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Longitudinal life course perspectives on housing inequality in young adulthood

Abstract

In many countries, there is growing public concern about the increasing difficulties that young people face in obtaining secure, affordable, high quality and well-located housing. Much of the analysis and discussion focuses on the ways in which intergenerational housing inequalities have deepened over time as young adults' fortunes have deteriorated, most obviously through declining access to homeownership. In this review, we showcase how researchers are harnessing life course theories and rich longitudinal datasets, exploiting longitudinal modelling techniques, and developing new geographical data linkages to enhance our knowledge of a broader range of housing inequalities in young adulthood. We argue that incorporating these longitudinal perspectives more fully into geographical research and teaching will foster an enriched pluralistic model of quantitative human geography that is characterised by collaboration, critical engagement with policy issues, and sensitivity to the strengths and challenges of working in an integrated fashion with varied forms of numerical data.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Across Europe, young people's economic fortunes have deteriorated in recent decades, while patterns of transition to traditional adult roles and identities have become more diverse. Although much research focuses on the changing demographic and labour market position of young people, since the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) their growing difficulties in housing systems have attracted particular attention (Arundel and Ronald, 2016; Christophers, 2018).

Much of this debate about young adults' housing problems, especially in the United Kingdom (UK), is framed in terms of a deepening clash or divide between generations (Hoolachan and McKee, 2019). Encapsulated in the popular concept of 'Generation Rent', these narratives propose that intergenerational gulfs in housing wealth, space, security and quality are opening up as a range of structural trends mean that contemporary young people are increasingly excluded from the opportunities to enter homeownership and low-cost social housing that were available to previous post-war generations (for detailed discussion see Clapham et al., 2014; Coulter, 2017; Dewilde et al., 2018; Lennartz et al. 2016; McKee, 2012). However, viewing young people's housing difficulties through this type of generational, tenure-centric lens overlooks how a wider range of housing disparities *between* young adults are also growing in tandem (Christophers, 2018; Green, 2017; McKee 2012).

In this article, we showcase how social scientists are moving beyond simplistic Generation Rent narratives by drawing on (1) *life course perspectives*, (2) *harnessing longitudinal data resources* and (3) *using novel data linkages* to improve our understanding of housing inequalities in young adulthood. A key advantage of taking a longitudinal approach to this topic is that rich prospectively collected data from the same people over time allow us to operationalise many of the core principles of the life course perspective (Elder, 1998). These include recognising that individual trajectories across the life course domains of education, work, childbearing and

1

housing are interconnected in ways that influence life span development. For example, housing decisions and circumstances have a complex reciprocal relationship with far-reaching decisions regarding family formation. Similarly, 'turning point' events that significantly alter the direction of life course trajectories (for instance job loss or partnership dissolution) often promote particular types of housing transition, thereby contributing to the creation of diverging and non-linear life paths (Stone et al., 2014). Young adults' housing decisions are also influenced by normative societal beliefs concerning the appropriate age for making role and status transitions such as leaving the parental home (Aassve et al. 2013). Exactly what constitutes an 'on-time' transition can, however, change across cohorts as trends like delayed home leaving reshape social norms.

In addition, life course perspectives guide researchers to examine how the dynamics of people's lives are tied together and connected to contextual circumstances (Coulter et al., 2016). This can involve exploring the ways in which family members' lives are 'linked' together in the housing system, for instance as parents provide various forms of support to help their children live independently (Heath and Calvert, 2013; Manzo et al., 2018) or overcome the growing financial barriers to homeownership entry (Albertini et al., 2018; Mulder et al., 2015). Considering how macro-level institutions, structures and culture constrain agency and unevenly influence housing careers is also important, for example as geographic variations in housing provision and costs influence young adults' prosperity, living arrangements and fertility (McKee et al., 2017a). This type of contextual effect can help generate patterns of cumulative disadvantage over the life course as success in early adulthood increases the flow of advantages throughout later life (Putnam, 2015). Distinguishing shared *cohort effects* on life course experiences from the individual effects of *ageing* processes, as well as from *period effects* that impact on all members of a population living through a given moment of historical time, is therefore a crucial objective for life course researchers (Findlay et al., 2015).

