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The Experience of Co-Residence: Young Adults Returning to the Parental Home after Graduation in England

Jane Lewis, Anne West, Jonathan Roberts and Philip Noden

Introduction

The greater freedom and independence associated with living away from home is part of the authentic ‘university experience’ for English university students (Holdsworth 2009). However, whereas their parents, having lived away from home as students, did not usually return to the parental home (or live with parents) following graduation, as many as a half of today’s graduates live with a parent at ages 22-24 (Stone et al. 2011). As sociologists have argued, the period of ‘young adulthood’ has become ‘destandardised’ (e.g., Leccardi 2006), with little by way of linear transitions.

Finishing full-time higher education is one of the main causes of returning home across socio-economic groups for both men and women (Berrington et al. 2012). While graduates are considered to have the best chance of a well-paid job and of living independently, the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2012) commented on the weakness of the graduate job market in terms of unemployment and underemployment. The ONS (2012a) has also pointed out that the increase in the number of young adults living with parents over the past decade coincided with an increase in the average house price paid by first time buyers of 40 per cent between 2002 and 2011.

Commentary in national media has tended to emphasise the problems faced by parents and their young adult children who return home (e.g. Cummings 2013; Koslow 2012), but academic, usually quantitative analysis has often been more equivocal and sometimes considerably more positive (e.g. Aquilino and Supple 1991; Mitchell 1998; Parker 2012). However, as Furstenberg (2010, 74) has pointed out, while quantitative research has documented later home-leaving and the quality of relationships between co-resident parents and young adult children, ‘what happens inside families on a day-by-day basis...remains a largely unexplored topic’.

This paper uses qualitative data to explore the experience of co-resident graduate ‘returners’ and one of their parents, all but one of whom were also graduates. It investigates the extent to which returners and parents have positive, negative or ambivalent feelings and perceptions about co-residence and their day-to-day interactions. It also identifies the issues that are salient for parents and young adult children, and discusses what these tell us about the reasons for their feelings and perceptions.

Literature

There has been a long history of mainly quantitative research documenting the extent to which co-resident parents and adult children report experiences positively or negatively (with relationships often being categorised as ‘close’ or ‘problematic’). While taking an adult child back into the parental home appears to be an action redolent of family solidarity, early quantitative US research (Clemens and Leland 1985) found that most parents did not welcome the return of a child. Umberson (1992) also found that co-residence with a child over 18 resulted in strain and more dissatisfaction among most parents. Nevertheless, quantitative data from 609 family life interviews with US parents (who reported on their own position and that of their

co-resident adult children) found relatively high levels of parental satisfaction with co-residence (70 per cent) (Aquilino and Supple 1991). Analysis of Québécois telephone interview data from 218 families (with both a parent and a co-resident adult child) reported a similar figure for parents, and these data also showed 78 per cent of co-resident children to be somewhat or very satisfied (Wister et al. 1997; Mitchell 1998). More recently, the Pew Research Centre's telephone survey of a nationally representative US sample of 1625 adults aged 18-34, found that the 18-24 year olds were more positive than older co-resident children about the effects of co-residence on their relationship with parents (Parker 2012). Using qualitative data, Sassler et al. (2008) found that almost three-quarters of their sample of 30 young adult 'returners' in Southern New England were positive about their experiences.

In 1998, Luescher and Pillemer (1998) proposed that 'ambivalence' might be as, or more, important a category for analysis. In everyday language, ambivalence connotes the possibility of holding two contradictory evaluations of a relationship or situation – both positive and negative – simultaneously. Fingerman et al's (2004) quantitative study of relationships between parents and children of different ages classified their sample as solely close, solely problematic, or ambivalent. As Willson et al. (2003, 1056) have pointed out, the 'emphasis on and attention to both positive and negative perceptions of relationship quality' are 'critical to the concept of ambivalence'.

