

# Living with the parents: the purpose of young graduates' return to the parental home in England

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## Abstract

Young graduates in England often return to the parental home after a period of living away during their university studies. Little is known, however, about why they return and how coresidence with parents fits within a life trajectory. This paper reports upon an in-depth cross-sectional qualitative study of young graduates' coresidence with their parents. It identifies a five-part typology of the purpose of coresidence as perceived by the graduates: a base camp for exploration before settling into adulthood; a launch pad for careers; a savings bank, in particular for future property purchases; a refuge for respite and reflection; and a preferred residence, whether on account of comfort, cultural practice or to support parents. The paper further explores how far these purposes were associated in young adults' accounts with social structures, individual agency or some combination of these. It concludes that the default understanding of graduates' return and coresidence as a residual function when other options fail is insufficient. Such a generalisation obscures the different purposes which the return can enable; it overplays some notion of a broken biography rather than the positive contribution of coresidence to graduates' trajectories towards adulthood and to their life experiences.

**Keywords:** housing trajectories; transitions; coresidence; return; young adults; graduates

## Introduction

Moving out of the parental home to independent accommodation is regarded as a significant marker of the transition to adulthood. Increasingly, however, adult children stay longer in the parental home (DaVanzo and Goldscheider 1990): in the UK over a quarter of 20 to 34 year-olds live with their parents (ONS 2014). Further, those who leave the parental home are increasingly likely to return on one or more occasions (Goldscheider et al. 1999; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Leaving the parental home, indeed, may be not so much an event as a process, featuring numerous exits and returns (Molgat 2002; Holdsworth and Morgan 2005); it is part of a larger picture of a transition to adulthood which is not linear or predictable, but prolonged, fragmented and challenging (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Young adults who coreside with their parents are not a homogenous group (Coles, Rugg and Seavers 1999): reasons for coresidence may be varied, implying a need for focused empirical research. This article concentrates on a particular subgroup – young adults who previously left the parental home to attend university. Most students in the UK move away to study (Holdsworth 2009), but many move back post-graduation, so that returns to the parental home have been recognised as characteristic of a 'student housing pathway' (Rugg, Ford and Burrows 2004, 20); the transition out of student status in particular is a triggering event for such a return (Berrington, Stone and Falkingham 2012). 18% of young adults aged 20-34 with degree-level qualifications live with their parents (Office for National Statistics, personal communication, 10 December 2013); in a survey of graduates from one English

university, around half of respondents returned to the parental home in the five years after graduation (Sage, Evandrou and Falkingham 2013). The prevalence of return has caused anxiety about graduates' transition to adulthood (for instance, Coward 2011). Leaving home for university implies some 'ideal of independence' or of 'self-responsibility' (Holdsworth 2009, 1858): subsequent coresidence with parents may seem a backward step in the progression to independent adulthood.

Despite growing awareness of the phenomenon, little is known about why young graduates return and their experiences when they do. There is a paucity of qualitative research which might unravel the complex dynamics and contexts around young adults' living arrangements (Rugg, Ford and Burrows 2004; Berrington and Stone 2013), and a particular absence of such research into graduates' coresidence. This paper reports upon an in-depth qualitative study of young graduates' coresidence with their parents which addresses this gap. It seeks specifically to explore the reasons why young graduates return to the parental home. As the first section describes, explanations of young adults' coresidence have focused upon the interplay of structural determinants and individual agency. These insights are valuable. But this focus upon antecedents – whether structural or individual – tends to exclude a rigorous consideration of the purpose which coresidence is perceived to fulfil within young graduates' housing pathway and within their life course. The paper identifies a five-part typology of the purposes of coresidence as perceived by young graduates. A subsequent discussion considers how these purposes fit within graduates' life trajectories, and how far they are linked within graduates' accounts to structural antecedents, individual agency or some combination of these.

### **Graduates' return: insights from literature**

The identification of a 'student housing pathway' in the UK provides a starting-point for exploring graduates' return and coresidence (Ford, Rugg and Burrows 2002; Rugg, Ford and Burrows 2004); characteristics include a planned leaving home for university, multiple returns to the parental home during and after university, a post-university preference for independent living outside a family unit, and an endpoint of home ownership. This pathway, however, lacks detail in the post-graduation phase, with the trajectory to home ownership remaining largely unspecified.

This section presents two distinct but related approaches to understanding graduates' return. The first dimension – the effect of social structures and the role of individual agency – acknowledges a fundamental debate about the roots of young adults' actions and specifically about their housing trajectories. But graduates' return can in addition be considered through a subtly different analytic lens which has received less attention – namely, the purpose which return to the parental home fulfils and its contribution (if any) to the graduate's trajectory towards adulthood.

### ***Structures, agency and the return to the parental home***

The relative influence of - and relationship between - structures and agency remains a fundamental discussion in the context of young adults' transitions and trajectories. Beck (1992) describes a post-traditional age in which predictable or 'normal' trajectories are disrupted, to be replaced by 'do-it-yourself' biographies: responsibility is thrown onto the individual to achieve 'self-realization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 26), including making decisions about career, leisure and education (du Bois-Reymond 1998; Wyn and Woodman 2006). An emphasis on agency is still more prominent within Arnett's

conceptualisation of ‘emerging adulthood’ as a distinct life period. For Arnett (2000, 469) these are the ‘most volitional years of life’ – a moment to experiment, to consider life opportunities, to undertake experiences for their own sake. Arnett’s description of explorations in the period after undergraduate study suggests a particular link between ‘emerging adulthood’ and a student pathway.

