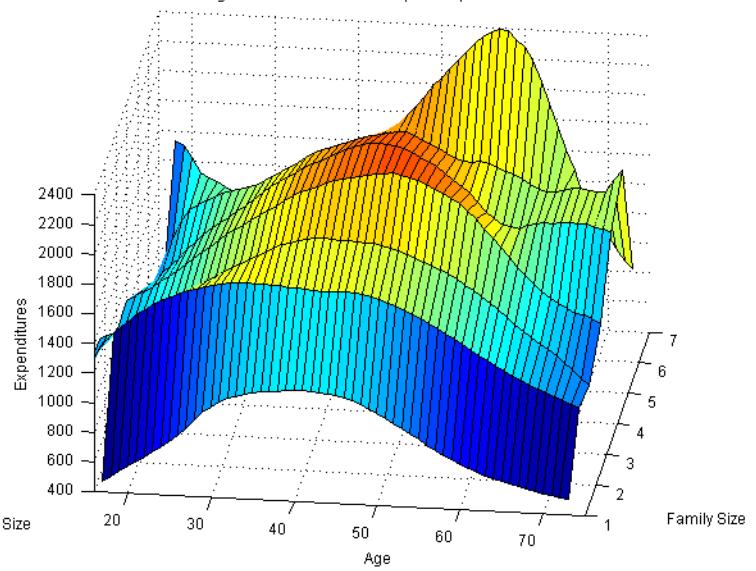


Figure 2.4a: Household size = 1,
95% confidence interval

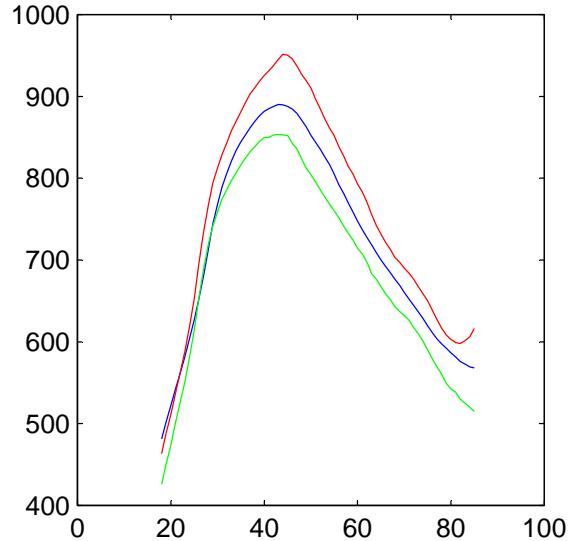


Figure 2.4b: Household size = 1,
widest confidence interval

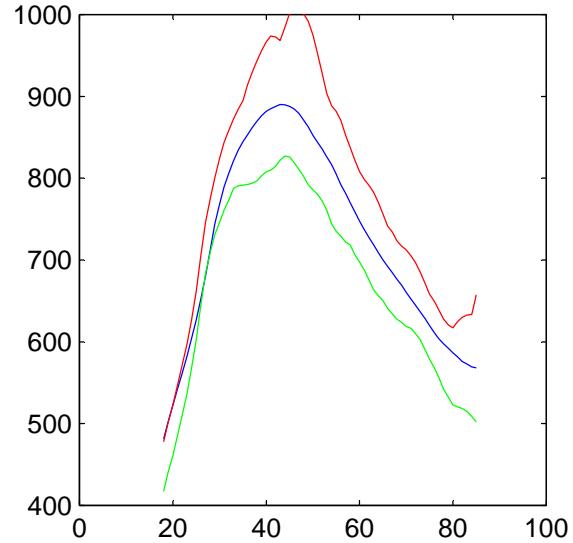


Figure 2.4c: Household size = 1,
95% confidence band

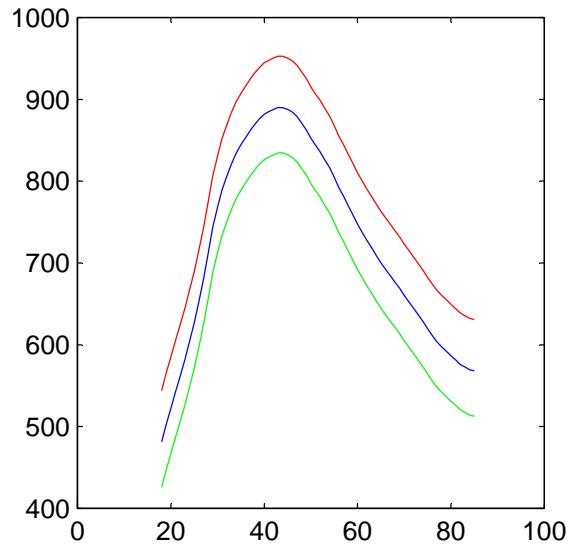