At the individual level, most empirical work documenting ambivalence has focused on the relationship between older adult children and their elderly parents. However, in respect of parents and co-resident young adults, Dor's (2013) qualitative study found that parents reported that positive feelings existed alongside negative feelings associated with conflict, while young adult returners have reported that they felt both autonomous and dependent, depending on the issue raised (Molgat 2007; see also Cicchelli and Martin 2004). But, there has been little agreement as to the importance of ambivalence. While Luescher and Pillemer (1998, also Pillemer et al. 2007) claimed it to be a widespread characteristic of parent/child relationships, especially at times of major transition, some continental European research has found it to be much less prevalent (Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006; Steinbach 2008).

There has also been considerable attention paid to what underpins relationships exhibiting ambivalence. Taking the example of professional relationships, Merton and Barber (1963) identified the part that conflicting normative expectations play in producing ambivalence in respect of social statuses and roles. In the case of adult children and their parents, Furlong and Cartmel (2007) have commented that it is not surprising that returners may feel both an entitlement to return to the parental home and resentment about the need for it. In identifying key dilemmas in intergenerational relationships, Pillemer and Suitor (2002, also Pillemer et al. 2007) have pointed out that parents may experience conflict between the norm of solidarity with children and the normative expectation that children will develop independent lives. The return to co-residence entails a measure of economic dependence and is usually of uncertain duration, which in and of itself can make ambivalence more likely (Pillemer and Suitor 2002), because it undermines any assumption of a steady progress towards independence. As Smelser (1998, 8) observed, 'dependent situations' - in which the structural conditions offer fewer escape options - may 'breed ambivalence' (see also Connidis and McMullin (2002)).

Graduates returning to the parental home are likely to feel more dependent than they had as students. Côté and Bynner (2008), have argued that they must react to the situation they find themselves in and 'cope' with lack of suitable jobs or

housing (see also Hendry and Kloep, 2010)). These structural problems are likely to constrain the agency of young adults and bear upon their capacity for achieving adult independence. Arnett (2001), a psychologist, has stressed the importance of individualistic criteria for achieving adulthood: financial independence, taking responsibility for self, and establishing a relationship with parents as an equal adult (shown also to be important for Sassler et al.'s (2008) sample). All these issues are likely to have significance for our sample of young adult returners.

We explore the perspectives of both the returners and their parents, focusing on the extent to which each party in each dyad feels strongly positive, strongly negative, or ambivalent about the day-to-day interactions associated with co-residence, and in regard to the last of these, whether the members of the dyads are mainly positive or negative. We also identify and discuss what it is that makes interviewees feel as they do.

Methods

Relatively few studies have focused on dyads, yet as Willson et al. (2006, 235) have pointed out, while feelings and perceptions are individually experienced, the interactions between parent and child are key: 'it is essential to study people within the context of their relationships and to incorporate the perspectives of both members'. Connidis and McMullen (2002) have also noted that two people in a family may differ in their views.

Dyads comprising a graduate in their 20s and co-residing with - in all but one case- at least one graduate parent were recruited for the study. Middle-class families were the focus of the research, and the aim was to recruit parents and adult children who were similar in terms of social class background and educational level.

Interviewees were thus approached through an alumni organisation of a pre-1992 English university (these tend to have a more advantaged intake and a higher percentage of students living away from home): 27 dyads (54 interviewees) were recruited in this way. Contact was made both with recent graduates identified as being under the age of 30, who gave their current contact address as their parental home, and alumni graduating between 1970 and 1985 and therefore potentially of the parent generation. Six dyads were contacted via the recent graduates and 21 via the parents. The mode of recruitment did not result in identifiable differences in the nature of feelings expressed about co-residence between the two groups.

Parents and co-resident, graduate children were interviewed separately and the semi-structured interviews were carried out by different interviewers. Interviews focused on the perceptions of and feelings about the same issues by parents and returners, e.g. the financial dependence and employment status of the returner. The dyads were not discussed by the researchers until after both interviews had been completed. All interviews were carried out between January and September 2013.