Such emphases on agency have been challenged. Furlong and Cartmel (2007, 138), while acknowledging the role of subjective agency, suggest that the contemporary focus upon individual responsibility is an ‘epistemological fallacy’ which obscures the continued influence of structures upon young adults’ lives. Similarly Arnett’s description of a period of unfettered volition is criticized for its failure to acknowledge social structures (Côté and Bynner 2008). Diverse structural forces are implicated, ranging from policy interventions and economic institutions to ‘social characteristics’ such as class, gender and ethnicity (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005, 27; Bynner 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

There have been multiple attempts to explain the relationship between structure and agency in young people’s lives. Evans’ (2002) notion of ‘bounded agency’, for instance, implies that some natural state of subjective action is constrained by structural forces. More recently a ‘social generation’ approach acknowledges that each generation of young people face a specific collection of economic, political and social conditions which constrain and channel opportunities (Wyn and Woodman 2006) – but that, within this particular context, young adults exercise agency as they ‘interpret, construct and shape their lives’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn 2011, 357).

Whether young adults’ return to the parental home is a manifestation of individual agency or structural constraints remains a central debate (Berrington, Stone and Falkingham 2009). Commentaries typically emphasise economic structures which push young adults to coresidence. Thus changes in the labour market have been associated with growing delay in leaving the parental home (Furlong and Cartmel 2007): without employment, or with only a precarious job, young adults cannot afford independent residence. Higher qualifications may have previously shielded graduates, but such protection seems increasingly fragile. Since the 2008 financial crisis increasing numbers of recent UK graduates have been unemployed (ONS 2012a); others are ‘underemployed’, taking jobs for which they are over-educated (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). Further, the rising cost of housing relative to income means that home ownership in England may be prohibitively expensive for young people (ONS 2009). Substantial real terms increases in the cost of homes purchased by first-time buyers have coincided with the growing incidence of young adults’ coresidence (ONS 2012b); graduates may need financial assistance from their parents to purchase a home (Heath and Calvert 2011). The cost of rented accommodation has also been rising, but remains more affordable than mortgage-based home ownership (Wilcox 2008; Clapham et al. 2010).

Policy contexts may also be significant. First, young adults’ residential independence might be funded and facilitated by the state, an approach favoured by Scandinavian countries (Newman 2008). In the UK, however, there has been a steady reduction in support for young adults, who have been increasingly expected to remain in or return to the parental home (Coles, Rugg and Seavers 1999; Berrington and Stone 2013). Second, and of specific relevance to graduates, tuition fees and living costs at university are in part financed through government loans which become repayable once the graduate reaches a modest income level (limited non-repayable grants are available for more disadvantaged students; see West et al. (2015)). Loan repayment may obstruct property ownership by reducing the ability to save for

a deposit or make mortgage payments (Andrew 2010). Characteristic of both policy streams is a reduction in state support for young adults and a privatisation of responsibility to the individual (Wyn and Woodman 2006).

‘Social characteristics’ have been implicated as influential in young adults’ residential arrangements. More young men than young women, for instance, live with their parents (Berrington, Stone and Falkingham 2009). Cultural perceptions of the appropriateness of coresidence have been identified as significant - whether conceived as community norms (Sassler, Ciambone and Benway 2008) or national cultural values relating to the life course and to living with parents (Dykstra et al. 2013). Comparisons are drawn between North European cultures, which encourage young adults towards independent living, and South European and Asian cultures, which accept or expect coresidence (Mitchell 2004; Newman 2008; Dykstra et al. 2012). Social class, finally, may affect living arrangements. Wealthier parents are better placed to offer support: parents may subsidise an independent residence for the young adult (White 1994); alternatively the family home may be more comfortable or spacious, so that coresidence is more attractive (Avery, Goldscheider and Speare 1992).

While particular focus has thus been on structural constraints and influences upon residential arrangements, there has also been limited reference to young adults’ agency. Subjective preferences, for instance, may drive behaviours: some young adults prefer to forgo independent living in order to maintain their social life or to be comfortable (White 1994; Hutton and Seavers 2002); by contrast, and especially among graduates, there can be a preference for a period of shared non-family living (Heath and Kenyon 2001) - university life may create a ‘taste for independence’ (Mulder and Clark 2002, 985). Kenyon and Heath (2001) find a strong perception of agency in the residential arrangements of young professionals: their preference for, and enactment of, shared non-family living arrangements is not a product of constraint, but fits with a preferred lifestyle; individual agency is central to the young adults’ narratives.

### ***The purpose of return***

Both structural forces and young adults’ subjective preferences are antecedents which, independently or interactively, may influence the decision to return to the parental home. To understand return and coresidence, however, it is necessary to examine not only such antecedents, but also how coresidence pushes forward, or at least fits within, a life trajectory – in other words, the purpose which return and coresidence are perceived to play within an individual’s biography. What does return enable young adults, and in this case graduates, to do which they cannot do (or do easily) living elsewhere?