Figure 2.4d: Household size = 1,
all simulations

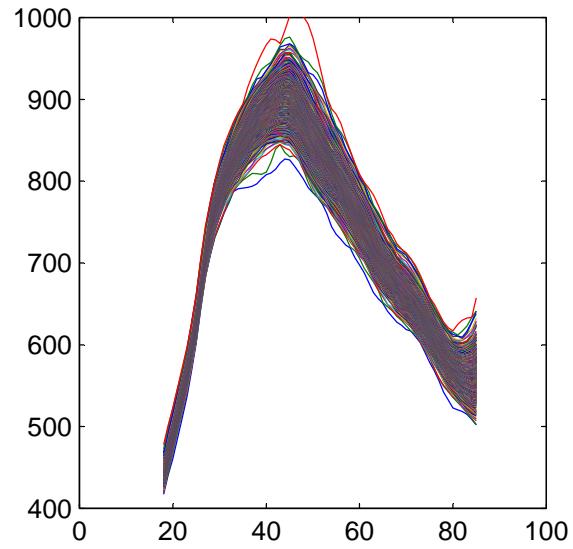


Figure 2.5: Non-Housing Durable Expenditure

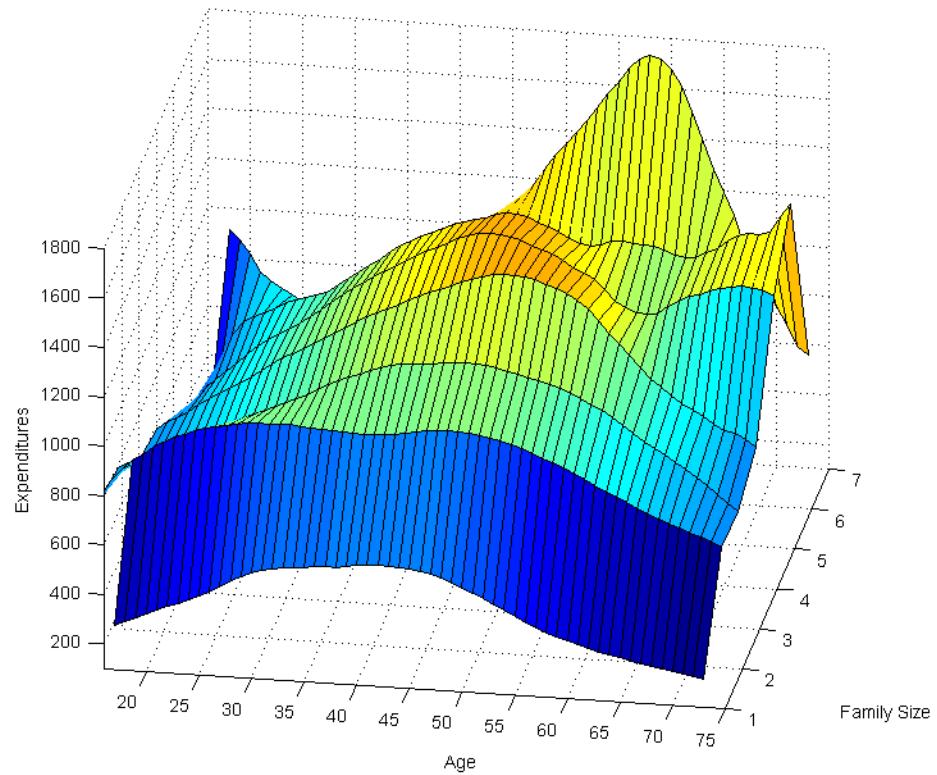


Figure 2.6: Owned House Expenditure

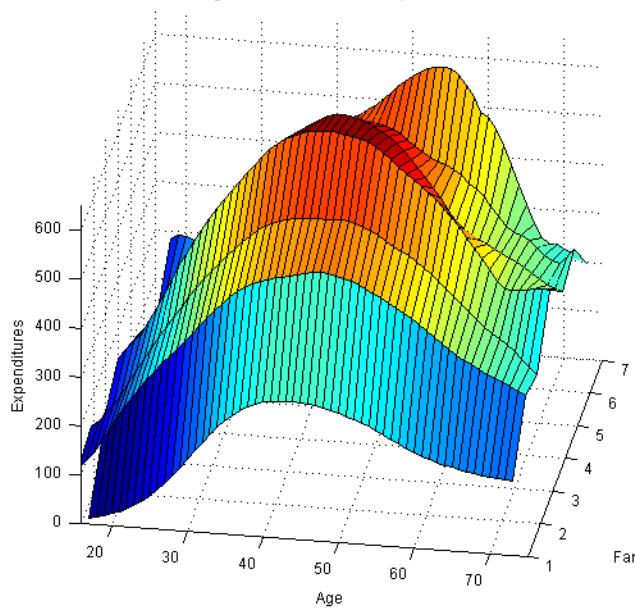


Figure 2.7: Rented House Expenditure

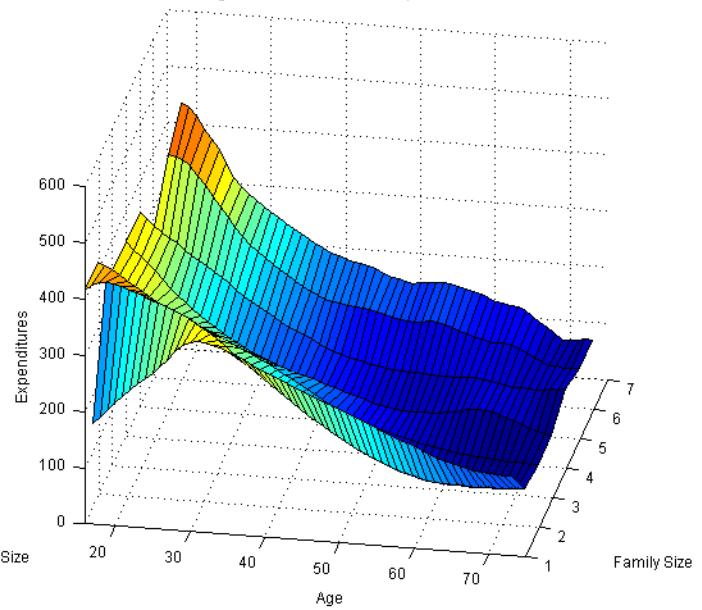