Following multiple readings of each account, a descriptive summary was created for each member of each dyad and inductively derived categories and themes were developed. Analytical work entailed working within each theme (i) to establish whether on balance each interviewee's feelings about and perceptions of co-residence were positive and/or negative, and also whether such feelings were strong, or alternatively 'mixed' and mainly positive or negative. This enabled classification of dyads into strongly positive, strongly negative, or ambivalent (in which either the parent or the child might feel mainly positive or mainly negative); and (ii) to identify the most important issues for each interviewee.

Characteristics of the sample

The age range of the returners was 21 to 29, with the majority - 24 in total - aged between 22 and 25. The mean period of co-residence was 22 months, with the largest group (12) living at home for more than one year but less than two at the time of interview. Four returners came from South Asian families, two were mixed race identifying as white/Asian, and the remainder were white. Of the six returners who contacted the project, three were South Asian. In all cases, at least one parent was (or had been in the case of those who had retired) in a professional or managerial occupation. Importantly from the parents' point of view, all but one felt that they had a large enough house or flat to accommodate a returner without undue difficulty.

In terms of jobs, while only five returners had been employed full-time on initial return, 18 were in full-time work by the time of interview, and whereas six were unemployed on return, only one remained completely without work at the time of interview. However, it is also important to know whether the jobs were perceived as a step forward in the returner's chosen career, or whether they were undertaken only to earn money and/or fill-in time. Only three returners had a 'career job' when they returned home, whereas 14 had achieved this goal by the time of interview. But, while only four had temporary work when they first returned, eight had work of this kind by the time of interview. The significant number of returners (nine) who were continuing to study when they returned home (usually for Master's level degrees) had dropped to three by the time of interview.

In respect of the households, 22 returners were living with mothers and fathers, four with lone parents, and one with a mother and stepfather. In terms of dyads: 12 were mothers and daughters, five were mothers and sons, seven were fathers and daughters, and three were fathers and sons. Nineteen households contained other siblings.

Findings: feelings about and perceptions of co-residence

Graduate returners and their parents tended to feel a degree of inevitability about return to the parental home, given the returners' lack of financial independence. A large majority of the graduates would have preferred to continue to live away from home, including most of those returners who tended to be positive about their living arrangements. They were thus fundamentally ambivalent about their situations as a result of the normative expectation that progress to adult independence would be linear. Most parents also experienced some anxiety or disappointment about the 'unsuccessful launch' of their children, wondering when co-residence would end and/or expressing discontent with the behaviour of their offspring. But they nevertheless stressed that they felt compelled to help their children by providing 'a roof over their heads'. To this extent the position of parents was also fundamentally ambivalent.

However, despite this underlying ambivalence about their *situation*, we found that it was nevertheless possible for parents and children to express strongly negative or positive feelings to interviewers about their *day-to-day interactions* and, in respect of parents and children expressing ambivalent feelings, also to vary considerably in terms of the balance between positive and negative.

Analysis of the transcripts resulted in three main groups of dyads: (i) both parent and adult child where strongly positive about co-residence (five dyads); (ii) both parent and adult child were strongly negative (nine dyads); (iii) parents and adult children expressed ambivalent feelings, but not necessarily in the same way or to the

same extent. This group was divided into one in which the adult children were mainly positive and the parents mainly negative ((iia) nine dyads); and into another in which the adult children were mainly negative and the parents mainly positive ((iib) four dyads).

The following sub-sections highlight the nature of daily life for one dyad in each group, and summarise the main issues for the rest.

(i) Parent and child are strongly positive about co-residence (five dyads)

These dyads comprised one mother/son, one mother/daughter and three fathers/daughters. The following summarises the situation for a father/daughter.

The daughter had not initially wanted to return home because her parents had divorced during her second year at university. However, it was 'the most sensible option'; she had no job. After four months she secured a graduate job and also began further study.

The returner was effusive about the support she received from her father, who had retired early and undertook all the household work:

He's an angel, that's [the washing-up] something I could be helping with and I just am lazy. And he never complains.