Consideration of the purpose of coresidence has been limited. There has been a default understanding of return and coresidence as fulfilling a residual function when other options fail, whether on account of structural constraints or individual mistakes – a role typically conveyed by the term ‘safety net’ (for instance, Settersen 1998; Coles, Rugg and Seavers 1999) and tending to imply a negative turn in the life trajectory. For the young adults studied by Kenyon and Heath (2001, 625) coresidence is a ‘last resort, involving an undesirable loss of independence’. Coles, Rugg and Seavers (1999) distinguish between an unwilling return, forced by structural constraints, and a willing return – yet the latter is willing only inasmuch as the parental home is chosen as a refuge from loneliness or other misfortune. DaVanzo and Goldscheider (1990, 254, 255) offer a less pessimistic interpretation, describing the parental home both as a ‘safety net’ for young adults when unexpected trouble strikes, and also as a ‘normal base of operations’ during the increasingly fluid journey to adulthood. The first

expresses failure or compulsion, the second more strategic agency or less urgent contingencies.

The identification of the parental home as a residence of last resort is challenged by the 'feathered nest' hypothesis. In this case coresidence is apparently a preference: independent living is foregone in favour of a certain quality of life. Material benefits include a comfortable residence, or meals provided and 'laundry and the housework done by mom' (Mitchell 2004, 120); there may also be psychological benefits of companionship (Avery, Goldscheider and Speare 1992). There is too the financial benefit of saving money through reduced housing and living costs (Mitchell 2004; Sessler, Ciambone and Benway 2008).

In the case of graduates, there has been little attempt to explore the purpose of return. Where a purpose is attributed, it is again a 'safety net' (Rugg, Ford and Burrows 2004, 31) or some variant of this - a 'fall-back option' during illness or unemployment (Heath and Calvert 2011, 2), a 'staging post' for graduates searching for employment (Jones 1999, 154), or a 'breathing space' after university (Rugg, Ford and Burrows 2004, 31). The study of the trajectories of English graduates by Sage, Evandrou and Falkingham (2013, 749) is unusual for acknowledging the possibility of multiple purposes of coresidence: primary reasons identified by graduates range across job-seeking, saving for a property deposit, being close to their family or paying off debt.

This paper seeks primarily to understand the purpose fulfilled by graduates' return to the parental home. Such an investigation cannot be divorced from the roots of young adults' behaviours in agency and structures: the paper therefore also explores how far such purposes are associated in participants' accounts with structural forces or individual agency, or some interplay between these.

## **Methods**

This paper draws upon data from a qualitative investigation of graduates' experiences when they return to coreside at the parental home. Participants were recruited via approaches to young adults working at two large graduate employers and also through the alumni network of a long-established English university. 29 young adult graduates were interviewed. Interviewees received a gift voucher as a token of thanks for participating.

All the participants were graduates and at the time of interview lived with their parents. They were aged between 21 and 29, with over half being 23 or 24. 21 were female and eight male, so that the selection was significantly over-weighted towards female participants. 21 were white British, four were Indian British, two had a mixed Indian / white British heritage, one a mixed Middle Eastern / white British heritage and one was East Asian British. Their backgrounds were middle class: 26 participants had at least one graduate parent; in all but one case at least one parent was in, or had retired from, a professional or managerial occupation. Only one young adult was from a disadvantaged background.

All had lived away from the parent home during undergraduate studies. In 23 cases the young adults had returned immediately after university; in a further two cases there were only a few months between the end of undergraduate study and the return. Three graduates had moved back to the parental home after some years of independent living; in one case this was the third occasion on which the young adult had returned since graduation. One participant had lived away only for the first undergraduate year before returning. At the time of

interview, seven young adults had been in coresidence for less than one year, 18 for between one and three years, and four for more than three years. The shortest duration of coresidence was three months, the longest over seven years.

At the moment of return, seven participants were undertaking or about to undertake further study (whether a Master's degree or vocational study), five were employed in graduate-level jobs, four were employed in temporary jobs, seven were unemployed and five had an unpaid internship or were volunteering. One was continuing her undergraduate studies. By the time interviews took place, 16 were employed in graduate-level jobs and eight in temporary jobs, three were studying, one was unemployed and one was in an unpaid internship.

Place and time can be of significance to young adults' trajectories. The location of the parental home may be relevant because of job opportunities and housing costs (Jones 1999; Berrington and Stone 2013); place can also influence aspirations and a sense of what is possible (Allen and Hollingworth 2013). In 15 cases the parental home was in London, in eight cases within easy reach of London, and in six cases in more distant towns or rural settings. Housing costs in London are especially expensive (Wilcox 2008); on the other hand proximity to London can generate aspiration and possibilities (Allen and Hollingworth 2013). Interviews were carried out between January and September 2013: young adults' post-graduation experiences thus mainly took place at a time of economic weakness and fiscal austerity following the 2008 financial crisis. Four participants left university prior to 2008; most (24) had graduated between 2010 and 2012.