Figure 2.8: Equivalent Rental Value

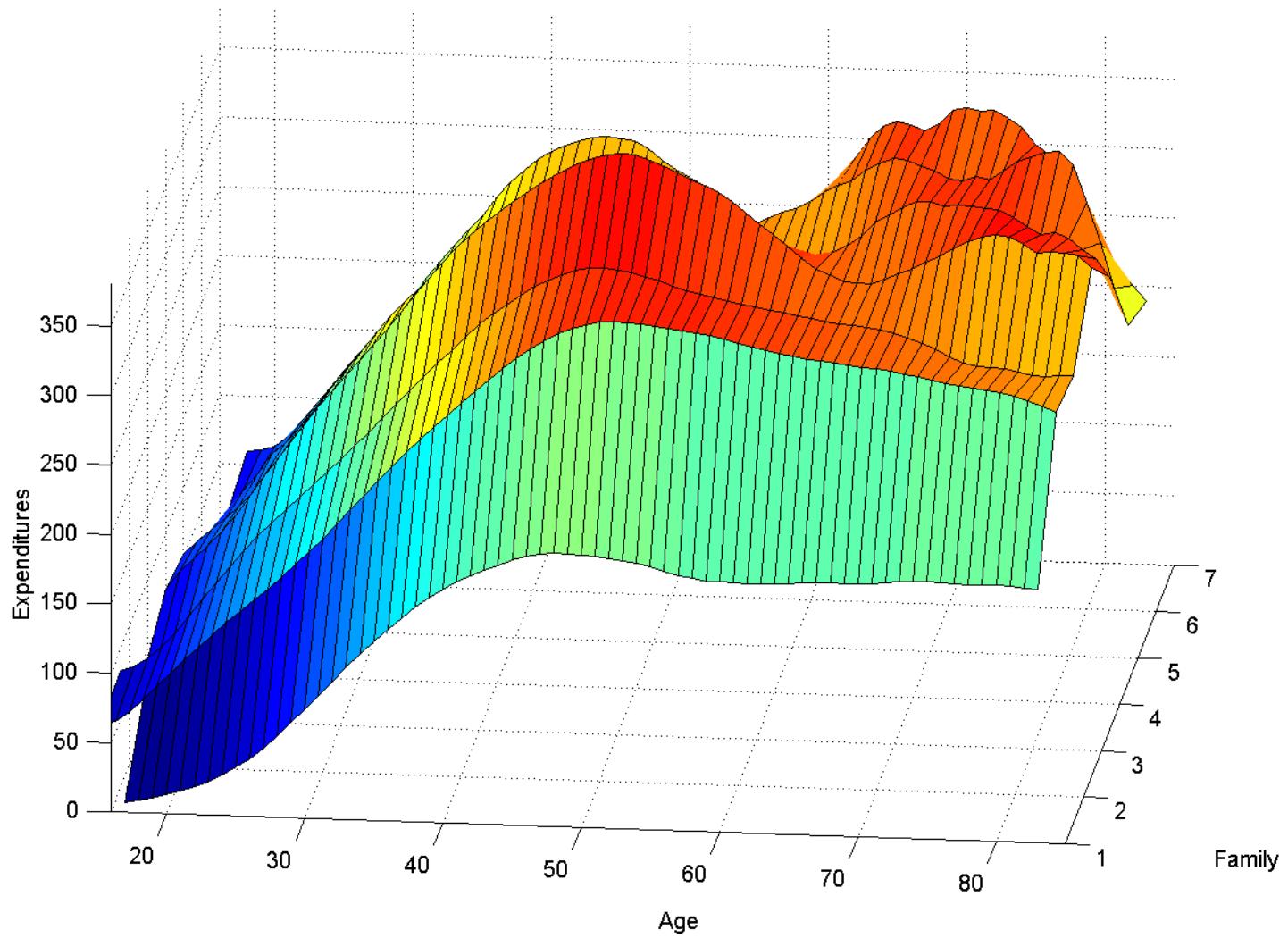


Figure 2.9: Households Net Worth, 1995 SCF

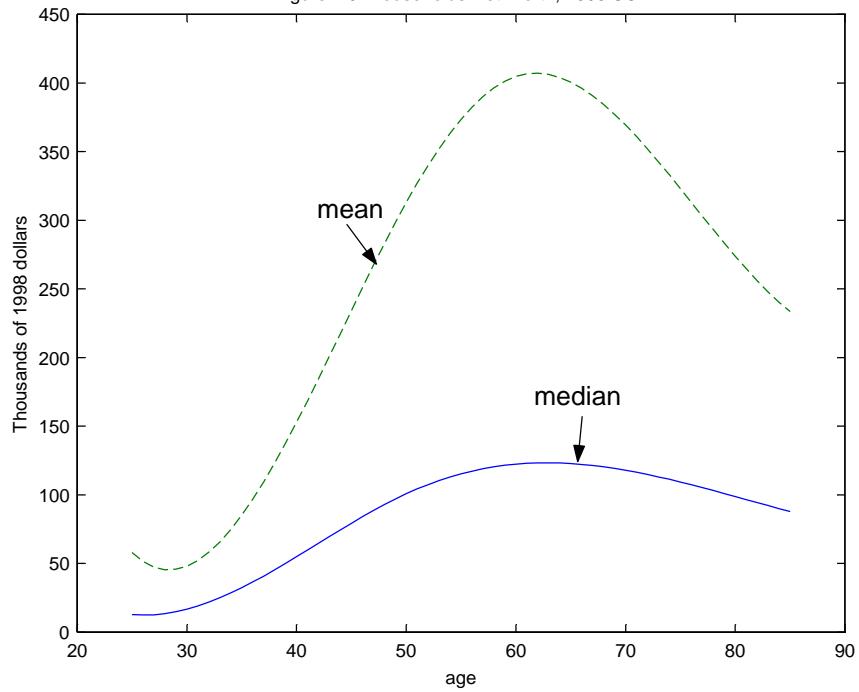


Figure 2.10: Households Assets Distribution by Wealth, 1995 SCF

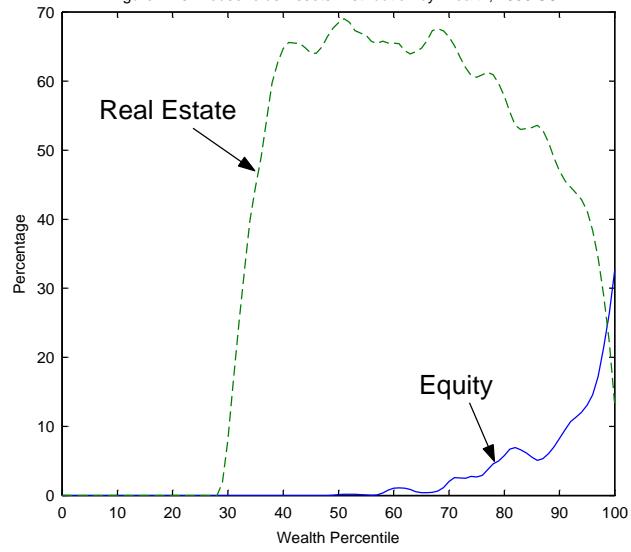


Figure 2.11: Median Households Assets, 1995 SCF

