

# Measures of leaving the parental home

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The postponement of union formation in west European countries in the last decades has resulted to a longer waiting time until young adults did, if ever, found an own family. The range of living arrangements in this period of the life course has broadened. Due to low fertility also of the parents' generation and due to wealthier housing conditions the parental home may abet to stay in it, unmarried cohabitation is legalised and more preferred in some age groups than to be married, visiting educational institutions might be accompanied by more or less transitory living in adequate households and institutions.

Newly available European and German surveys give more information about the historical and regional differences. I will discuss measurement problems. More detailed I will inform about the concept of "conjoint events" and about the "fuzzy time". In general I will express some doubts about the quality of data and the concept of the demographic event "leaving the parental home".

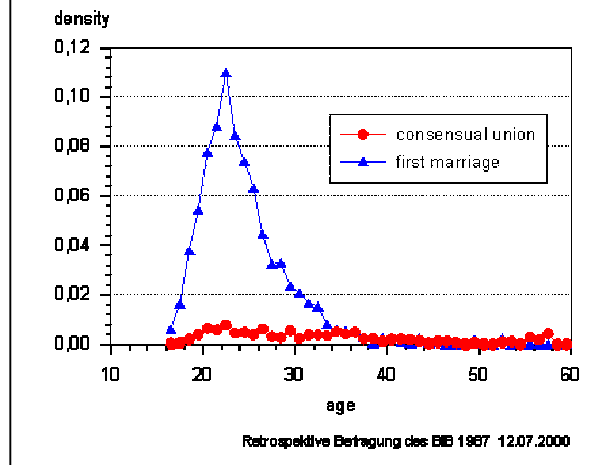
This presentation is part of the BiB project "The decline of nuptiality - a new gain of privacy or a loss of private and family investments?" which has been announced to the "Fertility and Family Survey" research programme of the UN/ECE.

## Introduction

The traditional nuptiality had been marked by a high marriage propensity which sustained the assumption that nearly all would marry, the majority in the age of 20-30. That means that young adults left their parental home at that age to form an own household, women one to two years earlier than man due to the common age difference of young spouses. Consensual unions, i.e. households of unmarried people of opposite gender, have also been built in the past, but rather seldom and unspecific at time. It could not be foreseen that this alternate form of partnerships would overtake the marital union. Figure 1 shows the density of marriages and consensual union building of German women born 1927 to 1951 (Retrospective Survey of the BiB, cf. Hullen 1995). The marriage rate had a peak in the beginning of the 20s, whereas new consensual unions were built at any age at a very low level.

**Fig. 1**

**Marriages and consensual unions  
female cohorts 1927-1951 - Germany**



The impact of marriages are new households. Only if there is a special pressure, for instance housing shortage or administrative rules, new kernel families in Western and Central Europe may start whilst living in the parental home. This is - by definition - similar to consensual unions with an own common household. So the age at leaving home is influenced by the union formation behaviour. Other factors might be the quality of the parental home or educational and occupational careers vice versa opportunities both of the educational system and the labour market.

There is a broad literature on these topics. In a special volume of the "Journal of Family Issues" (18, 1997, 6) with contributions of Cordon, Fernandez-Cordon, and Nave-Herz, Cordon analysed the European Labour Force Surveys, 1983-1994, in twelve countries of the European Union, and he compared especially Italy, Greece, and Spain as southern countries with France, Germany and Great Britain. The "Revue de l'OFCE" (72, 2000) contained contributions of Gallard, Heinz, Cavalli, Cunningham, and Bynner. The international comparisons of Corijn/Klijzing in "Transitions to adulthood in Europe" (1999/2000) focused on the interaction of the events of the educational/occupational career and the start of the household and family formation. German references are Blossfeld/Nuthmann 1991; Buba/ Fruchtel/ Pickel 1995; Georg/Strzoda/Zinnecker 1994; Härtl 1996; Hullen 1995; Hullen 1998; Lauterbach/Lüscher 1999; Mayer/Schwarz 1989; Mayer/Wagner 1989; Meulemann 1995; Nave-Herz 1997; Papastefanou 1997; Schwarz 1989; Silbereisen/Meschke/Schwarz 1996; Vaskovics 1997; Wagner 1989; Wagner/Huinink 1991; Weick 1993; Ziegler/Schladt 1993.

## Conceptual questions

The status of young adults who stay in the parental home at higher ages may be far away from the situation of a child which has to be reared and educated by its parents. What is the remaining centre of living together in the parental home? The living room might not be longer shared, nor the kitchen, nor the TV or other media; there are no common visitors and only sparsely information about the others' guests. Is the common use of the washing-machine the last reminiscence of mother-child relations? I mention these varied forms of living together not to contrast it to a rather romantic picture of a glorious family life, but in order to indicate that the economic definition of a household has rather weakened due to the age of the children, the economic and ecological situation of the households and due to life styles where outsourcing takes place also in the private life of recreating and consuming.