Data was collected through in-depth qualitative interviews of 45-90 minutes' duration; all were recorded and transcribed. A qualitative approach is well-suited to investigate meanings, nuanced experiences and contexts; it is thus particularly appropriate to explore young adults' subjective preferences and behaviours, and how these subjectivities interact with social structures. Qualitative methods are also suitable for the investigation of process, offering the opportunity to explore the evolution of coresidence over time through participants' narratives.

The accounts generated through the interview process are acts of interpretation by the participants. They provide insights into how the young adults made sense of the return, and identify what was significant to them about their residence (Mason 2004). Narratives around residential history are particular locations where self-identity and values are constructed and represented (Mason 2004); given that the return to the parental home might be experienced as normatively or psychologically undermining, participants may construct or exaggerate its purpose in order to legitimize their situation. Such interpretative accounts are nonetheless 'necessarily entwined' with experience and facts (Lawler 2002, 243), so that they offer a window upon the context of coresidence, its purpose and young adults' responses to it. Such a window is subject to the limitations of participants' field of view. Structures such as social class may be hidden to those whom they affect (MacDonald et al. 2005). Increasing emphasis on young adults' individual agency may, further, create an illusion of autonomy which obscures the continuing effect of socio-economic structures (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Interviews broadly explored young adults' experiences of return. Participants were not directly questioned about the purpose of coresidence, but were invited to provide a narrative of the circumstances around the return to the parental home and their experiences and activities since then. The focus of analysis in this paper is young adults' perspectives of the role and purpose of their return: multiple readings of transcripts provided an understanding of

the perceived purpose(s) of coresidence in each case; from these observations a typology of purposes was inductively developed across the study.

## **Findings**

For almost all the young adults, coresidence with their parents was not their preferred residential option. Most expressed a preference for independent shared living with peers; others desired to live alone or with a romantic partner. Nonetheless they chose, or were compelled, to live with their parents. The perceived role played by coresidence within the young adults' life trajectories is explored in the following sections. Five distinct purposes are described: base camp, launch pad, savings bank, refuge and preferred residence. Each purpose is explored in depth, where possible being presented in participants' own words (pseudonyms preserve anonymity). In each case the characteristics and goal of coresidence are described; in each case the perceived drivers of coresidence – socio-economic structures, young adults' agency or some balance of these – are also considered. The number of instances of each purpose is given: the total number of instances is greater than the sample size since, as the final paragraphs describe, the purpose for a given graduate might change over the period of coresidence, and coresidence too might encompass multiple simultaneous purposes.

### ***Base camp***

For five graduates, the parental home was or had been a temporary *base camp* which enabled extended travelling or other life experiences. Often residence with parents was intermittent, a pause between experiences:

*I was living [at the family home]... in between but I always had the next thing to go to... the longest I was here really was a month. (Beth)*

During periods of coresidence graduates took temporary jobs to raise funds for travel or other experiences; such periods were generally of limited duration. Jack unusually predicted a lengthy stay at the parental home, in part because he had obtained a job which was 'good experience and it's good on my CV'. Nonetheless his intention remained to explore the world:

*I want to... [work] like 18 months, 2 years. Live at home... so I can save a bit of money. Then I'd like to go travelling... my mates have done that and they've all said it's an incredible experience... I'd like to do it... in my early 20s, before [I] kind of settle down.*

The parental home was a cost-effective base for exploration - Jack's parents charged him a minimal rent. It also provided flexibility: as Jennifer described, explorations might be unplanned and *ad hoc*, so that private rental contracts would be too constraining:

*... it was completely unplanned whether I was going to do things... it was easier to have a base where I could just come and go without having to... say, "oh I'll rent for x number of months".*

Use of the parental home as a base camp seemed driven by young adults' individual choices. In contrast to some of their peers described in the next section, there was a deliberate decision to delay the transition into the traditional markers of independent adulthood – a career, leaving the parental home or starting a family. This base camp purpose was generally short-term; the next residential step was envisaged in different ways. Linda was emphatic that she

would not live with her parents after her travels, whereas Jennifer chose to push forward her career while living with her parents on a more permanent basis.

### ***Launch pad***

The most common purpose of coresidence with parents was as a *launch pad* into graduates' careers. This was identified by 14 participants as the central purpose at the moment of return, and by 13 at the moment when the interview took place after a period of coresidence; 17 participants in total identified this purpose. There were a number of characteristics: strategic attempts to secure a job; constant coresidence, in contrast to the fragmented residence of the base camp; and a plan for coresidence to be time-limited, ending soon after a long-term job was secured:

*I thought I would go home temporarily... while I have these interviews and... I might have to do one internship... When I get a job... I'd then move out. (Rebecca)*

Coresidence facilitated two sets of activities which supported entrance into graduate employment. First, graduates searched and applied for career opportunities. The decision to delay this search until after university was sometimes presented as strategic. Dan had not wanted to apply for jobs whilst at university on the basis of disappointing grades; better scores in his final exams would 'unlock the jobs' he wanted. Stephanie preferred to focus on her university studies without the distraction of job-hunting; others, such as Lily, had searched for jobs unsuccessfully while at university.