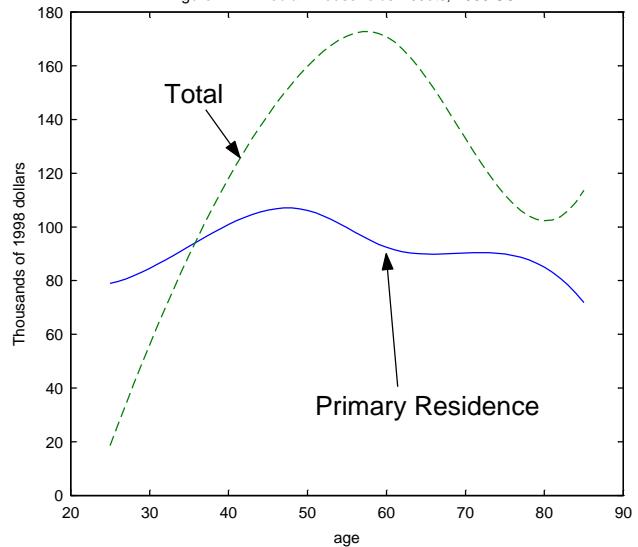


Figure 4.1: Conditional Survival Probabilities

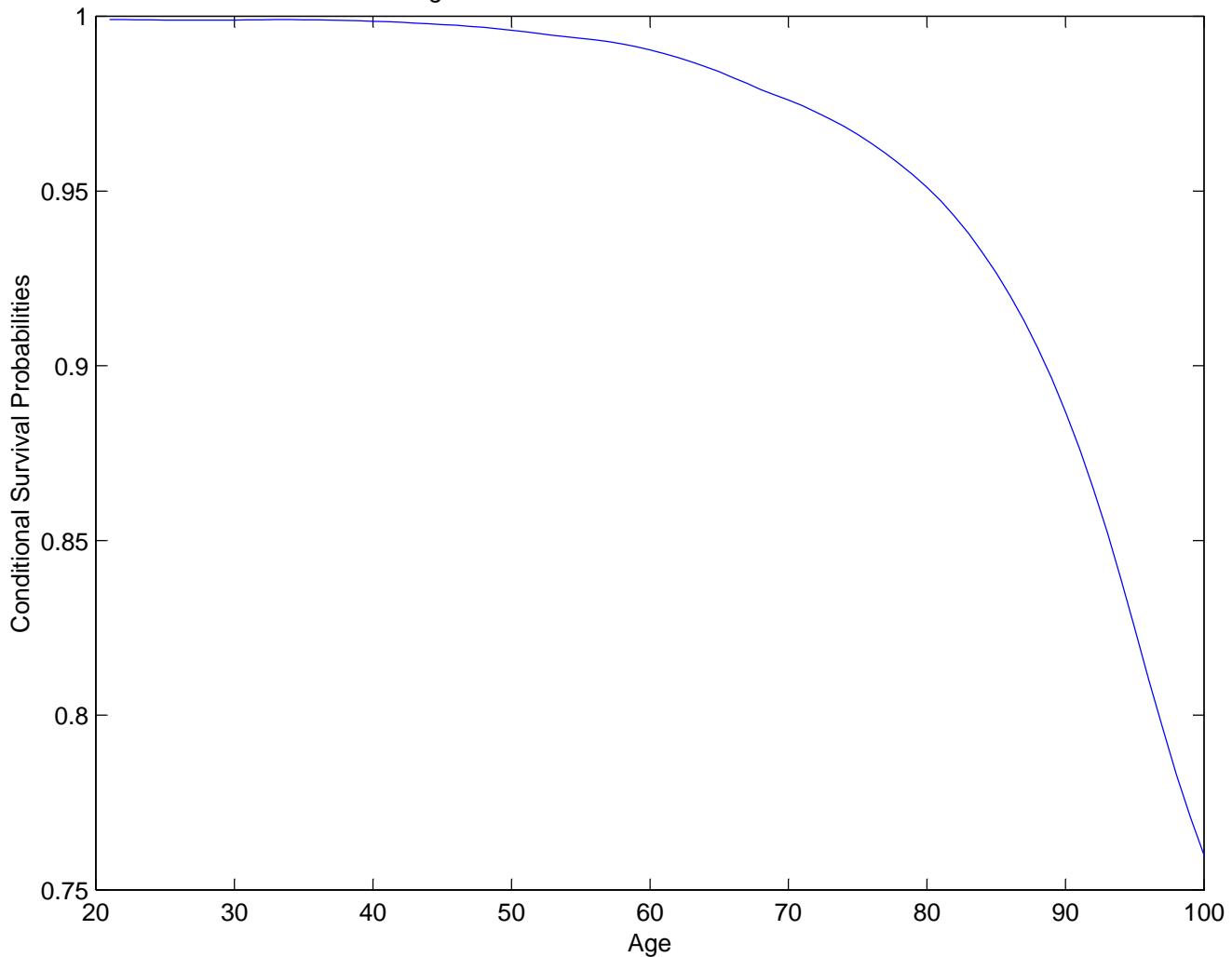


Figure 5.1: Life Cycle Pattern of Labor Income and Nondurable Consumption

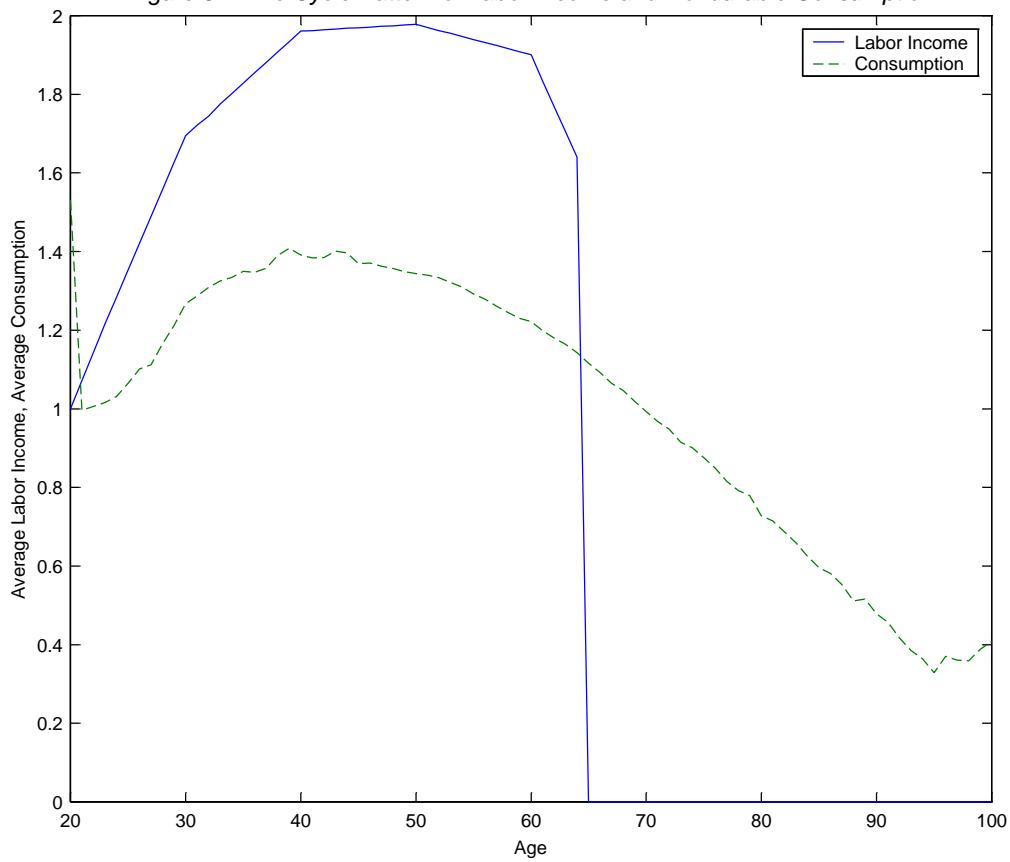


Figure 5.2: Life Cycle Pattern of Consumer Durables, Financial Wealth and Total Wealth