Because of the divorce, she felt that

...it was like we were both finding out how to do something new together, so it didn't feel like oppressive or anything like that.

She described her relationship with her father as becoming 'more like friends', although her father insisted that he was

...still dad, so you're not equals in that sense, you know, you're not just good friends who chat about everything...

However, the father also said that he was 'prepared to be less a father' and gave the example of talking about the divorce to his daughter. He was not looking forward to his daughter leaving home for the second time.

In the remaining cases in this group it was also important that three of the returners were in full-time career jobs. The fourth was undertaking further study and had part-time work allied to her choice of career. Two returners were grateful to their mothers for supporting their job search. In the case of the son, the father had had difficulty in understanding how problematic it was to find a 'good job'; the son said:

I do remember one evening he turned round and said "well you can just go and be a groundsman at a cricket club"...I said no, "we've got a plan and we're going to stick to it". And I always knew that it would take a year.

The 'we' referred to him and his mother, who confirmed that they had planned 'a campaign' of job search.

In two of the four remaining dyads, the living situation also differed from how it had been before the children went to university. In one case the returner was living with her mother full-time for the first time, her parents having divorced when she was very young. Both she and her mother were delighted to be living together. In another case the father had retired, although the mother continued to work, and the daughter lived in the house with her boyfriend, who was said by father and daughter to have fitted in well with long-established family routines. The father found the presence of both of them enlivening, but was also happy with his daughter's timetable, which involved moving out within a year. These circumstances presented the possibility of

renegotiating relationships and in both these cases the returners felt closer to their parents and on a more equal footing:

...you have more of an established role, almost like a partner more than a child and a parent...it's more egalitarian...

This was not the case with the South Asian father/daughter dyad. This returner was the most advanced in her career, but her father confessed to treating her as if she was a 'young child', stressing to the interviewer the importance of 'inculcating responsibility' and guiding his daughter. However, the returner was happy to do what was expected and return home to live until she married (career location permitting).

The relationships in most of these dyads were characterised by shared goals, parental support in job search, and by more equal relationships mainly in terms of the topics and nature of conversations between parents and young adult children. Children's contributions to the shared household often remained rather minimal, but the parents were not overly perturbed by this.

(ii) Parent and child are strongly negative about co-residence (nine dyads)

These dyads comprised one father/daughter, six mothers/daughters, two mothers/sons. The following summary of the situation for a mother/daughter shows the full strength of negative feelings. Not all respondents in this group expressed their feelings as intensely as this.

The daughter had a first class humanities degree. She had had several unpaid internships and had just got a non-career job.

The daughter was happy to return home at first, but after six months she felt 'desperate'. She began to realise that she was not going to be able to 'walk into' her preferred job in the creative industries and spoke strongly of her

...dashed expectations...I feel like I'm in a nightmare I don't understand. She felt as though she was back in her teenage routine, asking for permission to have people to stay, and arguing with her mother over cleaning chores. She insisted that she only felt her 'real self' when she was out of the house.

Her mother respected the returner's right to search for the kind of job she wanted:

...she's a highly creative person...we're very modern parents...we don't put any pressure on them to do anything other than follow their natural bent, their natural inclinations.

However, she was 'scared' about her daughter's prospects and the lack of a 'plan'. She was also frustrated about not being able to develop her own job and about having to do more household chores for her daughter, who did not know how to clean to her standards.

Above all, this mother expressed her anxiety about the lack of a 'roadmap': If something appears to be temporary and everyone knows where they're going, it's very different to not knowing where this is going.

Several dimensions of this relationship also characterised other dyads in this group. The lack of graduate jobs was a major issue for all the parents and all but one of the children. Six were in non-graduate jobs (with three working part-time), and one had an unpaid internship. The remaining returner was undertaking further study, but only after abandoning her earlier career hopes. In three cases, the returners were

'hanging on' in the hope of getting the kind of 'creative' job they wanted, something their parents were sympathetic towards, but also worried about, for fear that their children's aspirations would not be realised.