Second, the young adults sought to strengthen their labour market competitiveness through self-development. Seven undertook further study – either Master's degrees or vocational qualifications which might unlock a particular career. Ruth gave up a graduate-level job to study for a vocational qualification: here return to the parental home facilitated relaunch of her career on a different path. Eight graduates sought at some stage during their coresidence to enhance career prospects through short-term and mostly unpaid internships.

In the case of both job search and self-development, there were financial reasons for coresidence. Paying both the fees for further study and the costs of rented accommodation was challenging or impossible; it was considered difficult to secure sufficient casual work to support living costs while looking for a graduate-level job:

*...living in London is so expensive... while I'm applying [for jobs], I can't really support myself and obviously getting a job is quite tricky. (Susan)*

But the launch pad role was not simply reducible to finance. Living at the parental home might enable a suspension of certain responsibilities of adult living, such as housework; it might also provide physical and psychological security. These characteristics enabled graduates to concentrate on establishing a career or self-development:

*I've been incredibly busy trying to balance [studying] and a job... when I get in there's a meal ready or, you know, getting the housework done, [my father's] ... been very supportive. (Karen)*

Through this means coresidence supported graduates' emerging careers in a third way. Many remained in the parental home even after obtaining a graduate-level job. Often, as the next section describes, they sought to save money. But the parental home was also a secure foundation from which to take the first steps into a career:



*[coresidence has] made my life easier... I hardly ever cook because I work quite long hours ... we have a cleaner and we all help out... it's not all down to me... (Priya)*

Such benefits depended on relationships within the parental home. For Alisha, whose family dynamics were sometimes stressful, it was 'difficult [to coreside] while having to look for a job at the same time'.

Structural forces were perceived to push participants to use the parental home as a career launch pad. Participants reported a challenging labour market; further qualifications or a history of internships were considered essential for successful job applications:

*... no one was taking anyone on without a formal [vocational] qualification... you can't... just walk into a design studio. (Lily)*

Further, the young adults perceived that career opportunities lay in London; it was, as a result, also a social hub where university peers congregated. The location of the parental home in or around London was invaluable -

*... if you don't live in London ... you're completely screwed... at least I could commute to internships. (Rebecca)*

But agency was also important. Some participants had strong aspirations for their career: several wished to enter highly competitive industries (for instance, film or journalism); others participated in risky business start-ups. Overall they were searching for fulfilment and challenge – the difference, as Dan described, 'between a job and a career'. Out of these aspirations flowed behaviours – Dan delayed his job applications until he was better-placed to obtain his desired job; multiple participants embarked upon study or internships; Lily rejected an undesirable job:

*I was... going to be working with one product... for the whole of my career and it was going to be dog food... I can't do that with my life!*

These choices committed the graduates to a period of joblessness and coresidence with parents. The availability of the parental home helped to keep opportunities open; it enabled risky decisions in the pursuit of self-fulfilment:

*...working with a start-up company ... I wouldn't have done that unless I'd had that stability, knowing that if it goes belly up I wouldn't have a problem with rent or mortgage. (Virat)*

### ***Savings bank***

A third purpose of coresidence was to put money aside not to fund immediate life experiences, as in the base camp situation, but as a material resource for the future. For four graduates, all working full-time, this savings bank role was the primary reason for coresidence at the time of interview; for five others it was an additional benefit. Renting accommodation was commonly perceived as wasteful -

*I was relying on my savings to pay rent and it just seemed like such a waste.... it makes sense to... stay at home and save. (Nicola)*

Such saving was generally intended to facilitate future home ownership by building up a deposit for property purchases. In these cases there was some delay in the transition to independent residential living – but a delay which was intended to support a more complete

launch, so that the young graduates not only left the parental home, but also owned their own property:

*It makes much more sense for me to... save money on rent so I can get my own first step on the property ladder. (Gill)*

Louisa, however, could not imagine being able to afford property. Instead, savings were a 'nest egg' for an uncertain future:

*... if I want to change career or I need to do some unpaid work experience... or something happens, or I decide I'm going to... live abroad for a year, then, like, I've got that money.*

Structural characteristics of the property market, including the high costs of rented accommodation, were in the foreground of these considerations. Nonetheless agency was exercised in two ways. First, the situation demanded some trade-off between the desire to live independently and the utility of saving. There were different judgements:

*... I'd rather have a lot less money in London living with my friends than being at home and having more money. (David)*

*I worked out the numbers based on my salary that I could rent but... I chose not to and I chose to live at home so that I could save up to buy. (Suresh)*

Second, there was tangible parental agency. Several young adults reported parental pressure to save for property purchases. In one case a parent took 'rent' from his daughter, which he would return to her when she left the parental home.

### **Refuge**

The purposes of coresidence described thus far have been goal-focused – whether the exploration of life experiences or launching into careers and home ownership. Sometimes, however, coresidence did not purposefully push forward an objective. Instead the parental home was, for seven participants, a refuge - a place to seek respite, to reflect or to regroup. Graduates' return was either a reaction to adverse events or a consequence of lack of planning or drift. In sharp contrast to the parental home as launch pad, there was an absence of intentionality and strategy.