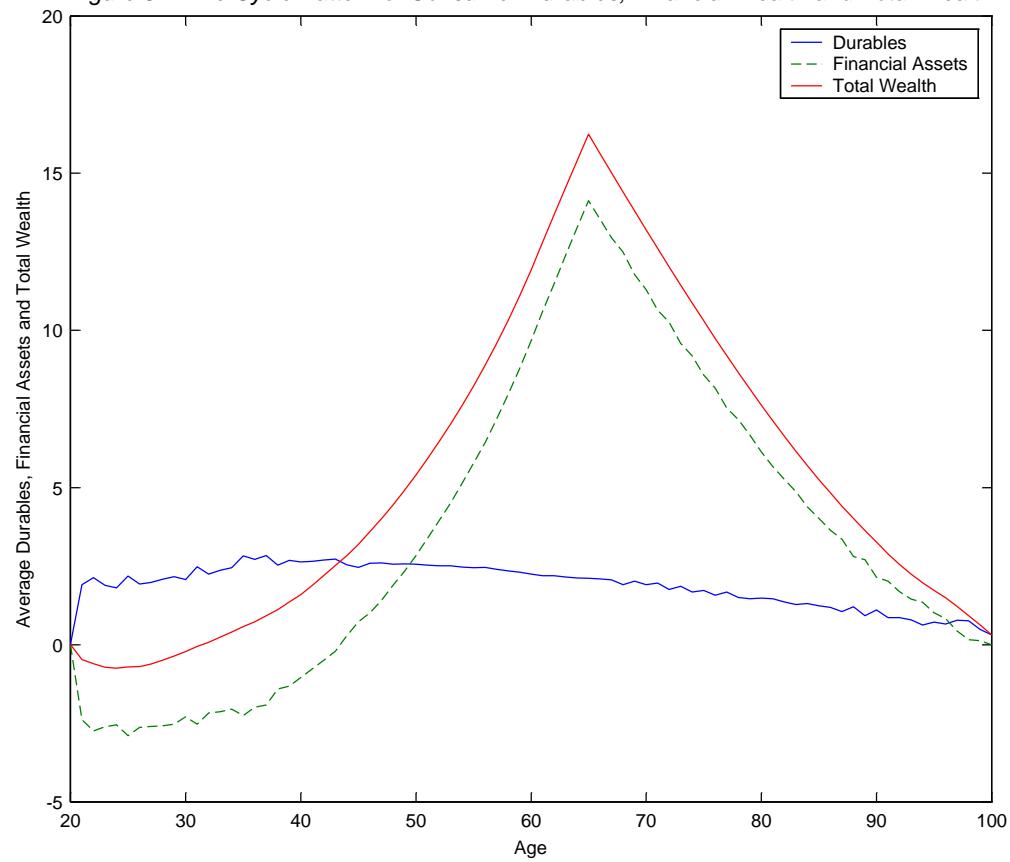


Figure 5.3: Average Stock of Durables

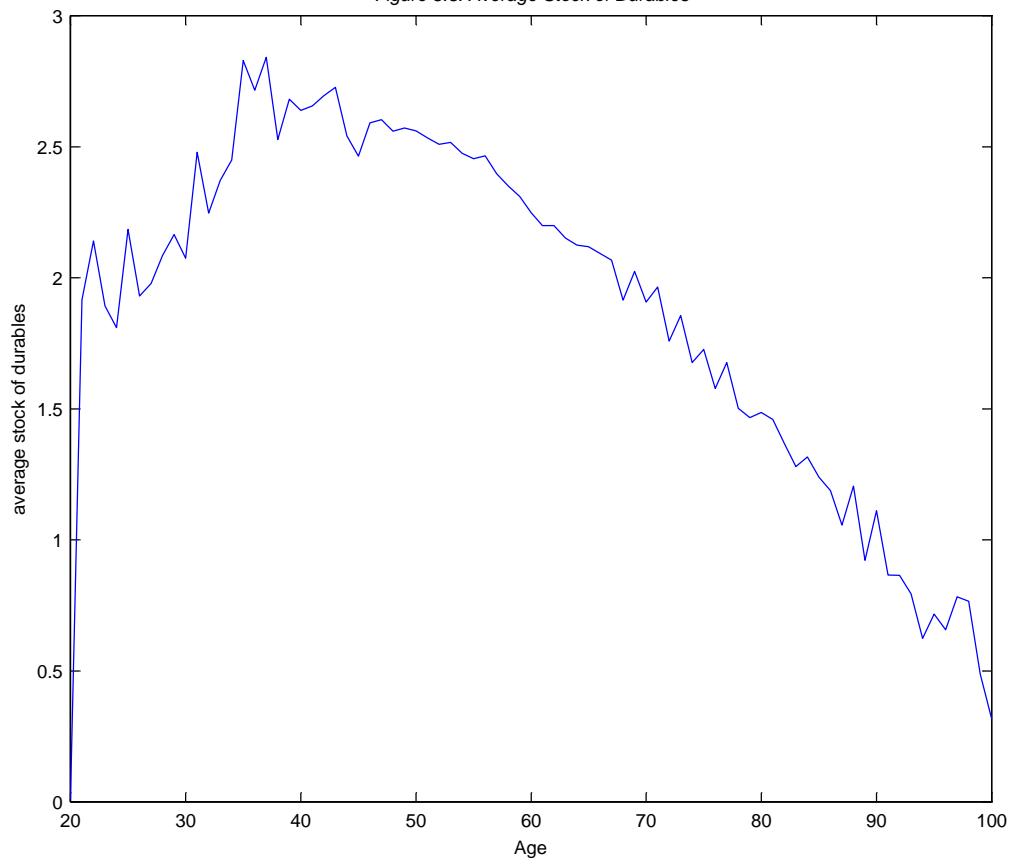


Figure 5.4: Average Expenditure on Durables

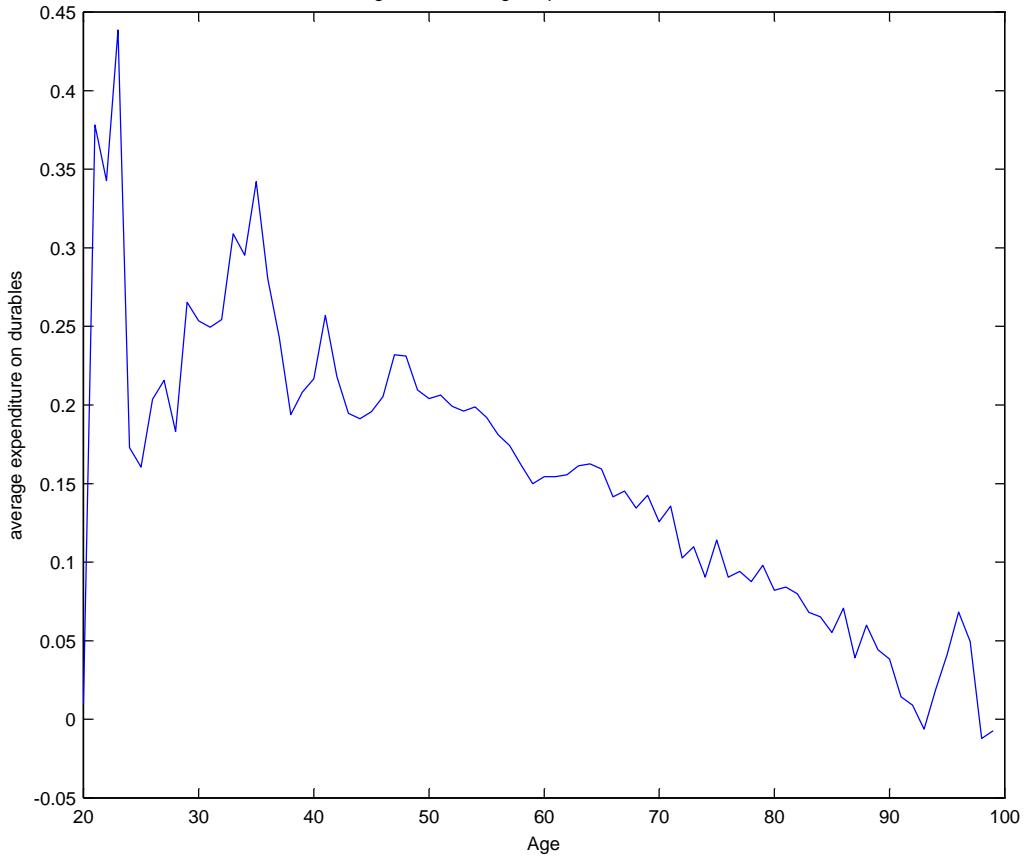


Figure 5.5: Some Simulated Life Cycle Consumption Profiles