On a broader level, we argue that more strongly integrating longitudinal data and methods into geographical research and teaching will help to foster a pluralistic school of quantitative human geography that encompasses conventional census and survey analysis as well as the emerging frontiers of data science and Big Data analytics (Arribas-Bel and Reades, 2018; Connelly et al., 2016; Lansley and Cheshire, 2018). Building a richer 'big tent' model of quantitative geography characterised by collaboration between researchers skilled in these different traditions — as well as partnerships with specialists in cognate disciplines — could produce a better appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of using different forms of numerical data in any given research application. Ultimately, creating greater quantitative dialogue and teamwork should yield more rigorous scholarship that can critically engage with the material social, economic and policy issues that are sometimes neglected within contemporary human geography (Hamnett, 2011).

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes how longitudinal life course research is unpacking multiple dynamics of housing inequality, first in young adults' living arrangements and then in tenure positions. Here we draw upon studies using a range of conceptual frameworks. These include models of *housing pathways* (Clapham, 2002), which highlight how complex and non-linear housing trajectories are shaped by events occurring in other life-course domains, as well as by life-style preferences and subjective meanings and narratives of housing. Although many housing researchers still use the term *housing careers*, which is often understood as implying a normative and traditional housing trajectory (Lennartz and Helbrecht, 2018), or instead suggest alternatives such as *housing transitions* to more adequately reflect dynamism across the life course (Beer et al., 2011), in practice these models are often used in a way which largely echoes the *housing pathways* perspective. We therefore do not limit this review to one single approach — rather, we welcome this conceptual diversity and argue that longitudinal life course approaches are particularly well equipped to explore recent trends in housing inequalities.

Next, Section 3 reflects on the practical opportunities and challenges of conducting longitudinal work in this area, as well as the ways these are being addressed. Section 4 then offers some brief concluding thoughts. Although the paper focuses primarily on the UK, in many places we also draw on examples from continental Europe and the US to contextualise our conclusions and reflect on the role that institutions, contextual conditions, cultures and policies play in configuring young adults' housing trajectories. Juxtaposing UK and international evidence also allows us to reflect on how well we understand the British case, while also enabling us to explore the research opportunities that exist elsewhere due to the varied data landscape.

2. Using Longitudinal Data and Life Course Approaches to Examine Housing Disparities in Young Adulthood

2.1 Transitions to residential independence

Rates of parental co-residence in young adulthood vary considerably across Europe due to differences in the patterning of life course careers brought about by institutional and macro-contextual factors such as the structure of labour markets, education and housing systems, welfare provision and cultural expectations (Mandic, 2008). However in many countries, public debates now regularly highlight the growth of parental co-residence in young adulthood that has characterised the first decades of the twenty-first century. In Britain, the proportion of 15-34 year olds living with a parent increased from 36% in 1996 to 40% in 2017 (ONS, 2017) and similar trends have been reported in America (Fry, 2016) and across much of continental Europe after 2007 (Lennartz et al., 2016). Explanations for growing rates of parental co-residence and also unrelated sharing in young adulthood usually identify prolonged educational enrolment (exacerbated in the UK by the shift to a debt-based system of student finance), delayed partnership formation, cuts to social benefits and difficulties finding secure well-paid work and affordable housing to be contributory factors (Arundel and Ronald, 2016; Berrington

et al., 2017). In this view, young people are spending longer in the parental home because co-residence provides an efficient way for parents to support their offspring to navigate the increasingly precarious transition to adulthood (Stone et al., 2011; Hill and Hirsch, 2019).

Cross-sectional data cannot, however, tell us whether increasing parental co-residence is principally the result of a later age at first leaving home, or increased rates of returning home among those who have left. For this we need longitudinal data following young adults over the life course. Recently, scholars have used nationally representative household panel surveys to model the life course dynamics of exits and returns to the parental home. These studies show that low incomes, unemployment and less advantaged jobs reduce the probability of leaving home, presumably because young people with fewer resources cannot afford to move out (Iacovou, 2010). In Britain, survey evidence suggests that age 30 represents a normative deadline for leaving home (Aassve et al., 2013) and young people found living with their parents after this age tend to be economically disadvantaged (Stone et al., 2011; Berrington et al., 2017).