There was also considerable strength of feeling among the returners about the problems of 'fitting back' into family life, having their opinions respected, and being treated as an adult rather than a child. The only male returner in the group said that his parents were

...particularly unwilling, I think, to know me as an adult...They're still holding on to the image they have of me as a child.

One of the daughters described herself feeling 'suppressed' and 'subordinate' to her parents. Another daughter said:

...everyone has different versions of themselves ...[with my parents] I just feel I have to be, kind of, a like, filtered version of me....

Virtually all the parents felt that the returners were failing to take sufficient responsibility, sometimes for job-seeking and often for contributing to household chores. Two felt that they had made things much too 'comfortable' for their children (cf. Avery et al. 1992, who termed this the 'feathered nest'). Mothers in particular felt resentment about the mess and additional housework. Resentment was more apparent when the returner was female (cf. Sassler et al. 2008). Uncertainty about the future further exacerbated conflicts over domestic responsibilities.

Some of the children in groups (i) and (ii) expressed a degree of ambivalence about their situation, particularly at the point of return. In the highlighted examples the daughter who was positive about the return was nonetheless reluctant to move back; the daughter who was negative nevertheless initially enjoyed the comforts of home. But what is striking about the accounts of both parents and returning children in groups (i) and (ii) is the strength of the positive or negative feelings about they expressed about their day-to-day interactions.

(iii) *Ambivalence*

Within this group, both parents and adult children expressed ambivalent feelings towards co-residence. There were two distinct subgroups: one in which adult children were mainly positive and the parents mainly negative (iiia); and one in which the adult children were mainly negative and the parents mainly positive (iiib). Individuals' ambivalence thus coincided with differences of opinion within the dyad.

(iiia) *Returner mainly positive and parent mainly negative about co-residence (nine dyads)*

These dyads comprised one father/son, three fathers/daughters, and five mothers/daughters. The following summarises the situation of a mother/daughter. Some mothers were more strongly negative than this one, but the returner was fairly typical.

The daughter was doing a paid internship at the time of interview. Both her parents worked full-time.

The returner described herself as 'a bit lazy' in terms of contributing to the household chores, as she had been before she went to university. She stressed that she chose

...to be less independent [at home] ... it's kind of easier to have someone to tell you to do things.

She felt that her overall relationship with her parents had not changed. She admitted that her mother was

...a lot more proactive than I am, I kind of go along and think "Oh, something will work out hopefully" [in terms of a permanent job].

This returner did not want to live on her own and said that home was 'the place I feel most comfortable in the world probably'.

Her mother said:

I think we've all enjoyed having her back...but...I suppose you could say we, sort of, slipped back into the old routine. You know, I still nag her to give me her dirty washing, notwithstanding of course that she did all that when she was at uni...Inevitably she gets treated more like a child...

This mother wished that she did not have to 'nag' and also expressed anxiety about her daughter's unwillingness to take responsibility for herself, e.g. by making an insurance claim following a theft.

All but one of the returners in the remaining eight dyads in this group were daughters. Four had full-time jobs that they regarded as careers, and all had work of some kind. One had a graduate level job that she did not particularly want to do. But this group shows clearly the extent to which other issues play a major part in accounting for the satisfaction of returners and the irritation of parents, particularly perceptions of a child's lack of willingness and/or capacity to take responsibility for self (the issue of failing to make an insurance claim came up again in another interview), and to contribute to the household. As one mother put it:

They are young adults. They need to be contributing to what's going on in the house.

On the other hand, two more mothers admitted to continuing to treat the returner as a child, although this may have been prompted by, as much as giving rise to, the behaviour of the returners. The father of the son, who had rather more positive feelings than most other parents in this group, nevertheless expressed his irritation about the need for 'parental checking': his son had failed to register with a GP despite frequent reminders.