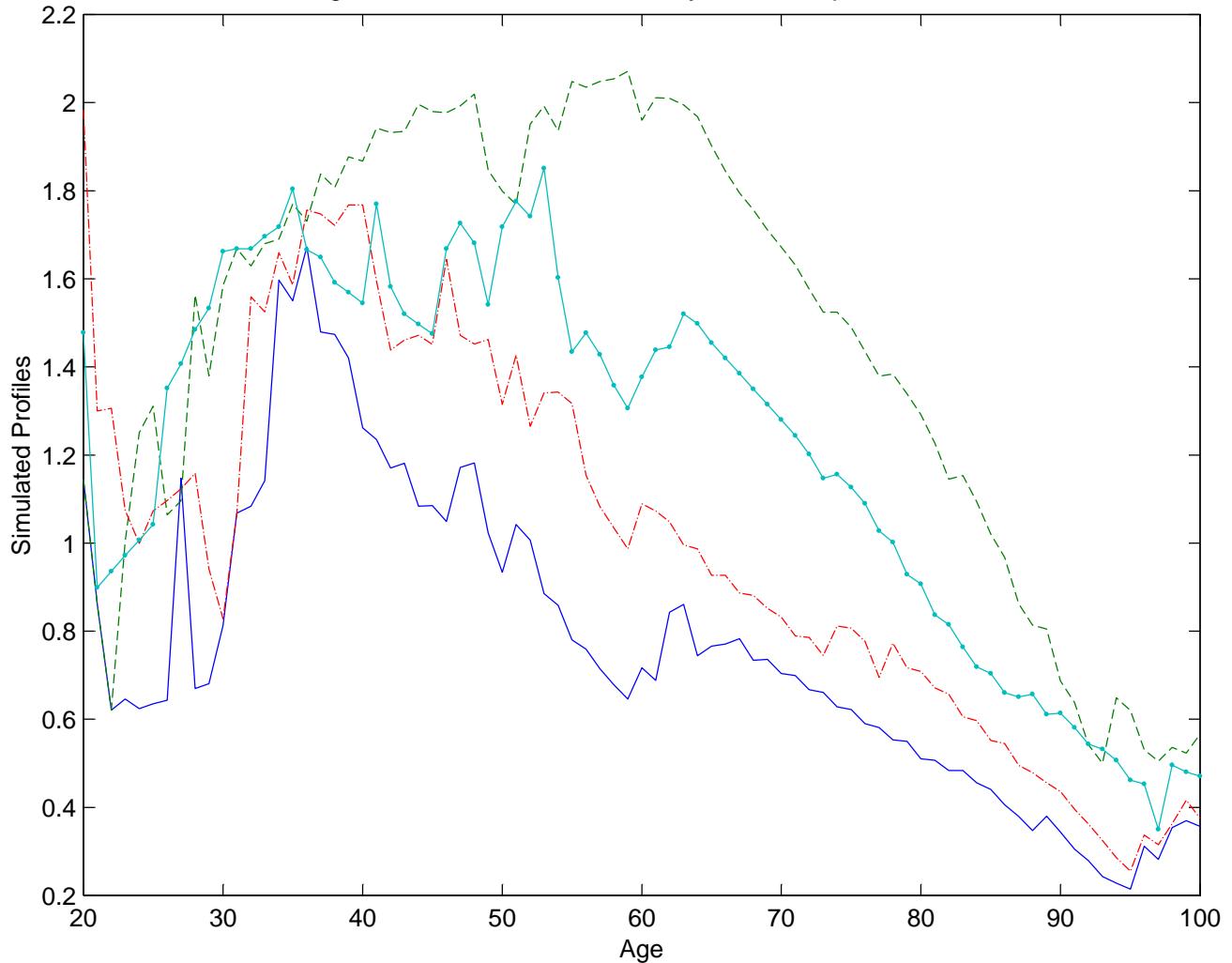


Figure 5.6: Life Cycle Pattern of Labor Income and Nondurable Consumption, no uncertainty

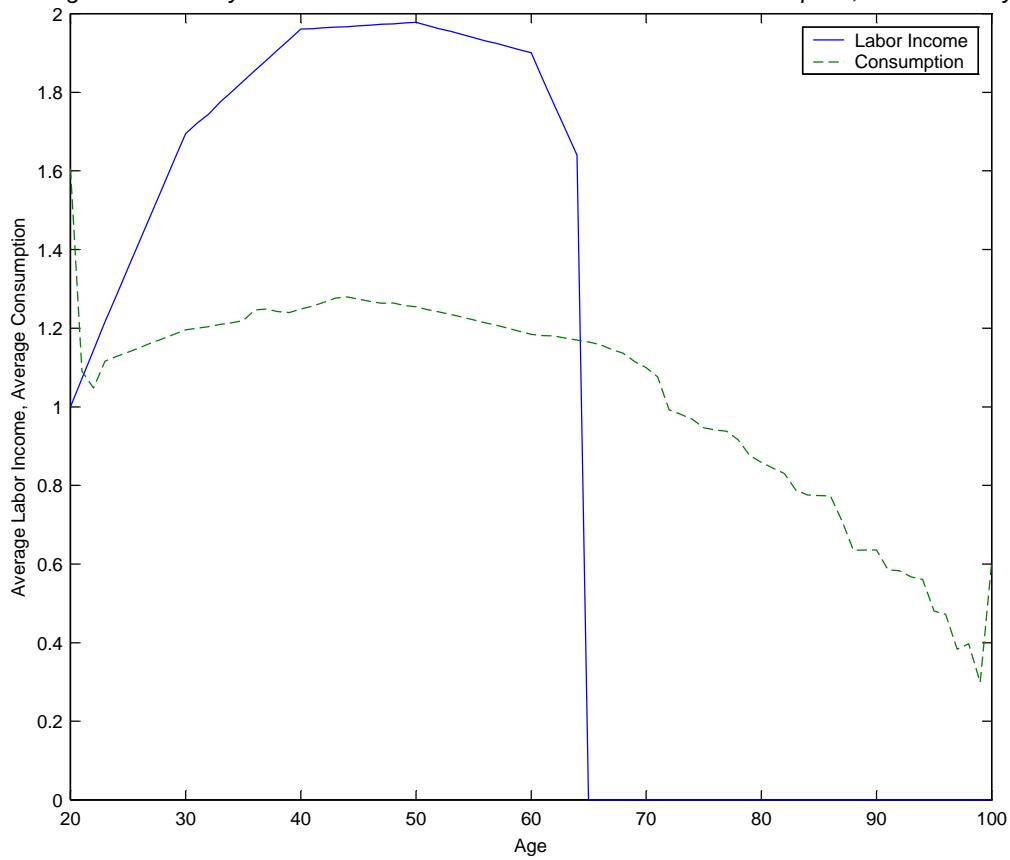


Figure 5.7: Life Cycle Pattern of Consumer Durables, Financial Wealth and Total Wealth, no uncertainty