Longitudinal analysis of exit dynamics has been accompanied by modelling 'boomerang' returns. Stone and colleagues (2014) applied event history models to data from the British Household Panel Survey to explore how several events — unemployment, leaving university and relationship breakdown — form 'turning points' in young people's lives that often trigger returns to the parental home. Importantly, the impact that these life events have on boomerang moves differs for young men and women. For example, young men are particularly likely to return home after relationships dissolve because they rarely have child custody and so receive minimal public benefit or social housing support to live independently (Berrington and Stone, 2014). This work demonstrates the importance of collecting rich event history data on interlinked education, employment and family careers and using these in longitudinal modelling of residential transitions.

There are also disparities in the parental co-residence patterns of young people from different ethnic groups and migration backgrounds (Stone et al., 2011). However, these ethno-racial and

migration disparities vary greatly across countries. While young Black and Hispanic Americans leave the parental home later than their White counterparts (Lei and South, 2016), Moroccan and Turkish young people in the Netherlands leave the parental home earlier than their Dutch peers (Zorlu and Mulder, 2011). Moreover, Dutch ethnic minorities are also more likely to return to the parental home, but their return is less likely to be linked to family events like partnership dissolution (Kleinepier et al., 2017). This evidence implies that ethnic disparities in the Netherlands are not solely attributable to differential exposure to life events. This area requires more research, in particular to investigate how different cultural meanings, familial bonds and support exchanges as well as ties to places may influence the housing pathways of different groups of young people.

Developing our understanding of who makes repeated exit and return moves by analysing long periods of longitudinal data is becoming increasingly critical as it becomes more common for young people to leave and return home multiple times during their twenties (Warner et al., 2017). Survey administrators also need to incorporate richer questions on inter-household flows of financial support between family members (for example payments to defray the cost of rent, bills, food and transport) as well as in-kind assistance so that analysts can explore which parents support their children's residential position with transfers rather than co-residence. The added value this can provide is illustrated by South and Lei's (2015) innovative event history analysis of the rich data on family relationships (including measures of emotional closeness and abuse histories) and financial support practices that has been collected in recent sweeps of the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics Transition to Adulthood supplement. Incorporating these types of 'softer' measures into longitudinal surveys promises to allow analysts to develop more relational perspectives on how, when and why young people may opt (not) to live with their parents at different life course junctures.

The life course framework emphasises that individuals' biographies are intertwined with other family members. Studies of leaving and returning to the parental home have focused

particularly on exploring the extent to which the 'linked lives' of parents shape their offspring's residential behaviour. For instance, middle class UK parents frequently provide subsidised co-residence in the family home while their children search for a career job (Lewis et al., 2016). Iacovou (2010) shows that European parents may use their resources to help children leave home at an age that aligns with national norms, as she found that higher parental incomes reduce riskier early departures to partnership while promoting such exits at older ages. Furthermore, analysis of US panel data shows that children are less likely to leave home if their parents own their dwelling or have ample residential space (Mulder and Clark, 2000), perhaps because these types of 'feathered nests' provide young people with greater comfort and privacy. By contrast, Hill and Hirsch's (2019) qualitative evidence from focus groups indicate that less affluent UK parents often need their co-resident children to help pay rent, while some lack the space to accommodate returns. This means that policy decisions about *inter alia* social benefit levels and eligibility criteria, social housing allocations, rental sector regulation and housing construction standards could all impact on patterns and experiences of parental co-residence in young adulthood.