It is also important to distinguish between different situations of the young adults when they have left the parental home. The amount and the structure of the material and social capital of the new places of residence might be quite different. There will be a great variety between new households which are the main place for recreation and consume, together with a spouse and children, and of new "addresses" which are part of a plurilocal way of life. The members of these households might envisage quite different perspectives of future living. If one tries to make prognoses about their housing and facility needs - as this is the case in household projections - one should be aware that new addresses may not comply the traditional concept of a household. The new situation of less visible, more transparent boundaries between the spatial and economical spheres of the generations leads to growing problems to collect information through personal interviews and to analyse the timing of household changes. Interdependencies with other biographical events may inspire the respondents'

memory, but this includes inevitably attempts of ex post explanations of former behaviour. If one considers that also other biographic events, e.g. the begin and the end of partnerships or the occupational career, are less fixed than it is traditionally given with marriages and the 8-hours-day, analyses of leaving the parental home are forerunners for some more analyses of the life course.

## Questionnaires' questions

Compared to marriages, births or deaths, there is a broad variety in questioning about the event of leaving home. It seems typical that in an own retrospective study of our institute 1987 (Federal Institute for Population Research; cf. Hullen 1995) it had been only asked for the date of the "separation of the family of origin". The understanding of this question by the respondents probably had a wide range – from temporary mental alienation between generations on the one side, to economic autonomy with conclusive moves on the other. So the answers could not been analysed.

Whereas the first wave 1988 of the German Family Study, done by the German Youth Institute (Familienstudie, Deutsches Jugendinstitut, München), did not request any information if the respondents had stayed at home after the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, in the second wave 1994/95 it has been asked "In welchem Alter sind Sie aus der elterlichen Wohnung ausgezogen?" [At which age did you leave the parental home?]. Results will be shown later.

The main base of this analysis is the Family and Fertility Survey. This international project, co-ordinated by the UN/ECE (Geneva), was undertaken in about twenty countries in Europe, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A. in the last two decades. The shortness of the questions in the standard questionnaire concerning the leaving of the parental home (Fig. 2) might have been something like an invitation for national researchers to detail them. For example the relevant parts in the German and in the Italian questionnaires are of interest. They broadened the spotlight and probably they gave cues to different views on the mere event of leaving the parental home. In both countries it was sticked to stages of the process, in Germany to the possibility of multiple leaving with intermediate re-entry, in Italy to different stages of autonomy. When, like in Italy, respondents are asked about their economical autonomy on their parents, their reported age at leaving presumably is general higher.

**Fig. 2: Questions concerning leaving home in the FFS questionnaires**

**FFS Standard Questionnaire**

107. Did you ever leave your (foster)parent(s) to start living on your own?  
108. In what month and year did you first leave your (foster)parent(s) to start living on your own?  
109. Does this mean that you are still living with your (foster)parent(s)?  
[...]  
112. In what month and year did you stop living with your (foster)parent(s)?

**Germany** (in brackets number of corresponding Standard Questionnaire questions and given translation; Pohl 1995)

123. Leben Sie derzeit mit Ihren Eltern bzw. Pflegeeltern zusammen? [109 Do you currently live with your (foster)parent(s)?]  
124. Sind Sie jemals von Ihren Eltern bzw. Pflegeeltern weggezogen? [107 Did you ever move away from your (foster)parent(s)?]  
125. Wann sind Sie das erste Mal von Ihren (Pflege-)Eltern weggezogen? [108 In what month and year did you first leave your (foster)parent(s)?]  
126. Seit wann wohnen Sie wieder mit Ihren (Pflege-)Eltern zusammen? [109 Since when have you been living with your (foster)parent(s) again?]  
127. Seit wann wohnen Sie nicht mehr mit Ihren (Pflege-)Eltern zusammen? [112 In what month and year did you stop living with your (foster)parent(s)?]  
[...]  
129. Seit wann sind Sie (und/ oder Ihr Partner) der Haushaltsvorstand? [111 Since when have you (or your partner) been the head of the household?]