There were two moments when young adults sought refuge. First, the idea of 'refuge' captures the experience of five graduates immediately after university. For two participants the undergraduate experience had been exhausting, even disturbing. For Matthew the parental home offered respite after a 'tumultuous' final undergraduate year:

*... the state I was in, I needed looking after... I wasn't particularly thinking about where I was going to live next, what I was going to do after university...*

Three others had graduated without plans for the future - the parental home was the obvious location to pause for reflection.

Second, two graduates found refuge at the parental home after an extended period of independent residence post-graduation. Nicola, having obtained a Master's degree, studied for a vocational qualification, but failed a module of her exams; Sally pursued an acting career. Neither had achieved financial independence: in both cases the return to the parental

home was compelled by the parents' withdrawal of funds. The return was perceived as a retreat shaded with failure:

*Oh God, I'm having to move back in with my parents, this is like a massive sign of failure... (Nicola)*

This role of the parental home as a place for respite, reflection and retreat was transient. Some graduates moved on to search and find jobs or began to save funds for property purchases. For others the situation evolved into longer term coresidence. The parental home remained a refuge, but also became a trap: progression to a career or to independent living had stalled -

*I'm trying to apply for jobs... but I don't see it leading anywhere. I don't see it moving me out of my own bedroom... (Matthew)*

A similar situation of chronic refuge applied to two young adults when the launch pad failed. Elizabeth and Rebecca had been unable to obtain jobs in creative industries. Their strategic pursuit of career aspirations ebbed; the parental home was a place to reside, but carried no other goal:

*... it started to look like I wasn't going anywhere... I'd done months and months of internships, still had no job, seemingly had no prospect of getting a job... (Rebecca)*

Multiple factors were implicated in the use of the parental home as refuge. Contingent circumstances, such as university experiences, were significant. Economic structures were implicated: Susan attributed her long stay at the parental home to the difficult job market; others cited the cost of accommodation. Rebecca, having eventually obtained a full-time job, could afford to move out to shared rented accommodation. But the friend with whom she intended to share had been unable to find a job. Rebecca's account indicates the complex interactions which might constrain a young adult: the impact of a difficult labour market upon another person compromised her own ability to exit the parental home. The location of the family home was also a factor. In two cases where graduates felt chronically trapped, London was not easily accessible: the family home, as Sally described it, was 'in the middle of nowhere'.

Individual agency also played a role. Some graduates had not planned for the future when at university, so that a period of reflection at the parental home was taken-for-granted. Pursuit of risky career options increased the possibility of failure and hence the need for refuge. Rebecca acknowledged that she had deliberately refused to consider 'dull' jobs; by contrast an acquaintance had put aside dreams of an acting career and now had a 'proper' job. By highly specifying the careers which they were prepared to pursue, Matthew and Susan increased the likelihood of a prolonged entry into the labour market:

*... due to the nature of the work I want to do, I was never just going to go straight into a job. (Matthew)*

### ***Preferred residence***

For five young adults the parental home was their residence of choice. In three of these cases, it was a comfortable place to live. Nadira had returned to her parents' home for her second year of undergraduate study, and remained through the rest of her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and her first steps into work. There were multiple benefits – the parental home was safer and more comfortable, it facilitated a better social life, and she was

materially better-off. Helena and Gill had returned to the parental home as a refuge after university. Both came to enjoy the experience, emphasising the ‘comfort’ of the family home. The parental home in these accounts was a pleasant ‘feathered nest’; the transition to independent living was happily postponed:

*I don't really want to pay bills... just too much hassle... I'm still playing at life. (Nadira)*

Kim's reasons for preferring to live with her parents were different. The alternative residential option was to share with fellow teachers – the prospect of ‘talk[ing] shop all the time’ was unappealing. Importantly she valued the opportunity both to support and to spend time with her elderly parents:

*I... thought actually it would be nice to be at home while... they're still around... Sometimes I wake up a bit early and we sit and have a coffee... [My father] will... tell me stories... about the past...*

This was a rare moment when the primary purpose of coresidence was perceived, at least in part, as a response to the needs of parents rather than to the needs of the adult children.

Finally, there were cultural distinctions which influenced understandings of coresidence. White British participants tended to perceive the parental home as a temporary staging-post, reflecting a cultural preference for a swift transition to independent residential living. Participants of Asian origin were more likely to describe coresidence as their preferred option, sometimes making an explicit link to cultural practice. Thus Priya described how her preference for living at the parental home was driven by culture:

*...it is my culture ...it's well accepted that we would live with our parents until you get married or... [unless] you actually need to move out for a job.*

This cultural practice was not perceived as limiting: coresidence reduced her domestic responsibilities, so enabling her to concentrate on her emerging career.

Kim also cited her East Asian heritage in explaining why she coresided, stressing a sense of obligation towards her parents. Other participants of Asian origin, while not expressing a preference for coresidence, nonetheless tended to describe the experience as unproblematic.

There were also contrasting individual perspectives upon the desirability of coresidence. Gill experienced no strong normative or psychological impulse to leave the comfortable parental home; Nadira, while influenced by Asian cultural norms, expressed her preference for coresidence in individual terms:

*I'm not a big fan of change... I don't think everyone really feels a massive desire to move out...*

Others, however, for whom the parental residence was not their preferred choice, expressed a palpable urgency in their desire to regain residential independence.