An important geographical research priority is to examine how the location of the parental home influences young peoples' dynamics of exit and return. This can be achieved by using panel survey geocodes to attach administrative data about the labour market or housing conditions of localities at a range of spatial scales. For instance, Bayrakdar and Coulter (2018) linked administrative house price data onto the UK's Understanding Society survey to show that the local price of housing has a relatively weak association with the timing of exits from the parental home. However, their findings also suggest that young people may be particularly inclined to stay living in parental homes that are located in densely populated areas, potentially because these locations offer excellent cost-effective access to jobs and educational opportunities. In particular, family homes in London and the Greater South East can enhance career development by enabling young people to take on unpaid internships and entry-level jobs in the capital that their peers from other parts of the country can only access by paying

market rents. Exploring how spatially unequal opportunities to use the parental home may affect patterns of social mobility remains a pressing research objective that could be tackled in Britain using massive linked census record databases such as the ONS Longitudinal Study of England and Wales. More innovatively, repurposed administrative and consumer data resources — such as the Electoral and Consumer Register assembled and linked to housing transaction records by Lansley and colleagues (2019) — could be used to model young adults' spatial mobility and housing transitions. Outside Britain, comprehensive population register databases in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands offer unparalleled opportunities for studying mobility patterns and their relation to economic variables and kinship geographies at highly granular spatial scales (e.g. Korpi et al., 2011).

Another research priority is to evaluate the ways in which policy changes can exacerbate inequality in young adults' housing transitions. The 2010-15 UK Coalition Government's sweeping cuts to housing benefits particularly targeted younger adults as ministers sought to position sharing and parental co-residence as the normative residential situations for poorer young people (Berrington et al., 2017). The most obvious example of a policy change with this motivation was the decision to raise the age below which people can only claim housing benefit to cover the cost of renting a room in a shared dwelling —the Shared Accommodation Rate — from 25 to 35 in 2012. Analyses of this initiative have shown that in many places there is a dearth of affordable shared stock and unwanted 'stranger shares' often undermine privacy, safety, well-being and non-resident fathers' ability to see their children (Cole et al., 2016; Stone and Berrington, 2014; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2017).

Furthermore, vulnerable young people often cannot return to the parental home and insufficient benefit support can propel some into homelessness. These vulnerable groups tend not to be represented in social datasets and so it is important that longitudinal administrative data from those working with the homeless (e.g. the London Combined Homelessness And Information Network (CHAIN) database about rough sleeping — see GLA (2019)) be made

available to researchers. This would allow scholars to examine the factors propelling young people into homelessness and their subsequent dynamics of homelessness. Ultimately, such work could inform efforts to improve the residential circumstances of these highly disadvantaged groups.

2.2 Transitions to homeownership

The expansion and spread of homeownership was one of Britain's defining social, political and economic trends through the late twentieth century. It is therefore unsurprising that policymakers have been alarmed by recent falls in the rate of owner-occupation from 71% of English households in 2003 to 63% in 2016-17 (MHCLG, 2018a). Much of this decline can be attributed to reduced transitions into mortgaged homeownership by younger cohorts constrained by low incomes, less stable life courses and problems of housing affordability (Andrew, 2012). Similar patterns of deteriorating access have been observed in the United States, Australia and other European countries (Clark, 2019; Lennartz et al., 2016)

Thus far, the main policy response has been the UK Government's collection of Help to Buy schemes designed to assist young people to overcome the deposit barriers that impede access to mortgages (Ronald et al., 2015). While tens of thousands of English first time buyers have benefited from Help to Buy mortgage guarantees and equity loans since 2013 (HM Treasury, 2017; MHCLG, 2018b), there is much debate about the efficacy and social equity of the multibillion pound scheme. Part of this debate revolves around whether recent cohorts of young adults will eventually 'catch up' with the higher homeownership rates of their predecessors as they age (Green, 2017; Resolution Foundation, 2018).

One problem with our understanding of young Britons' tenure trends is that the prevailing reliance on Generation Rent narratives perpetuates an Anglocentric view of homeownership as the preferred and natural majority tenure (Preece et al., 2020). This ignores alternative

approaches and channels debate towards how to improve access to ownership at the expense of discussing other housing policies. These include the provision of more social housing and ways to more equitably tax housing wealth and capital gains made from land and property price movements (Dorling, 2014; Murphy, 2018). Although the Westminster government has recently started to shift housing policy away from mostly promoting homeownership, the UK's devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have long been taking a more diverse approach; for example by terminating Right to Buy, investing in social housing and reforming private renting laws (McKee et al., 2017b; Moore, 2017).

