Why Study Young Adult Living Arrangements? A View of the Second Demographic Transition

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Abstract

The major focus of research and theorizing on the second demographic transition has focused on changes in the relationships between men and women: the growth in cohabitation and the delay in marriage, together with increasing rates of union dissolution. However, the other major family tie, that between the generations, is also being challenged by the second demographic transition. As stable couple formation is delayed, where should young adults live? Should they live in trial unions (cohabitation), alone or with roommates in nonfamily settings, or with their parents?

This paper reviews research on trends in leaving home in the United States and in some other industrialized countries experiencing different versions of the second demographic transition. It also theorizes about the ways the process of leaving home, and particularly the route taken out of the home, are shaped both by changes in the family dimension of the transition to adulthood and by changes underway in the industrialized economies. Both sets of changes are reshaping the young adult life course patterns of schooling and career establishment. The economic considerations include variation in income sources, particularly wages and transfers, as well as the costs of independent residence, which vary sharply by country. These considerations underline the importance of taking a comparative perspective to the process of leaving home in the transition to adulthood.

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Why Study Young Adult Living Arrangements? A View of the Second Demographic Transition

Full adulthood normally involves attaining stable adult work and family roles in which one is providing for oneself and others, in some combination as a worker, partner, and parent. Childhood, in contrast, is normally associated with dependency on one’s own parents. The transition to adulthood, then, comprises both the end of childhood and progress on the central responsible roles of adulthood. When we study leaving home, all of these processes are bound together in various complex combinations.

The complexity is increased by the dramatic changes underway in both adult spheres—work and family. The time needed to attain stable adult work roles has increased due both to the increased need for higher education and for the increase in job turnover in early adulthood (Duncan 1996; Kim 1999; Oppenheimer et al. 1997). Ages at marriage have also increased substantially throughout the industrialized world, postponing full adulthood for most young adults and creating an ambiguous life course stage between the ages of 18 and 25 or so marked by “semi-adulthood,” when living with parents might make substantial economic sense. This has made the transitions of “leaving home” and “returning home” more complex.

The transition out of (and sometimes back into) the parental home has not been well studied. This has partly been because most researchers have focused on the adult roles themselves—union entry and status attainment, the dominant themes in the social and economic study of young adults—which has obscured the processes that lead to them.

Nevertheless, studying leaving home, and particularly studying the routes young people take out of the home, is an important step in assessing the second demographic transition. The
growth of nonfamily living is a hallmark of the second demographic transition phenomenon. It began among the elderly with the expansion of state support for pensioners, but spread to young adults at the same time as the other signature trends of the second demographic transition—the delays in marriage and parenthood and the growth in divorce and cohabitation.

The lack of research on leaving home likely reflects the much greater complexity of the process, compared with the growth of nonfamily living among the elderly. At the older end of the adult life course, nonfamily living has emerged as an alternative for widowed retired people to living with children. For younger people, living arrangements are tied to attaining both work and family roles, and are shaped both by resources located in the home as well as those located in the community or state. As such, its complexity presents a great challenge. It is one best met by the comparative study of leaving home in Europe. Europe leads the world in the second demographic transition (van de Kaa 1987), which has been restructuring adult family roles, particularly in young adulthood, with great variation across Europe in the extent of cohabitation. Europe also has enormous variation in the level of state support for higher education and work apprenticeships, shaping the transition to adult economic independence. This variation has produced great differences in parent-adult child living arrangements. In this paper, my goals are to outline the complexity that poses the challenge and to encourage the research on nestleaving with a European focus that is needed to meet it, focusing first on conditions in the home, and then on the role of the community or state. Figure 1 has been produced to help guide the discussion of how resources in the home and the state shape leaving home through their impact on young adults’ work and family roles.
The home is clearly important, as it is the major site of the socialization of children, where many of the transfers of the resources needed by the next generation are made. As such, the access young people have to the resources of their parental home should be of considerable interest to students of young adulthood as well to those interested in stratification, family formation, and the processes of social change, as well, of course, in leaving home.