The returners felt comfortable at home and insisted that they 'respected' the fact that it was their parents' home, but were also willing to admit that they liked someone else to be cooking, cleaning and looking after them. One father said that his daughter's attitude was close to

...that of a child who's still at school. She seems to have in her mind this idea that she really is a big contributor to that [domestic chores]. It's not true.

This returner, together with one other daughter in this group expressed a clear preference to live at home. These returners felt that they had close relationships with their parents (one talked at length about her mother being her best friend) and that the parents liked having them at home. To some extent this was the case for the daughter who was mediating between her parents. Nevertheless the mother in this dyad described her daughter as 'immature and self-centred'. On balance this group of parents expressed negative feelings, especially about their offspring becoming 'too comfortable' and about whether they would ever be sufficiently motivated and able to move out. As a father said 'you think how would they bloody cope on their own...'.

This group provided evidence to show that not all returners, especially the daughters, were ready to live independently or even to play a more adult role in their

households. The mismatch between parents' dissatisfaction and their children's positive feelings was often expressed in developmental terms. Most of the parents got along well with their offspring, but expressed irritation with what they tended to see as 'irresponsible' behaviour. The returners were in the main content.

(iiib) Parents mainly positive and returners mainly negative about returning (four dyads)

These dyads comprised two mothers/sons and two fathers/sons. The following summarises the situation for a father/son:

The son was South Asian, living with his extended family. He reiterated that he ...chose to live at home so that I could save up to buy a house...

He shared an office with his father and life at home went on as before, with his grandmother and aunt doing most of the cooking and household chores. He said that his parents had 'provided everything' for him, so he was glad to spend time with them and was resigned to following his mother's house rules, for example opening the curtains in the morning and making the bed.

But on balance, his feelings were negative. Above all, he felt that he was ...a different person when I'm at home with my family than with my friends and when my friends come over they always say "you're so quiet", it's really weird.

In particular, he felt that living at home restricted his interactions with his girlfriend.

His father expressed his pleasure that as one child left home another returned. In common with other South Asian parents, he felt that spending some time away from home at university was appropriate, but that it was usual for young people to return home after graduation, save up for marriage and a home, and continue to benefit from parental advice.

All the sons in this group had full-time career jobs. Three were South Asians and were working in the family business or, as in the example above, developing a business alongside the father. These returners expressed strongly negative feelings about the constraints co-residence imposed on their social life, but shared their parents' expectations in respect of living at home usually until marriage. The fourth, white British returner shared the sense of constraint on having a social life, particularly in respect of developing a relationship with a girlfriend. He had not redecorated his childhood bedroom for fear that

...it would be a sign that I was planning to stay longer.

As his mother put it:

He is in a waiting room really, in some ways...A comfortable waiting room...but he doesn't know when the train is coming yet, as it were...

These parents were all sympathetic and found their children to be considerate and 'easy', as one said; none raised any major problem about the small size of the contributions made by the returners to household work. However, their sons were impatient to be in a position to leave home, but the uncertainty about when this might happen weighed most heavily on the white British participant.

Discussion and Conclusion

All parents other than the South Asians in our sample, together with the vast majority of returners, expressed some ambivalence about their situation of co-

residence, particularly the parents, who were pulled by competing norms to ‘look after’ their children and to successfully ‘launch’ them. However, the day-to-day feelings about co-residence expressed to the interviewers by parents and returners were sometimes strongly negative or positive.

Just over half the returners and two-thirds of the parents expressed strongly or mainly negative feelings and perceptions. Our sample of highly educated adult children was more positive than might have been expected (cf. Aquilino 1999), which might be explained in part by difficult socio-economic conditions and the tendency of peers also to return home, and in part by gender differences. There were more female young adults in our sample than males, and daughters were more positive about returning home, with some happy to resume their old childhood patterns of behaviour (especially in group (iiia)). In almost half the dyads (13) parents and children expressed ambivalent feelings. In group (iii) strong individual ambivalence (particularly prevalent among parents) was associated with conflict or difference of opinion within the dyad (cf. Dor 2013). The presence of such disagreement may have heightened individuals’ feelings of ambivalence towards the situation (Luescher and Pillemer 1998).