The view that homeownership is the preferred, natural housing destination for most people is rooted in traditional *housing careers* approaches and it requires further examination. Traditional housing careers frameworks regarded housing experiences as a linear upward progression, ignoring diversity in the preferences and meanings that people attach to housing (Clapham, 2002). However, more recently researchers have recognised the role of the complex meanings people attach to housing and their preferences and life-style choices (Preece et al., 2020). A culture of homeownership appears to be a given in UK housing debates, but in fact some European countries such as Germany have a long tradition of private renting over the life-course (Scanlon et al., 2014). It is thus important to recognise the differences in the attitudes and meanings of housing across different institutional contexts, as well as across individuals from different social groups.

Another issue with the current debate is that conceptual fuzziness of the Generation Rent concept makes it difficult to agree on how different generations should be distinguished. Mannheim's classic thesis that generations are defined by the shared ideologies, attitudes and beliefs that emerge from their historically anchored formative experiences is much less amenable to measurement than the related demographic concept of birth cohorts (Scott, 2000). There is currently little agreement about whether the housing difficulties of contemporary young adults represent the 'one-off' cohort effect posited by David Willetts in *The Pinch* (2011),

or whether they represent a leading edge on a new structural dynamic of progressively accelerating intergenerational inequality (Green, 2017). Assessing the merits of these perspectives will require using long periods of longitudinal data —perhaps collated from the UK's long-running birth cohort studies (CLOSER, 2019) — to compare the housing trajectories of different cohorts as their life courses unfold.

Perhaps the most important shortcoming of the Generation Rent debate is that it ignores how intra-generational housing disparities between young people are deepening at the same time as inequalities between cohorts (McKee, 2012). As a response to this, researchers are increasingly using life course perspectives and longitudinal data to examine how the aggregate decline of young adult homeownership is being accompanied by growing tenure disparities between young people. Given that many governments profess a commitment to social mobility, much of this work assesses whether young adults' housing careers are shaped by the intergenerationally 'linked lives' of their parents. This involves using longitudinal datasets to model how parental background measures like educational attainments, social class and tenure are associated with young adults' subsequent patterns of transition into homeownership (Bayrakdar et al., 2019). For instance, Mulder and colleagues (2015) showed that in many European countries children are *ceteris paribus* more prone to enter homeownership if their parents own rather than rent their dwelling. Sequentially adding time-varying individual variables to these types of event history models of homeownership transitions has allowed researchers to evaluate whether parental effects primarily operate indirectly through intergenerational transmissions of socio-economic status (Coulter, 2018).

The long-running nature of some longitudinal studies has allowed researchers to compare parental background effects across cohorts. In Britain, Green (2017) used twenty years of harmonised panel data to argue that the positive effect that parental socio-economic advantage confers on child homeownership has increased over time. Similarly, Coulter's (2018) analysis of the ONS Longitudinal Study indicates that over time the children of renters have become

increasingly likely to rent privately into their early thirties. Enriching this dataset with information on local house prices indicated that parental socio-economic advantage is a particularly potent predictor of child homeownership in places where house prices are higher (Coulter, 2017). This latter study provides one of the first attempts to test whether intergenerationally 'linked lives' have geographically varied importance for young people's housing careers at the subnational level. In future, longitudinal research could productively harness resources such as the large Understanding Society survey or linked census datasets from the ONS Longitudinal Study of England and Wales, Scottish Longitudinal Study and Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study to compare young adults' housing career trajectories across the UK's devolved administrations.