A typology of this kind can imply an ordered world in which categories are clearly defined, discrete and consistent. But the experience of the purposes of coresidence was fluid, nuanced and contingent. There might, for instance, be multiple purposes at a given moment. Jack's priority was to raise money for travel: the parental home was a base camp. But his acceptance of a permanent full-time job was driven by pragmatic consideration of his future career, so that a secondary purpose of coresidence was as a launch pad:

*... it'd be better for... my future prospects if I took this job now, got the experience when it's on offer.*

For Louisa, who had obtained a graduate-level job prior to returning to her parents' home, coresidence supported her first steps into work, enabled her to save money, improved her disposable income and strengthened her relationship with her parents. There was no obvious primary purpose; these factors cohered so that coresidence was 'getting me to where I need to be'.

The purpose of coresidence was also fluid over time. The base camp role was generally temporary, so that, after a period of travel and temporary employment, graduates began to search for or start careers. The refuge, for respite, reflection or retreat, was also transient: for some coresidence evolved into a launch pad; for others short-term refuge became more chronic. Both success and failure caused the purpose to evolve: when a career was successfully launched the focus of coresidence might switch to saving for property ownership; but if the career launch was unsuccessful, the parental home became a chronic refuge. Finally, the desirability of coresidence might change. Two participants developed a preference for living with their parents: in both cases the initial return had been to a refuge; both had successfully used the parent home as a career launch pad; both now preferred to coreside rather than to live independently. By contrast, Virat initially regarded coresidence as his preferred residential option; but its desirability had ebbed over seven years, so that he was 'gutted' when an exit to independent living collapsed.

## **Discussion**

Return to the parental home played some kind of role in the life of the young graduates in this study, and our focus is to understand how the graduates perceived this role. As an act of interpretation and self-representation, young adults' accounts of purpose may be exaggerated: no one likes to admit to purposelessness, so that the extent of intentionality may be over-emphasised. But the purposes of coresidence which the young adults described were entwined with real experience, so that, for instance, careers were indeed launched and money saved in the parental home.

The findings here indicate that it is not sufficient to ascribe an overarching residual or safety net function to young graduates' return to the parental home. Such a generalisation obscures the different purposes which the return is perceived to enable; it overplays negative antecedents, emphasising some notion of a broken biography rather than the positive contribution of coresidence to graduates' trajectories towards adulthood and to their life experiences.

The study identifies five purposes of return to the parental home within the young graduates' accounts. Two are associated with movement towards traditional markers of adulthood: the savings bank purpose supported young graduates' progress towards an independent residence; the launch pad supported transition into a career. In particular, by freeing young graduates from the compulsion to undertake full-time paid work and also from some housekeeping responsibilities, coresidence gifted to them 'control of time' (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn 2011, 364) – time in which to undertake a career search, to concentrate on further study or to give attention to their career's first stages. There was an apparent emphasis on the quality of the transition rather than its swiftness, the objective being a good transition into a stable residential situation or the right career.

Other purposes supported not future transitions, but different dimensions of living in the present. The base camp role facilitated engagement in present-centred experiences (Wyn and Woodman 2006); there is resonance with Arnett's (2000) description of emerging adults who explore and experience the world. Entry into full adulthood – or 'settling down', as Jack described it – was deliberately put off. In a few cases the parental home was preferred as a comfortable 'feathered nest'; the transition to adulthood was again to some extent on hold.

Mason (2004) argues that decisions around residence are embedded in relationships and connections with others which may not be adequately captured through an emphasis on individual agency. Yet only in a single instance was coresidence described as primarily a response to parents' needs or as a means to nurture intergenerational relationships between child and parents. In contrast to the residential biographies described by Mason (2004), the purpose of return for the young adults was not encumbered by or defined in terms of the needs of others. That is not to say, however, that the purpose of coresidence was divorced from young adults' relational contexts. Parents might be influential in pushing a specific purpose (in particular saving for the future), so that purpose was sometimes co-determined.

The role of the parental home as a refuge was nevertheless important. In some cases it was indeed a retreat in moments of 'biographical slippage' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 14): some kind of disappointment necessitated a deviation from the planned trajectory of residential independence. Less dramatically, the parental home was a place to reflect: some graduates faced an 'option dilemma' (du Bois-Reymond 1998, 69), having no view of their future post-graduation; for others the undergraduate experience was emotionally draining, so that a period of retreat from independent living restored energies.

Across these purposes, the parental home offered advantages of cost-effectiveness, flexibility and sometimes location. It was cheap compared to rented accommodation, a financial advantage which underpinned multiple purposes – resources for life experiences, time out to search for a career, saving for property purchase, or extra income for present-centred activities. Being free of rental contract or mortgage tie-ins, the parental home also offered flexibility which supported both *ad hoc* explorations and responsiveness to the demands of the graduate labour market – for instance, the need to take on short-term internships. Finally, the location of the parental home was sometimes invaluable. Proximity to London offered access to graduate employment opportunities and social life; the parental home thus carried 'location-specific capital' (DaVanzo and Goldscheider 1990, 244).