The home, however, is just one piece, although normally a major one, in the set of resources that might be available to young adults considering their future lives. The state also can play an important role, primarily by providing access to apprenticeships that would lead to the development of human capital on the job, opportunities for pursuing higher education and hence, more general human capital, or both. When the state facilitates access to one or both sources of human capital, parental resources are less important; when it does neither, the importance of home grows in magnitude.

It is important to consider both adult roles—work and family—because making progress on the career agenda has a major impact on progress on developing adult family roles for young men and increasingly for young women, as well. This makes the resources available through the family and the state indirectly important in this realm of adulthood, as well. Through policies affecting the cost of housing and through other forms of economic support, the state can also directly affect young people’s opportunities to make progress on their adult family roles, and on residential independence from the family. This is our primary task, so let us begin by focusing on the home.

Support in the home: A number of recent trends are currently affecting young people’s access to resources from their families, some positive and some negative. On the positive side, in
most industrialized countries, the generation of later middle-aged adults is wealthier than any in history, and had relatively small families, so that parents can afford to provide reasonable space for their children, and perhaps even space for their children’s partners and children. Parents evidently use their income to retard very early departure, which is linked with the most negative outcomes, but to facilitate leaving home at older ages (Avery, Goldscheider and Speare 1992; Whittington and Peters 1996). Parents are more likely to be living in areas where there are economic opportunities for young adults than in the not so distant past, when young adults had to leave home to find jobs. Parents also are more likely to have benefited from attaining higher education than was the case for their own parents, and to appreciate the importance of education for their children and be willing to help them attain it.

However, there is also a growing set of trends that are likely to restrict young adults’ access to these resources, even when parents have them. I think it is worth pointing out, here, that many families once provided their children with jobs. Involvement in and eventual inheritance of the family farm or business was once an important issue structuring many young peoples’ economic opportunities and their relationships with their parents. This is not to say that nepotism has totally vanished from modern economies; many parents can “pick up the phone” as it were, and get opportunities for children and other relatives in the businesses of their colleagues. Nevertheless, most parents who want to help their children must now find other ways to do so.

The primary means, of course, is money, although we like to think our advice is helpful, as well. Not all parents are willing to provide monetary support to their children, once they reach adulthood, and of those who are, help appears to be contingent on what young adults are doing. In a forthcoming study on the US, we found that although most parents expect to provide at least some help with the expenses of college (88%) for their unmarried children, many fewer would
help with college costs if the child were married, and fewer still would help out a child struggling with job or relationship difficulties (Goldscheider, Thornton, and Yang forthcoming). Further, there appeared to be substantial differences among mothers in what we call support priorities. Some would be more likely to expect to help a married child while others would be more likely to help an unmarried one. Some would be more likely to provide support to a child living away from home while others would only help out a child living at home. We interpreted these findings as indicating that consistent with other research, values about family forms are among the most contested of Americans’ attitudes, more than attitudes about race or class (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996).

Given confusion about whether and when to help out young adults, the growth in union dissolution is a most problematic recent trend. Consistent with research showing a link between parental separation and remarriage and decreased investment in children’s schooling (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1991), a consistent finding in the nestleaving literature is that young people leave home faster from disrupted families than from two-biological parent families (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998; Mitchell, Wister and Burch 1989; Ní Bhrolcháin et al. 2000; Young 1987). The differences are particularly large when leaving home to attend college is separated from other routes, since this is the one early route out of the home that young adults from stable, two-parent family structures are significantly more likely to take (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998). Young adults from unstable families are also much less likely to return home when they need to, suggesting that the home and its resources are simply less available to them (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999).

Further, parents in recent cohorts appear to be dismayed by the recent increases in the proportions of young adults remaining or returning home that have resulted from the increased
ages at marriage and increasing instability in the job market noted earlier. One frequently hears expressed an image of adulthood that requires residential independence from an early age, in most cases long before marriage (Riche, 1990; Schnaiberg and Goldenberg, 1989). The rhetoric in the popular press is even more extreme, referring for example to the emergence of “Peter Pan syndromes,” i.e., they refuse to grow up (e.g., Gross 1991), implying that young adults are not deserving of their parents’ residential support. This image, and the pressure it may put on young adults to leave home early, is problematic, given the negative effects of early nest-leaving on educational attainment (White and Lacy 1997).