Another strand of work focuses on the mechanisms by which parents shape their children's housing experiences. Quantitative specialists have exploited the unusually rich data gathered by some surveys to evaluate how strongly parental monetary gifts or practices of tenure socialization boost the probability that their children subsequently enter homeownership in different national contexts (Lersch and Luijkx, 2015; Mulder and Smits, 2013). In Britain, the growing evidence that parental background plays a significant role is perhaps unsurprising given estimates that parents provided £5.7bn to lubricate 27% of all UK housing transactions in 2018 (Legal and General, 2018). Meanwhile, qualitative interviewing has revealed how parents and children living in different societies negotiate and interpret intergenerational homeownership support practices, as well as their often ambivalent implications for family relationships (Druta and Ronald, 2017; Manzo et al., 2018). Unfortunately, much of this literature focuses mostly on the strategies of relatively affluent middle class families and less is known about intergenerational housing support exchanges among less advantaged populations for whom homeownership may be out of reach (Dewilde et al., 2018). This is an important area for further work.

At present, little is known about how uneven patterns of parental support could cause the housing fortunes of more advantaged young people to diverge from their less fortunate peers over the life course. If children from affluent families have greater access to housing support, this could buffer them against experiencing short-term housing problems (for example living in poor quality rented accommodation) and also provide long-term wealth benefits by enabling early access to owner-occupation (Christophers, 2018). This cascading of cumulative advantage down the generations through the housing system could become particularly important as younger cohorts age and potentially need to use private assets to offset increasingly meagre pensions, as well as the growing costs of later life care (Ronald, 2018).

3. Challenges and Opportunities in Using Longitudinal Data

Section 2 described some key benefits of using longitudinal data for housing analysis. These include the ability to more accurately identify the temporal ordering of effects; the relationship between earlier events, attitudes and expectations on later outcomes; and, where data allow, the role of extended kin in facilitating or constraining housing trajectories.

However, several issues mean that the analysis of longitudinal surveys is no simple matter. The first is the attrition of participants. Attrition is problematic for two reasons: firstly, it reduces the sample size for analysis, resulting in less precise inference and an inability to apply methods (such as multichannel sequence analysis) which require a long balanced panel of constant responses (Spallek et al., 2014). Secondly, individuals who drop out often differ systematically from those followed up and this differential attrition means that the fully observed longitudinal sample may, over time, become less representative of the target population.

In high income settings, attrition rates vary cross-nationally, being somewhat higher in the UK than many other countries (Jenkins and van Kerm, 2017). Attrition also tends to be greatest

among young men, renters, those who are more geographically mobile, minorities and those who are more socio-economically disadvantaged (Lynn and Borkowska, 2018; Jenkins and van Kerm, 2017). This selectivity can lead to biased estimates, although the extent to which attrition bias seriously affects substantive findings is debated. Whilst some authors report benign effects (Bayrakdar and Coulter, 2018; Stone et al., 2014; Watson, 2003), others more cautiously suggest that attrition bias can have substantial impacts (Jenkins and van Kerm, 2017). Given that response rates in social surveys tend to be reducing over time, the potential for attrition bias is becoming stronger. For example, whilst 78% of the British Household Panel Study sample were still participating after six years (1991-1997), the equivalent percentage for the main sample of the Understanding Society survey (2009/10-2015/16) was 52% (Lynn and Borkowska, 2018). If attrition can be predicted by observed characteristics in previous waves (benchmarked against census or representative administrative data) then weighting strategies can be applied to ensure that the sample characteristics remain representative (Little and Rubin, 2019; Seaman and White, 2013). However, if those who remain in the sample differ systematically on unobserved characteristics, and these unobserved characteristics are associated with the outcome of interest, then biases can creep in.

Housing researchers need to be particularly aware of the possibility that attrition is associated with residential mobility. The continually tracked sample will therefore likely over-represent those in more stable residential situations, such as owner-occupation. It is particularly difficult to follow up young adults since residential mobility (e.g. upon leaving home) is associated with drop out (Bayrakdar and Coulter, 2018). One strategy, successfully employed by Stone et al. (2014), was to use a selection model to jointly model the probability of remaining in the sample and the probability for the outcome of interest (in this case returning to the parental home). Such an approach requires the use of instrumental variables, which for longitudinal surveys could come from the paradata concerning contact and interview details from previous waves. Alternatively, one way of minimising attrition bias is to draw on administratively-linked population data, either from the population registers maintained in parts of continental Europe

(Jalovaara and Kulu, 2019; Kleinepier et al., 2017) or from a census-linked longitudinal study like the ONS Longitudinal Study (Coulter, 2018). These resources provide the very large samples to support sub-group and fine-grained geographical analyses, and often are available over a considerable number of decades, allowing researchers to study the inter-generational transmission of housing characteristics. However, administrative data tend not to include measures of attitudes, expectations, relationship quality or intergenerational flows of resources and support.