The decision to return home was heavily constrained for the vast majority of the graduates by the kind of structural issues identified by Côté and Bynner (2008): unemployment or a low paid job, and inability to afford to rent or buy housing. To this extent the returners resembled ‘prevented adults’ (see Hendry and Kloep 2010). While almost all the returners had been financially dependent to some extent on their parents at university, return home – often to their childhood bedrooms – sharpened the reality of their dependent status. Any normative assumptions regarding smooth onward progress to independent living were effectively shattered, sometimes resulting in ‘dashed expectations’ (above p.6).

Returners expressing strongly negative feelings focused on the curtailment of more than one dimension of independence: particularly on the lack of a career job and on parents’ tendency to continue to treat them as children (cf Arnett 2001). The determination of the strongly negative returners in group (ii) to find exactly the type of job they wanted echoed Arnett’s (2007, 71) finding that US ‘emerging adults’ had ‘extraordinarily high expectations’ about jobs. These returners also tended to complain that they were not treated as adults, that their opinions were not given equal weight in the household, and that they were unable to ‘be themselves’ in the family home. Only when there were strongly positive feelings about co-residence on the part of the young adult and the parent (as in group (i)) was there a significantly closer, and more egalitarian relationship between parent and child, exemplified by a more adult exchange of views. Sassler et al. (2008, 686) also reported that many of their young adult respondents struggled ‘to have their opinions and decisions respected by parents’.

The ambivalent male returner highlighted for group (iiib) who reported mainly negative views, also implied that he could not be himself at home, commenting that his friends found him ‘different’. However, this returner and the other young South Asian men in this group also reported their gratitude for what their parents had done, taking comfort from the fact that the constraints on their social lives would not be for ever. It is significant that these returners, together with the South Asian young woman in group (i), felt that they had chosen to conform with cultural norms, which they (and their fathers) spoke about explicitly, and to return home because of the better life it would bring in the medium and long term.

A significant minority of ambivalent returners (in group *iiia*) were mainly positive about co-residence and were in the main content to be back at home, resuming many aspects of their adolescent lives. Furthermore, some chose to return to being treated more as children: waiting to be told what to do by way of household chores, or relying on mothers to cook meals (highlighted for group (*iiia*)). Many passed comment on the comfort of their own homes compared to their experience of university accommodation and were relatively sanguine about a suitable job ‘turning up’.

Indeed, on the whole, young adult children were not as negative as their parents about co-residence. White parents experienced considerable conflict between competing social norms (Pillemer and Suito 2002; Pillemer et al. 2007) that underpinned the situation they and their children found themselves in: to support their children on the one hand, and to successfully ‘launch’ them on the other. Both strongly and mainly negative parents commented on the lack of any established norms about how to ‘do’¹ co-residence, particularly in terms of how much financial and emotional support to give, and how far to push the child to do more to secure an independent life. Several parents mentioned that it was expected by their friends and acquaintances that help would be offered, but they were unsure about how much to offer. Parents in all the groups expressed more or less concern about their role: whether it should be a more equal one (as many of the more negative returners wanted), or whether there remained a parental role of adviser and mentor (the South Asian fathers felt this particularly strongly). Parents (in groups (*ii*) and (*iiia*)) who felt that their children were not taking enough responsibility commented that they had little choice other than to go back to treating them as they did ‘when they were home before’.

Even when the returner had secured a graduate job, lack of responsibility was often still reported by parents (as in group (*iiia*), where parents were mainly negative). Thus, there were many statements such as that made by the mother in the dyad highlighted for this group, who began with ‘we’ve all been glad to have her back...’ before coming to a substantial list of ‘buts’. Mothers expressing negative feelings were particularly unhappy about resuming the household chores they associated with having a younger child (cf. Mitchell 1998)). While Sassler et al. (2008) reported conflict between parents and children over the standards to which tasks had to be performed, which was also identified by the mother highlighted for group (*ii*). Several parents in group (*iiia*) expressed their negative feelings in developmental terms, referring to the behaviour of their offspring as ‘immature’.