In the US and in most of the other industrialized countries, the cohort of the parents of turn of the century young adults is not only relatively wealthy, but also left home younger than any cohort before or since (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1994). They appear to expect their children to follow in their footsteps, despite the much later ages at marriage and more fragile economic situation of the younger generation, relative to their own. Evidently, with the second demographic transition has come a greater expectation for privacy for all (Lesthaeghe and Meekers 1986). When young adults remain home, this postpones their parents’ entry into the empty nest stage of their own lives, which most parents now look forward to as a time of greater leisure.

This combination of trends is likely to be most problematic in the countries of northern and western Europe. In those countries, the historical marriage pattern was one in which people left home at marriage, requiring full economic independence. In eastern and southern Europe, in contrast, couples and their children formed part of (usually) the groom’s family household (Hajnal 1965), spreading the costs of the new family. Hence, support from families is likely to be lower in the countries of northern and western Europe, with their tradition of placing all the responsibility on the young adults. When you consider that these regions also have much higher
divorce rates and likely have experienced a more rapid growth in taste for privacy, holding economic conditions and state support equal, the transition to adulthood is likely to be more difficult in these countries.

**Community/State Support:** However, during the past several decades, economic conditions have been more favorable in northern and western Europe, and historically state support has been much more generous. I know much less about this literature. Here are some issues that should be considered:

1) the extent of government-provided cash assistance to low-income parents and their children strongly effects residential independence in young adulthood (Ellwood and Bane 1985). Kent (1992) estimates that growth in such government programs in the US had as much impact as the growth in wages (and were the two major contributors) to the increase between 1961 and 1979 in the proportion of those aged 15-24 in the United States who head their own households.

2) The German government has traditionally subsidized apprenticeship programs that smooth the transition from school to work for substantial numbers of young adults.

3) The Swedish government provides subsidies to students that allow them to continue in school.

4) Research on leaving home has found that housing costs (Christian 1989; Haurin, Hendershott, and Kim 1993; Whittington and Peters 1996) and job opportunities (Whittington and Peters 1996) are both important predictors.

5) Research on the Luxembourg Income Study countries has shown that the age group 15-25 is most responsive to income in their decision to form households (Short and Garner 1990).
It is time to put these processes together to create a more general model of factors affecting leaving home. This is a tall order, as even the trends in leaving and returning home are only vaguely known, and for only a small fraction of the next generation of the world’s adults. This lack of awareness of the trend in young adults’ living arrangements in part reflected a lack of interest in the subject in the early years of the development of family demography, but it also reflected the difficulty of conceptualizing it. When Paul Glick and his colleagues defined the family life cycle and outlined how its contours had been changing in the United States (Glick 1947; Glick and Parke 1965), he was forced by lack of data to assume that young people leave home (and so shape their parents’ entry into the empty nest) when they marry. During the period in which he wrote—the baby boom—this was a more nearly tenable assumption than either before or after, since the marriage ages then were so young that few young adults had the time to leave home in other ways.

His formulation diverted attention, however, from the simple fact that young people in their late teens and twenties have been found in most historical periods in three different kinds of living arrangements. These are: 1) with their family of orientation, in the parental home; 2) with a new family of procreation, with a partner and/or children; and 3) in some variably independent and usually non-family situation (boarding houses, dormitories and barracks, and separate homes). With three major types of living arrangements to be tracked and analyzed, it is not surprising that those studying one of them often neglected to think about what was happening between the other two. In the 1960s and 1970s, most family demographers were concerned with the dramatic fluctuations in marriage age underway (Cherlin 1992) and few thought much about what young people who were not getting married were doing. Some of the many scholars studying women interpreted their results as if the contrast were between getting married and
remaining with parents (e.g., Michael and Tuma 1985); others, that the nonmarried women were enjoying new opportunities of independent adulthood (e.g., Becker 1991). The few studying men normally did not comment on their alternatives to marriage, at all (e.g., Hogan 1981; Modell 1989).