Longitudinal surveys which are geo-coded can be augmented with auxiliary data to study how subnational contextual factors (such as housing market characteristics or unemployment rates) shape housing trajectories. For example in Britain, Ermisch (1999) found that higher regional house prices reduced departures from the parental home, especially to form partnerships. Using housing prices at the more fine-grained Local Authority District level, Bayrakdar and Coulter (2018) show that the likelihood of leaving the parental home is slightly reduced in more costly areas, especially for partnership formation and non-student exits. However LADs are administrative entities and may not represent local housing markets, which could be either smaller (for example if individuals are constrained by needing to live within a particular school catchment) or larger (for example the Greater South East commuter region).

Unfortunately, the choice of geographical scale is more frequently driven by data availability than by theory and a sensitivity to the potential impacts of the Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP). Auxiliary information, such as house price or rental index data, are often only available at a small number of relatively coarse geographical scales which often reflect administrative boundaries rather than functional spatial zones such as Travel To Work Areas. Inconsistencies in measurement or temporal gaps in datasets, as well as spatial boundary changes, are a particular headache for longitudinal analysts requiring consistent time-series of external data.

Where external data are consistently available at finer geographical scales, small survey sample sizes and statistical disclosure restrictions often bedevil analysis. These issues can be overcome

to some extent by using the safe research environments and secure remote access opportunities provided by statistical offices and data archives. Working in these environments with precise survey geo-codes (sometimes at coordinate level) could enable analysts to attach spatially referenced new forms of contextual data at customisable geographical scales, for example by using raw Land Registry housing transaction records or local area rental statistics from companies like Zoopla to create housing market indicators at multiple bespoke scales. As the technical challenges of doing this are considerable, collaboration with Big Data specialists may be required. Alternatively, linking survey data to fine-grained geodemographic area profiles such as the UK's 2011 census Output Area Classification or commercial equivalents like ACORN may provide opportunities to explore how housing trajectories vary across socially differentiated types of places.

There are also barriers to conducting cross-nationally comparative analysis of young adults' housing trajectories. A key issue is that representative data are not always available or comparable. Only a relatively small number ofs countries have large, long-running household panel surveys such as Understanding Society — these include the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (University of Michigan, 2019); German Socio-Economic Panel (Schupp, 2019); Swiss Panel Survey (Voorpostel et al., 2018) and Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Summerfield et al., 2019). While these have been harmonised to some extent into the Cross-National Equivalence File (CNEF), this data has not been extensively used and most comparative work has focused on comparisons of BHPS (UK) and SOEP (Germany). For example, Lersch and Vidal (2014) investigated the impact of separation on home ownership and found that the housing market context allows ex-partners in Britain to maintain relatively high levels of ownership after a separation, while ownership rates fall dramatically in Germany. Similarly, Bayrakdar et al (2019) compared entry to first-time homeownership in Germany and the UK to explore the effects of socioeconomic background and family life course events.

Both the BHPS and SOEP provided information for their respective countries to the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) which ran from 1994 to 2001 (Eurostat, 2019a). This cross-national project only covered a selection of (western) European countries but provided an important opportunity to study the determinants of leaving home (Iacovou, 2010; Aassve et al., 2002) and other housing transitions (Dewilde, 2008). More recently, cross-national longitudinal data have become available via the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) (Eurostat, 2019b). The strengths and limitations of the ECHP and EU-SILC for housing studies has been reviewed by Dewilde (2015), who concludes that they can provide unique understanding of interactions between micro-level individual factors and macro-factors such as welfare states, housing systems and labour market contexts. For example, Lersch and Dewilde (2015) used EU-SILC data to demonstrate how institutional contexts moderate the impact of economic insecurity on access to home ownership, while Arundel and Ronald (2016) used the same dataset to compare dynamics of returns to the parental home across Europe.