A 'social generation' approach (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn 2011) is useful in understanding the influence of structures and agency as antecedents of these purposes of coresidence. Young graduates' experiences were set within a 'particular moment' of social and economic structures (Wyn and Woodman 2006, 496); yet, as the social generation approach implies, the graduates also exercised tangible agency in response to and within this structural context. The present study cannot uncover the full impact of structures upon young graduates as they make their residential choices. Instead it provides insights into those structural features which were considered significant by the young graduates themselves. The housing and labour markets were prominent in their accounts. The high cost of property purchase and rental underpinned the savings bank purpose; whatever the primary purpose of coresidence, the high costs of rented accommodation in London amplified the financial advantage of living in the parental home. The dynamics of the labour market underlay the launch pad role. A difficult graduate labour market demanded involved job searches. There was also evidence of 'credential inflation' (Brown 1995, 37): a degree was no longer enough;

to maintain labour market competitiveness, higher or vocation-specific qualifications might be required, as well as engagement in internships. The need to secure credentials can explain why less qualified young adults remain longer in the parental home (Côté and Bynner 2008) – in the present case credentialism was also a driver for graduates' return. These features of the graduate labour market increase the likelihood of periods of constrained earning ability in the post-graduation stage: coresidence with parents supported young graduates through these periods. Two structural factors, finally, received little mention: only one participant referred to the possibility of state support for independent living, and even in this case the idea was swiftly dismissed; nor was student debt specifically identified as a constraint, albeit that few graduates were as yet earning enough to trigger repayments.

The composition of the study sample restricts evaluation of the influence of 'social characteristics'. Certainly cultural expectations seemed significant, so that participants of Asian origin were more likely than their white British peers to describe coresidence as a preferred option. One distinction by gender can be identified: it was female graduates who identified the parental home as a comfortable 'feathered nest'. This distinction, however, must be treated cautiously given the small sample size and the overweighting of female participants. Participants were almost exclusively middle class, so that inter-class comparisons cannot be drawn. It can be observed, however, that these middle class graduates had access to material resources and parent support which enabled the various purposes of coresidence – for instance, reduced rent or no rent, comfortable homes and the capacity to support a non-working adult household member. Participants also tended to display a 'cosmopolitan habitus' (Allen and Hollingworth 2013, 508) - a confident aspiration with regard to their careers, and an embracing of the dynamic opportunities which London might offer. In working class localities young adults may exhibit a 'stickiness' or attachment to local area and family ties which restricts mobility (Allen and Hollingworth 2013, 502; MacDonald et al. 2005). No such stickiness was visible among these middle class graduates; there was frequently a strong preference to move on, in particular if home locations were some distance from London. The origins of an aspirational disposition can be complex and multi-faceted (Kintrea, St Clair and Houston 2015); relevant factors here are likely to be class (in most cases at least one of the participant's parents was a graduate, so that they belonged to a fraction of the middle class in which a history of university attendance and of geographical mobility was embedded), place (the proximity of the parental home to London), and perhaps simply the experience of moving away to university, which might incubate a sense of possibility and an attachment to mobility.

Within this structural context the young graduates nonetheless described how they shaped the purpose of coresidence through their own agency. First, they might hold specific life ambitions. The existence of such ambitions might be associated with the middle class dispositions to which we have referred; nonetheless there were different subjective preferences and emphases. The determination to amass life experiences underlay the base camp role. In the longer term participants held strong aspirations that their career should be fulfilling (for a similar finding, see du Bois-Reymond 1998) – career preferences were thus particular and constraining. The pursuit of a highly specified career indicated prolonged use of the parental home as a launch pad, and created the risk of retreat to the parental home if an ambitious career project failed. Second, decisions to coreside typically involved a trade-off. Independent living – the preference for most – was sacrificed for present-centred benefits or for longer-term advantages. The frame of this trade-off was structured by the costs of independent living and the availability of employment. But judgements about the trade-off were subjective, being associated with the nature and strength of career aspirations and also

the value placed on immediate residential independence. An obvious example of contrasting subjective judgements occurred when full-time graduate-level employment was achieved – some participants planned an immediate exit from coresidence, while others continued to use the parental home as a supportive base.

This study, in conclusion, confirms that young graduates' residential trajectories are various and complex. Graduates' accounts of their return to the parental home encompass multiple purposes which may change over time, and which are associated with both socio-economic contexts and individual preferences. Such insights have been enabled by the use of an in-depth qualitative methodology; the corollary of such an approach, however, is that the study is limited both by sample size and composition. There would be benefit from wider qualitative investigation of the robustness of the typology of purposes identified here; specific exploration of differences in the purpose of coresidence by gender, place, class and moment of return would be valuable.

Sage, Evandrou and Falkingham (2013), finally, express surprise that three-quarters of coresiding graduates in their survey were satisfied with their living arrangements. A broader understanding of the purpose of return provides an explanation. Return and coresidence is not simply a retreat or dysfunctional interruption in graduates' residential trajectories; it can push forward an objective, so that, while the experience of coresidence might not always be comfortable, there remains overarching purpose. It is when this sense of purpose or progress is lost that coresidence can become chronic and painful.

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