**Italy** (in brackets given translation; De Sandre et al. 1999)

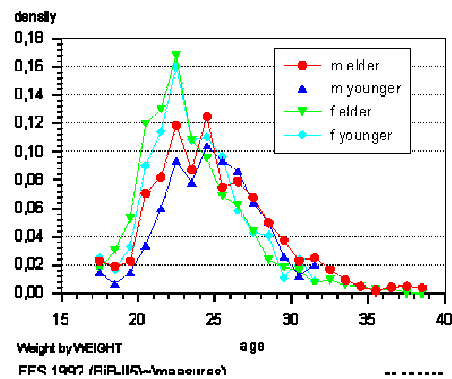
- 2.8 C'è stato un momento della sua vita in cui ha lasciato la casa dei\l genitori\ e ed è andata a vivere per conto proprio? [Did you ever leave your (foster)parent(s) to start living on your own?]  
2.9 Quando ha lasciato la casa dei\l genitori\ e per la prima volta? [In what month and year did you first leave your (foster)parent(s) to start living on your own?]  
2.10 Qual è il motivo principale per cui ha lasciato la casa dei\l genitori\ e? {matrimonio\coabitazione, lavoro, studio, autonomia\indipendenza, altro (specificare), non risponde} [What is the main reason to start living on your own? {marriage, work, study, autonomy\independence, other (specify), no response}  
[...]  
2.13 Attualmente lei vive ancora con almeno uno dei genitori? [Are you still living with your (foster)parent(s)?]  
2.14 Lei personalmente è economicamente indipendente dei\l genitori\ e? [Are you economically independent on your parent(s)?]  
2.15 Da quando ciò avviene?[Since when?]  
2.16 Da quando non vive più con almeno un genitore? [In what month and year did you stop living with your (foster)parent(s)?]

## The timing

Results of current German surveys differ slightly as regards the age of leaving the parental home. Younger data obviously do not longer sustain the expectation of an ongoing postponing of those moves.

**Fig. 3**

**Leaving the parental home, 20 to 39 years old cohorts, Germany**



## Family and Fertility Survey 1992

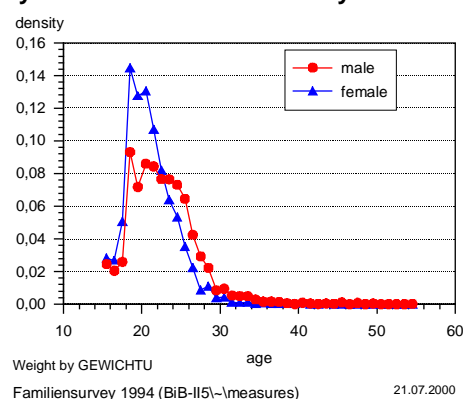
Following the Family and Fertility Survey in Germany which took place 1992 the younger cohorts had left the parental home at higher ages. The median age of men had increased from 22.6 to 24 years, the median of women from 20.9 to 21.6 years (Figure 2). This increase was slightly smaller in the former GDR than in the former territory of the Federal Republic. Compared to the postponement of reaching full autonomy especially in southern European countries and to the broad discussion about "Hotel Mama", the increase is nearly negligible.

## Family Survey 1994

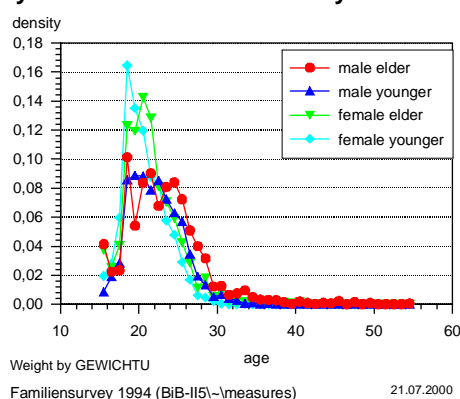
Two years later, the Family Survey had been done, including a broader age range of respondents from 18 to 55 years. Men had left the parental home at about 23, women at about 21. For a quick look the respondents were divided into two groups above and beneath the median age at time of interview of 37 years. Contrary to the

**Fig. 4**

**Leaving the parental home, 18 to 55 years old cohorts - Germany**



**Leaving the parental home, 18 to 55 years old cohorts - Germany**



common expectation the age of the younger women was even slightly lower than the relevant age of elder women, and men's ages at leaving home nearly had not changed (elder women 21.1, younger women 20.8 years, elder men 23.2, younger men 23.3 years).

One tentative explanation could lie in the structure of a panel survey: it might be biased by a higher proportion of people with a comparable low mobility. On the other hand this should result in an increase of the age of the movers. So the common hypothesis that the postponement of leaving home in Germany in the 90s is going on will not be sustained.

## Missing data

The respondents of the German FFS were not only asked for the date when they had left the parental home, but also if they were still living with the parents. It was quite astonishing how many – more than five percent – declared not to live longer with the parents, without giving a date of leaving the parental home, neither year nor month. Of course, some of these missing data might be caused by remembrance holes. Another part could be attributed to diffuse boundaries between parents' and children's households. There are several organisational possibilities: division of the parental household, children's second places of residence (typical for students), second places of residence of the parents, fluctuating living both in an own and the parents' household. It has not been possible to clarify it by empirical data, but there is some evidence for the assumption that the demographic event of leaving the parental home is no longer an event with a visible occurrence and a date which can be fixed post festum. In many cases it is a process which lasts over a time interval (fuzzy time) and in some cases it is not even uni-directed.