Recently researchers have highlighted how qualitative studies offer insights into the psychological and biographical dimension of housing life course careers. Most often cross-sectional interviews have been used to collect retrospective biographical information in order to reconstruct housing histories and reflect on the role of institutional, family and individual life course factors in shaping transitions. For example, Aeby and Heath (2019) illuminate the interdependencies between different life course domains, focusing on the (often transitional) housing arrangements that are made following the breakdown of a co-residential partnership.

Intergenerational support for young adults' housing transitions has been a frequent focus of qualitative studies relating to housing transitions. Health and Calvert (2013) found in their interviews with young UK adults that the majority had received some material or financial support from their parent(s). However, their interviews also highlighted that this support "came at a price, often expressed in terms of a feeling of unease, fuelled by awareness that their independence and autonomy as young adults had been compromised by their ongoing

dependency" (Heath and Calvert, p. 1131). Druta et al. (2019) used a two-generational design to elicit reflections from both the young adult (currently living independently from the parental home) and their parents on expectations surrounding and negotiations connected to the period of transitioning toward independent living. Although relatively rare, qualitative longitudinal datasets such as the 'Inventing Adulthoods' study (Henderson et al., 2006) and the 'Timescapes' study (Neale et al. 2012) provide unique opportunities for participants to re-evaluate and recount their lived experiences through time as the studies progress. Integrating a greater focus on housing into prospective longitudinal qualitative studies could help chart how family interdependencies, exchanges and 'moral economies' change over the life course in response to the shifting needs of different generations (Hoolachan and McKee, 2019).

4. Conclusions

Enhanced difficulties entering and navigating the housing system have become a hallmark of young adults' increasingly de-standardized lives across the Global North. In many countries, trends towards prolonged parental co-residence, reduced rates of home purchase, an increased reliance on private renting and the expansion of unrelated sharing have become the subject of public debates. These discussions typically frame young adults' housing problems as one facet of a deepening intergenerational crisis that is helping to pull apart contemporary societies.

In this paper, we sought to showcase how researchers working in the UK and beyond are using longitudinal datasets to apply life course principles in order to better understand a range of housing inequalities in young adulthood. For example, studies of 'turning point' events show how the interconnection between young adults' life course careers means that uneven exposure to economic adversity (for example the risk of unemployment or job insecurity) creates inequalities in which young people experience particular types of housing transition (Stone et al., 2014). Examining these interlinkages across multiple parallel life course careers requires

rich panel data, sensitivity to potential attrition biases and the application of sophisticated methods such as multichannel sequence analysis (Spallek et al., 2014), event history models and multilevel analysis (Kulu and Steele, 2013). Longitudinal research also shows how intergenerationally linked lives shape young people's home leaving behaviour and access to homeownership in ways that could have long-term implications for disparities in health, family formation behaviour and prosperity. These patterns unfold in different ways in different times and places as the opportunities and constraints young people face — as well as their tenure and life-style preferences, expectations, aspirations and decisions — are shaped by institutions, government policies and contextual conditions (Preece et al., 2020).

Geographers are particularly well placed to ensure that housing research makes optimal and rigorous use of the increasingly fine-grained georeferenced nature of most longitudinal datasets. For example, geographical expertise concerning appropriate spatial scales and ecological measures may be particularly valuable for projects looking to link administrative or commercial data on housing market conditions, local labour markets or the multifaceted characteristics of neighbourhoods onto longitudinal datasets. Collaboration with Big Data specialists and colleagues in other social sciences will be useful here, especially when working with repurposed commercial datasets or the massive population registers maintained by some continental European countries. Going forward, geographers could therefore usefully incorporate longitudinal data resources more fully into their research and teaching curricula as is common practice in cognate disciplines such as demography, economics, political science and sociology. This will help to erect a pluralistic 'big tent' model of quantitative geography that can critically deploy a range of tools to robustly analyse, understand and challenge inequalities within contemporary society.

5. References

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