As a result, few noticed the increases in non-family living underway in young adulthood (in close parallel with similar trends among the elderly), since they were obscured by the fluctuations in new family formation. When the increase in living with parents among young adults first came under scrutiny after the “marriage bust” of the 1970s and 1980s, many did not control for marital status, and hence missed that the proportion of unmarried young adults living with their parents continued to decrease during the period. There were also data problems important for the US, but not worth dwelling on here.

It is now clear both from census and survey data that the age at leaving home declined substantially between the 1920s and the 1970s in the US, a decline that has been only very partially reversed (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1994; White 1994). Those who left home were much less likely to do so via marriage as the period advanced, consistent with the trend in the United Kingdom (Berrington and Murphy 1994), a trend that has not reversed.

We illustrate this complexity with an analysis of young adult living arrangements in the US from 1940 to 1980 and then to 1998. In Table 1, we present data from the US censuses for young adults aged 18-24 for the period 1940 to 1980. These data show the complexity of the changes that have occurred. The first row shows the proportions living as “child of head.” In 1940, 63% of young adults by this definition were living at home at this age; by 1960 this status had decreased to 42%. Much of this decline was the result of the rapid decline in age at marriage,
as row 2 shows that in the same two decades, the proportion living as a family head, i.e., heads of households living with relatives (most of whom are married) or as a spouse of the family head, increased from 24% to 40% with the growth in early marriage that accompanied the post-World War II baby boom in the United States.

Part of the decline in living as a child during this twenty-year period, however, resulted from the increase in non-family living, indicated by the proportion living as “unrelated individuals” (row 3). This group increased from 13% to 18% between 1940 and 1960. While a much smaller increase than that produced by the marriage boom, it provided a growing alternative to remaining in the parental home for the unmarried. This aspect is captured in the final row of the table, which shows the proportion living as children (row 1) among those who are not family heads or spouses (the sum of rows 1 and 3). This measure, which closely approximates the extent of non-family living among unmarried young adults, declined from near-universal (82% of this group were living as children of the head in 1940) to rather less—fewer than 70% by 1960.

Things became much more complicated in the post-1960 period. The marriage boom ended abruptly, with the result that the share of young adults aged 18-24 living as heads or spouses of families (row 2) dropped from 40% to 28% between 1960 and 1980. Part of this proportional decrease in marriage appears as growth in the child-of-head category, which increased from the 42% of 1960 to nearly 46% in 1980. A return to the nest? Not really, since the non-family group grew more rapidly, continuing to increase after 1960 from 18% to more than 26% in 1980. As a result, the proportion living as children among the unmarried continued to decline, falling further from its 1960 level of about 70% to just over 63%.

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2 These are essentially the same data as those presented in Kobrin 1976, and summarized verbally in White 1994. It doesn’t make sense to add 1990 until data for 2000 are available.
What have been the trends in these measures since 1980? Has the continued decline in marriage finally led to a general postponement of adulthood, and an increase in the proportion of the unmarried who remain home? To address this question, and bring the series more fully up to date than would be possible prior to the 2000 census, we include data produced by the annual Current Population Surveys between 1983 and 1998, presented in Figure 3. With the exception of the period piecing together the two series (the 1980 figure is based on the decennial census, in which college students are treated as away from home, while the 1983 CPS returns most college students to the parental home), this measure declined continuously, from near universality to 57%.

This new route out of the home is very different from marriage in many ways. Perhaps from the parents’ point of view, gone is gone. In many cases, however, this is not what happens: those who leave home for reasons other than marriage are much more likely to return home (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). The trends, then, are finally clear: young adults’ timing of leaving home has fluctuated, declining with the fall in age at marriage of the 1940s and 1950s (then the major route out of the home), and then rising in response to the reversal in marriage behavior. However, trends in leaving home are becoming increasingly less sensitive to marital timing as non-family living arrangements have steadily increased their importance in early adulthood, so that by the 1990s nearly all of the decline in marriage shows up in increased non-family living outside the parental home. The growth in non-family living has not reversed, but the leaving home transition itself has become steadily more “reversible.”