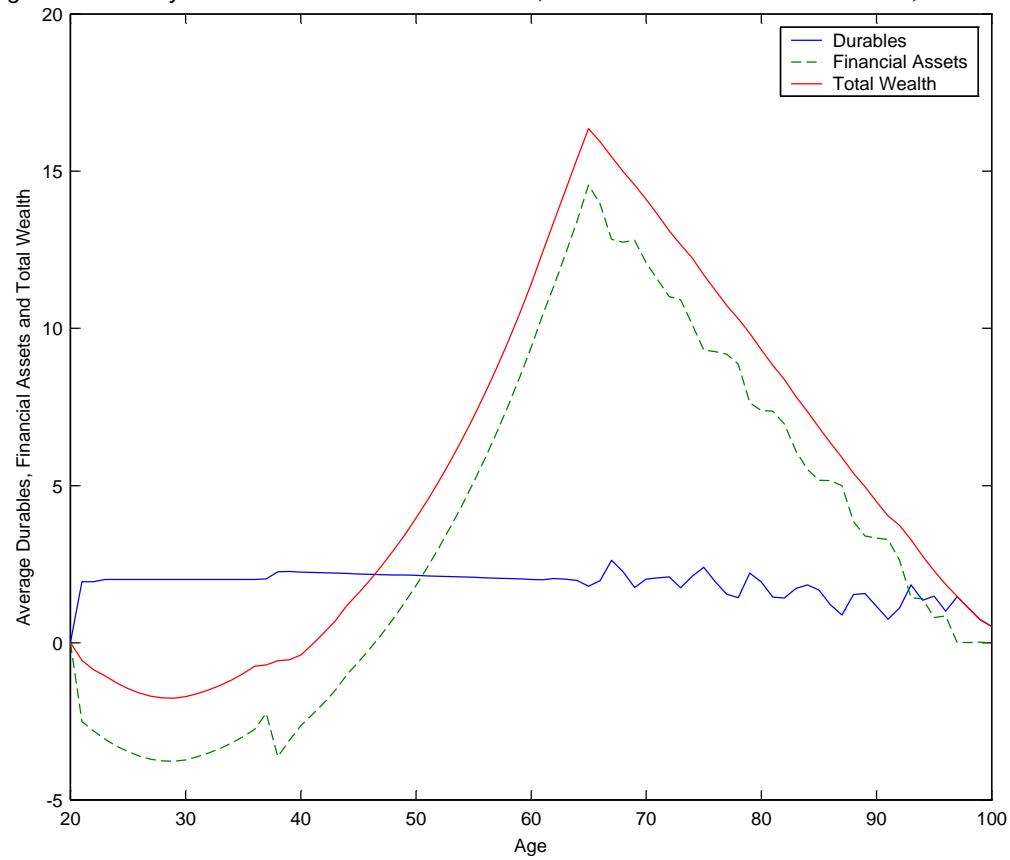


Figure 5.8: Simulated and Average Life Cycle Pattern of Financial Assets

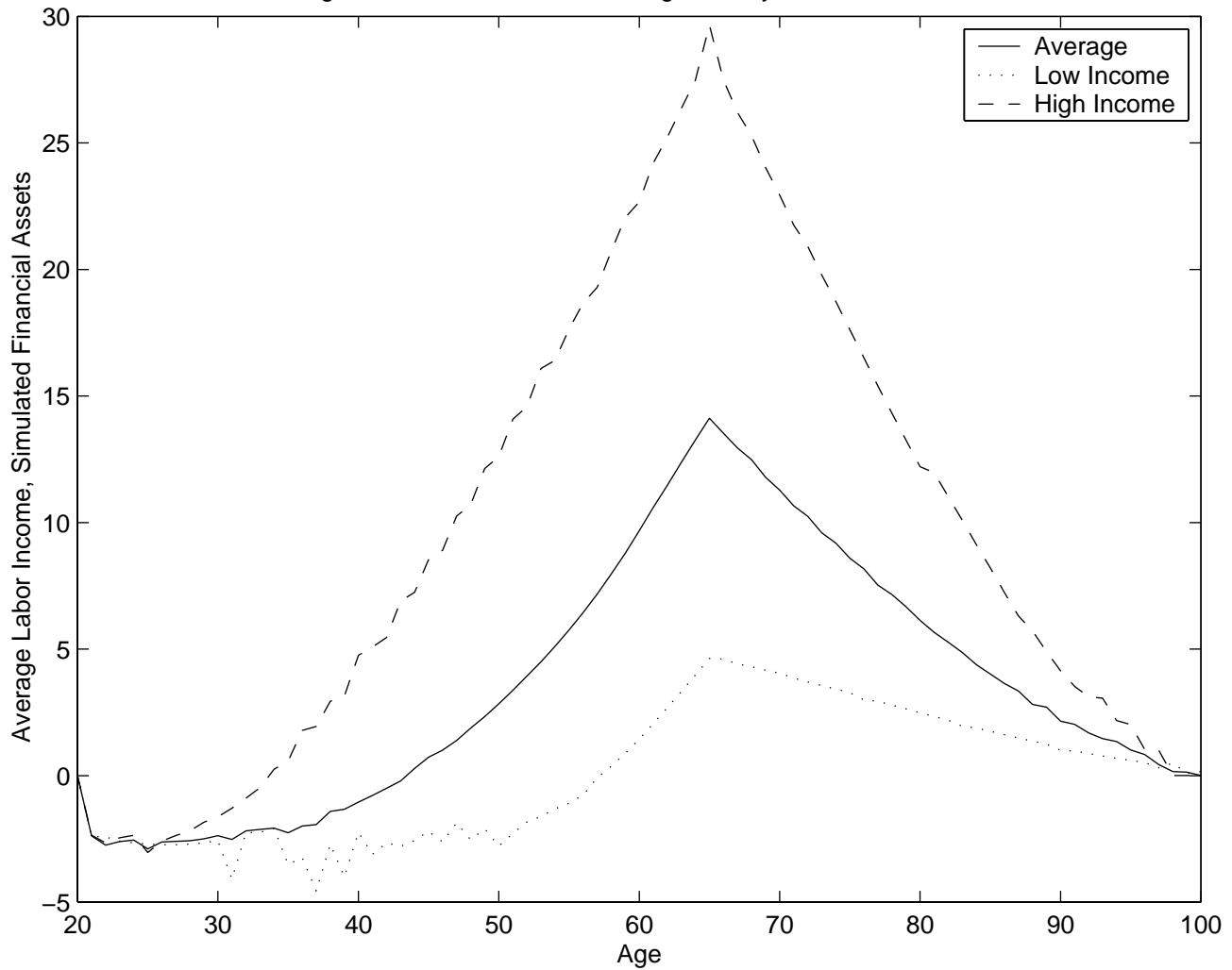


Figure 6.1: Life Cycle Pattern of Labor Income and Nondurable Consumption

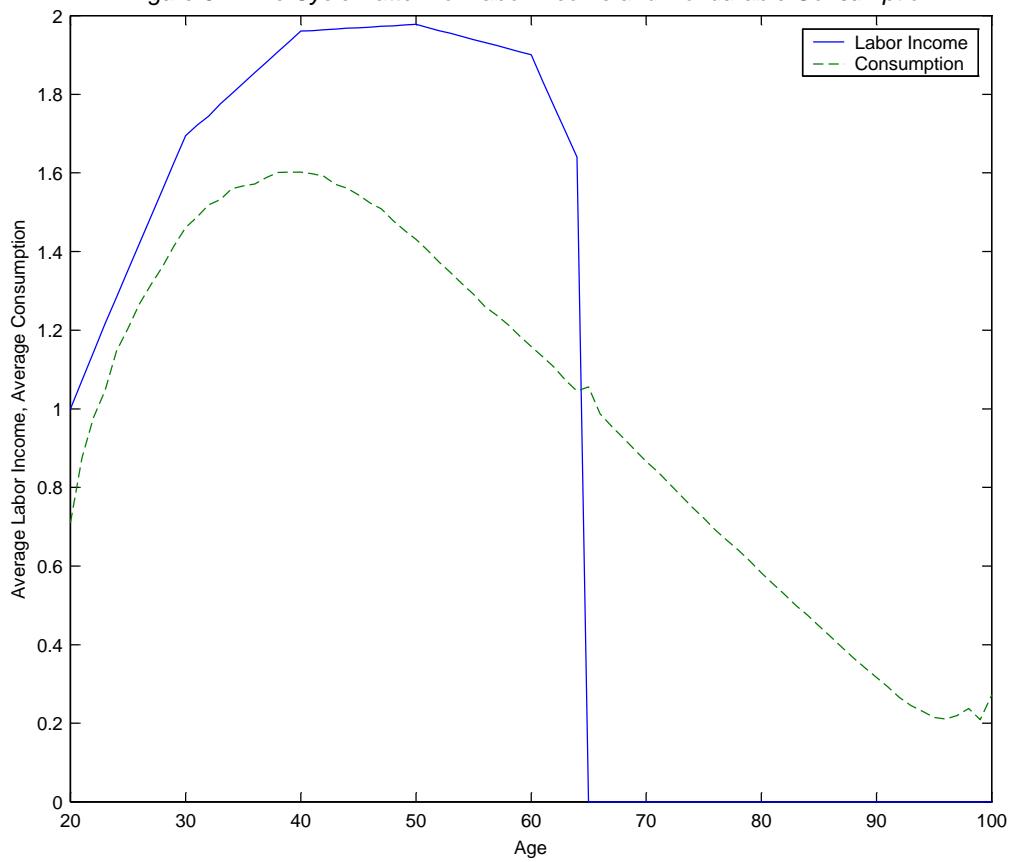