It is noteworthy that parents expressing mainly or strongly positive views about co-residence were confident that their children had a realistic timetable for moving out. One of the strongly positive fathers in group (*i*) was glad that his daughter and her boyfriend had established a timetable and planned to leave within the year (cf. Aquilino and Supple 1991 on the importance of shared timetables).

Our study has limitations. The sample is not representative of the population of parents and adult children living in the parental home. We intentionally focused on students whose parents had been to university and so the parents we interviewed were by definition highly educated and were from middle-class backgrounds. This limits the generalisability of our findings to the wider population. Further research could usefully contrast relationships between parents and co-resident adult children in cases that are more socially and ethnically diverse and also where the ‘university experience’ is not expected to function as a boundary between childhood roles and independent adulthood. In addition, our data suggest that there are other key variables

worthy of more investigation. The first is gender: a majority of returners in our sample were female, and it is interesting that these young women tended to be more sanguine about co-residence than the young men. Dimensions of household structure may also be important, e.g. parental divorce was especially significant. These changes provided the possibility for a ‘new[and positive] start’ in the case of three dyads in group (i), or for conflict, as was the case for one of the dyads in group (ii).²

Our data suggest that the return to co-residence, while essential for the graduate’s welfare, is often not a strongly positive experience for parent and child. No returner wanted to live with their parents indefinitely, although some, especially in group (iiia), where returners were mainly positive and parents mainly negative, were in no hurry to live independently. Nevertheless, returning home was usually prompted more by need than desire and the return to overt dependence on parents proved difficult for a majority of children and most parents. The structural problem of graduate unemployment and underemployment, combined with high property prices underpinned the situation that parents and children found themselves in (Côté and Bynner 2008), and were manifest in the negative feelings expressed in their day-to-day interactions. Conversely, securing a career job was crucial to more positive feelings about co-residence. Without it, parents in particular were puzzled about how to manage the return home, and were anxious as to how long it might continue. A ‘good job’ removed some of the uncertainty: it then became possible for both parent and child to anticipate that at some point it would be possible for the latter to move out. The returners who lacked a career job but nevertheless expressed mainly positive feelings, were above all happy to be living at home, as well as being more optimistic than their parents that something would turn up.

The literature suggests that dependent situations are an important factor resulting in ambivalence (Smelser 1998), but when the prospect of continued financial dependence was *combined* with the absence of one or more individualistic indicators of adult independence (Arnett, 2001), particularly lack of responsibility for self or for household work, parents tended to express *strongly* negative feelings. Returners were strongly negative particularly when financial dependence was combined with feeling that they were not being treated as adults by their parents. In the five strongly positive dyads, returners had secured their future careers, and while they did not necessarily participate equally in the work of the household, they were often supporting parents in other ways, especially in the two cases where the family structure had changed markedly due to divorce. Thus, the indicators of adult independence reported by Arnett (2001) – financial independence, taking responsibility for self, and establishing a relationship with parents as an equal adult - were important to the way in which both children and parents perceived co-residence, albeit that parents and children tended to emphasise different dimensions.

Return to the family home came without a ‘roadmap’ as a mother with strongly negative views about co-residence put it (highlighted for group (ii)). Another mainly positive mother spoke of her son being in ‘the waiting room’ but not knowing ‘when the train might come’ (above, p.10). Co-residence was normative only for the South Asian parents and children, who saw marriage rather than university as the salient marker of transition to adulthood and independent living. Nevertheless, many parents in the sample tried to take comfort from knowing that they were not the only people experiencing the problems that accompanied the return of a young adult child, while many young adults took comfort from knowing that many of their university friends had also returned home. There is therefore the possibility that returning home after graduation may become a new social norm.

¹ Cf. Morgan (1996) on 'doing family'.

² The presence of siblings is also likely to affect day-to-day-interactions.

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