Need for Comparison

It is unlikely, however, that studies of single countries will provide all the answers. Non-family living, both in young adulthood and at other stages of the life course, is part of the package
of recent family changes that have swept much of the industrialized world in the past quarter century, “the second demographic transition”. This makes research on Europe so important. Most of the English-language studies of leaving home have focused on North American and other English-speaking countries: Australia (Young 1974, 1975, 1987); Canada (e.g., Mitchell, Wister and Burch 1989, but also see Peron, Lapierre-Adamcyk and Morissette); the United States (see especially the studies cited above by Aquilino, Goldscheider, White, and Whittington and their associates), and the United Kingdom (see especially Kiernan 1986, 1989; and Kerkhoff 1992). With the exception of Kiernan (1986), who describes some cross-sectional patterns, none has been comparative among industrialized countries. There is nothing for the industrialized countries comparable to Susan DeVos’s (1989) study of young adult living arrangements in six Latin America countries, although the set of studies collected in a recent journal issue (Cherlin, Scabini and Rossi 1997) provides some useful clues for some countries in Europe. In that collection, the paper by Cordon is the first available on Spain. The paper by Nave-Herz is the first since Mayer and Schwarz (1989) on Germany and that by van Hekken, de Mey, and Schulze the first since Jong-Gierveld, et al. (1992) on the Netherlands. The paper by Cordon is particularly valuable, because it tries to design comparable analyses for a set of contrasting European countries. There is also a recent study by Corijn and Manting (2000) that compares changing nest-leaving patterns in Belgium and the Netherlands.

None, however, pull together information on changes in living arrangements and on young adults’ work and family roles, and these vary sharply across Europe. France, Germany, and Italy, like many other European countries with a strong social safety net, protect the jobs and wages of the currently employed and tolerate very high levels of youth unemployment. In 1997, the unemployment rates for these countries were 11.3% for Germany, 11.9% for Italy, and 12.8%
for France (*The Economist* 1997). These rates generally bear most heavily on the unskilled and those living in depressed areas, but also particularly on the young. Unemployment is even more extreme in Spain, recently reaching the highest level in the European Union, 23%. The Netherlands, in contrast, like the US and the UK, has cut benefits and encouraged employment growth, if often mostly of “lousy jobs” (Burtless 1990), with the result that its unemployment rate is barely half that of these other countries, 6.2%. This suggests that the high-unemployment economies of Italy and Spain likely encourage young people to remain home until they can “get on the ladder” and acquire a secure job with government or a large enterprise. The lower-unemployment economies of the Netherlands and the United States may provide jobs that, while unlikely to be “career” jobs, and thus not a basis for making long-term plans and commitments, are more likely to allow young people to move out of their parental homes into shared apartments with roommates and/or cohabiting partners.

It is much too soon to speculate about the sources of difference, however. What is clear is that the leaving home process is in flux, and is affected not only factors shaping the economy and opportunities to work and study, but also by the relationships between parents and children and, of course, by those between men and women. We need to relate changes in young adult living arrangements to changes in patterns of work and school attendance, but also to changes in marriage and cohabitation. The comparative studies I hope will be initiated by this workshop will be an important step.
References


### Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsidizing</th>
<th><strong>Adult roles</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sphere</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Home</strong></td>
<td>1. Housing¹,²</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Jobs (nepotism)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Education³</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Childhood structure (stability)⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State</strong></td>
<td>1. Jobs (apprent.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Education</td>
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Published sources for these ideas:

Table 1.--Long-term changes in living arrangements, US young adults
18-24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living arrangements¹</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family head or spouse</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated individual</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% child among nonheads | 82.4 | 77.1 | 69.5 | 66.1 | 63.4 |

¹ child=child and other relatives of the head
family head or spouse=heads of household living in families and their spouses
unrelated individual=primary individuals, secondary individuals, and those in group quarters

Source: Goldscheider (1997).
Figure 2. Long-Term Change in the Proportions of Young Adults (18-24) Living as Children Among Those Who Have Not Established New Families of Their Own