Figure 6.2: Life Cycle Pattern of Consumer Durables, Financial Wealth and Total Wealth

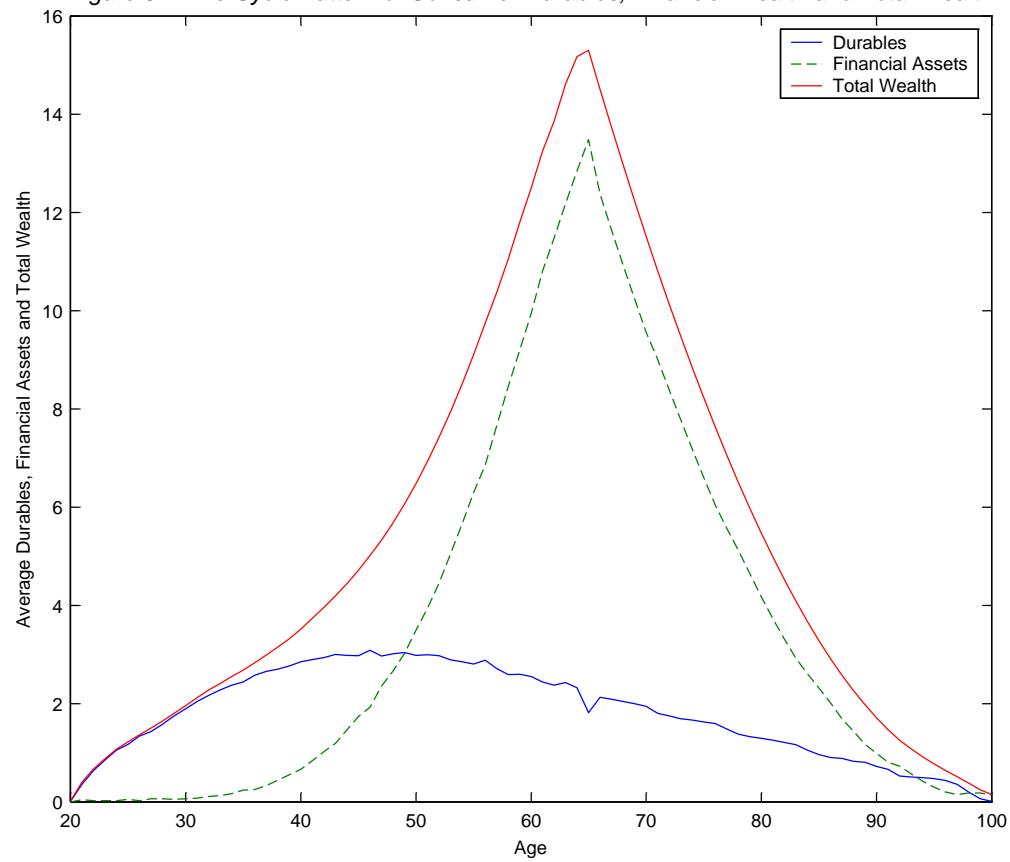


Figure 6.3: Life Cycle Pattern of Labor Income and Nondurable Consumption

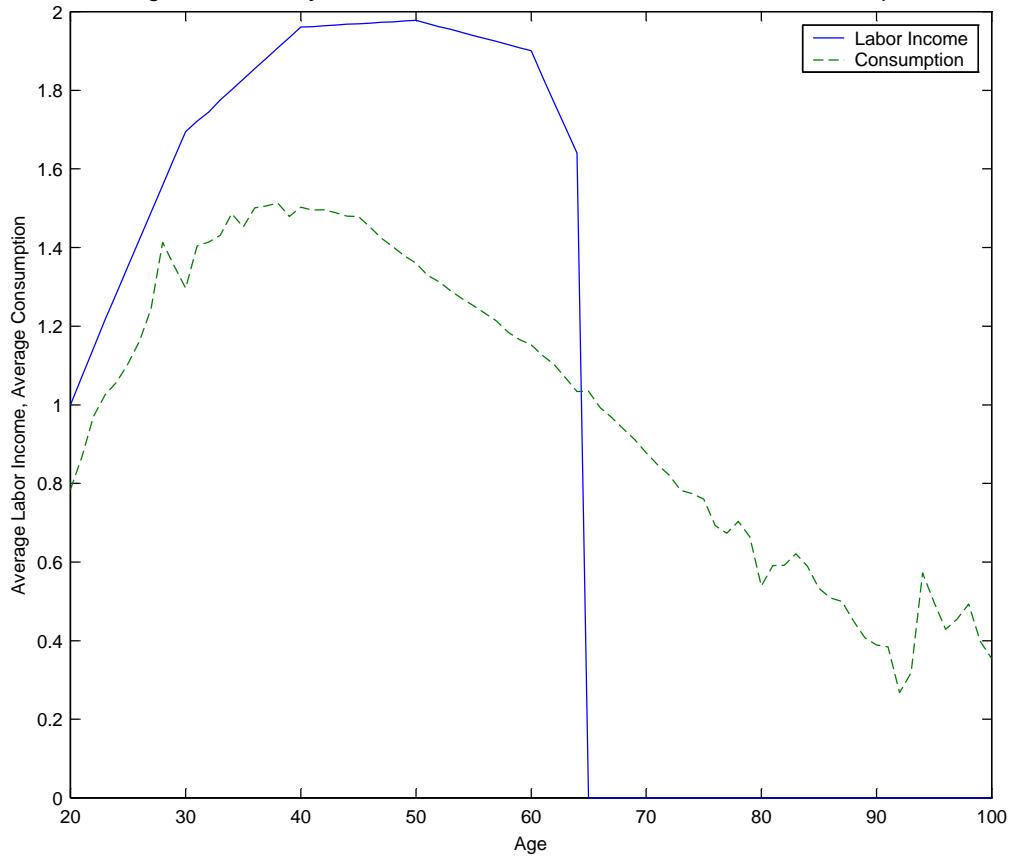


Figure 6.4: Life Cycle Pattern of Consumer Durables, Financial Wealth and Total Wealth