## Conjunctions of leaving home

For further investigations I looked if the leaving of the parental home took place in the same time with other demographic events. In the literature two broad categories of reasons to move are reported, the one is the family formation, the other the continuation of a career in the educational system or on the labour market. In my own analyses the family formation was subdivided by the events of a childbirth (for women pregnancies too), a marriage and the begin of a consensual union. The construction of conjoint events does not contain a causal relationship. Two - somewhat arbitrary - decisions were necessary, concerning the duration of time and the subsumption of events if there were more than two (see Hullen 1995 for more details<sup>1</sup>):

- Births are conjoint with leavings if they took place in the period beginning half a year before moving until half a year after moving.
- Marriages are conjoint if they took place in the period beginning at the time of moving until three months later.
- Entries into a consensual union (with an own household) in the same manner as marriages are conjoint if they took place at latest three months after leaving the parental home.
- Education is conjoint if it has been continued after leaving - irrespectively of its duration.

Superiority was given to the conjoint events in the order of the list above, i.e. the coincidence of leaving with birth and marriage was categorised as "leaving & birth", the coincidence of leaving with consensual union and further education as "leaving & CU". Table 1 for the West German subsample of the FFS shows that about one third of the reported moves did not coincide with the described other biographic events (category "others", men 34.3 percent, women 30.3 percent). In detail, about 13 percent of the moves were conjoint with further education. 11 (men) to 16 percent (women) to consensual unions, 7 (men) to 14 percent (women) to marriages.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also part of Hullen 1998; the figures given there differ slightly from the figures in this paper due to the former exclusion of respondents who had left the parental home at an unknown time.

**Table 1 : Leaving the parental home and conjoint events, duration and maximum of duration resp. censoring**

Destination	Episodes	%	Duration	Max. duration
<b>Men</b>				
0 censored	548	27,6	26.14	40.17
1 child	103	5,2	23.94	39.17
2 marriage	146	7,4	23.34	34.42
3 consensual union	227	11,4	22.74	30.92
4 further educ./train.	280	14,1	19.91	29.08
5 others	681	34,3	22.14	37.75
Total men	1985	100,0		
<b>Women</b>				
0 censored	525	17,7	26.28	40.17
1 pregnant/birth	257	8,7	21.27	38.58
2 marriage	428	14,5	21.47	32.00
3 consensual union	468	15,8	21.25	33.75
4 further educ./train.	384	13,0	19.22	27.17
5 others	897	30,3	21.32	34.17
Total women	2959	100,0		

Source: FFS 1992, West Germany 20-39 years old men and women

The destinations' ages differ remarkable. Leaving the parental home on behalf of further education takes place at the age of 19 to 20 years when, in general, final certificates of academic and vocational education have been achieved (in Germany: "Abitur" and "Berufsausbildung"). The slightly higher mean age for men might be explained by military and civil service. Also for the other destinations the age of women is lower, obviously due to the common age difference of couples. In the case of beginning consensual unions man leave the parental home at the age of about 22, women with 21, in the case of marriages, i.e. "immediate" marriages without foregoing cohabitation, men leave with 23 years, women with 21 ½. In the case of child births, men leave with about 25 years, women with 21 years.

## Conclusions

The time lags of two to four years for women resp. men between conjunctions of leaving home sustain the assumption of profound corresponding differences of their new addresses. Of course, households of couples should offer more space than one-person-households, couples in general will have an extended time usage of their flats, they will look for longer perspectives to live there, and especially for households with children specific ties to other households (social nets) will grow. From the point of view of demographic analyses the definition of an own household should correspond to these differences.

If the respondents could clearly interpret it, the question of economical autonomy might be added to the question of leaving home. This could be appropriate for the rather high proportion of respondents who answered that they had separated from their parents but could /did not indicate the date of leaving home. In the example of the Italian FFS one may doubt if the precondition of a mutual understanding of the term of economically independence had been given.

Another proposal to clarify the event of leaving the parental home has been to distinguish it to forming a household for ones own. This should be useful for an improved description of intermediate living periods in institutions and communitarian households, not more. Another way could be to look for the size of the new households, assuming that living in an two-person household is of greater importance, as regards the life course and the consumer behaviour. Above results were presented distinguishing by other demographic events which had been conjoint with leaving. Both these two approaches suffer from the disadvantage that they are based on the empirical events, i.e. censored cases couldn't deliver any information.

Looking at the results of recent surveys one might conclude that the process of postponing the exit from the parental home has come to an end. In former times first marriages had been the most important causes for leaving. Their preponderance has steadily diminished both in practice and in the expectations of children and parents (cf. especially Goldscheider, Goldscheider 1993). The increase of the first marriage age to 25 years and

more has loosened this tie. Increasing consensual unions and moves out of the parental home on behalf of further education could not compensate the decrease of "full" autonomy within an own family.

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