Family transitions in early adulthood: coresidence of young graduates with their parents

Most students in the UK move away to study. But there is increasing awareness that many graduates return to live in the parental home at some stage after graduation. Little is known about why they return or about the experiences of young graduates and their parents when they live together. This research brief reports on an in-depth qualitative study which has explored young graduates’ coresidence with their parents.

Eighteen percent of young adults aged 20-34 with degree-level qualifications live with their parents; in a survey of graduates from a single English university, around half of respondents returned to the parental home in the five years after graduation. The prevalence of return has caused anxiety about graduates’ transition to adulthood, especially in the media. ‘Moving out’ of the parental home to independent accommodation is often regarded as a significant marker on the road to adulthood: returning after university may appear to be a backward step on this journey.

Yet little is known about why young graduates return and about their experiences when they coreside. This research brief introduces the findings of an in-depth qualitative study of young graduates’ coresidence with their parents. It specifically explores why young graduates return, the feelings of the young adults and their parents towards coresidence, how parents and their children negotiate living together, and the financial arrangements that are made between parents and their adult graduate children.

Method
Researchers interviewed 29 young adults aged between 21 and 29, all of whom were graduates and were at the time of interview living with their parents. In 27 cases one of their parents was also interviewed. Participants were recruited via approaches to young adults working for two large graduate employers and also via approaches made through the alumni network of a long-established English university. 21 of the graduates were female and eight male; 17 interviewed parents were mothers and 10 fathers. The background of the participants was middle class: only one young adult was from a disadvantaged background. 26 graduates had a parent who had also attended university.

All the young graduates had lived away from the parental home as undergraduates. Mostly they had returned there shortly after graduation. Three graduates had moved back after some years of independent living. At the time of interview, seven had been in coresidence for less than one year, 18 for between one and three years, and four for more than three years.

In-depth qualitative interviews were carried out between January and September 2013: young adults’ post-graduation experiences thus took place at a time of economic weakness and fiscal austerity.

The purpose of return
For most of the young adults, coresidence with their parents was not their preferred option. Most wanted to rent a place with friends; some desired to live alone or with a romantic partner.

The study provides a clearer understanding of the purpose of return, and how co-residence with parents can push forward, or at least fit within, graduates’ life trajectories. Five purposes of coresidence were identified. Two are associated with progression towards traditional markers of adulthood: the parental home was a launch pad which supported graduates’ transition into a
career; it could also be a savings bank which enabled them to save for a property purchase. By freeing young graduates from the need to undertake any full-time job available and also from some domestic responsibilities, co-residence gave them time in which to undertake a career search, to concentrate on further study or to give attention to the first stage of their career.

Other purposes were not orientated to future transitions but to different dimensions of living in the present. The parental home as base camp enabled engagement in present-centred experiences, such as travelling or voluntary work: ‘settling down’, as one participant described it, was deliberately put off. In a few cases the parental home was the preferred residence – a comfortable ‘feathered nest’.

Cultural expectations seemed significant. White British participants generally expressed a greater eagerness to leave home, while participants of Asian origin tended to describe co-residence as a preferred option – whether because of normative expectations, greater comfort or as a response to the needs of parents.

The parental home, finally, might be a refuge. Sometimes disappointment necessitated return to the parental home. Less dramatically, it was a place to reflect, given that some graduates had no clear view of their future. The undergraduate experience can be emotionally draining too, so that a period of retreat from independent living was a valued opportunity to restore energies.

Young graduates’ experiences were set within a particular set of social and economic circumstances. The high cost of buying or renting property underpinned the savings bank purpose; the dynamics of the labour market underpinned the parental home’s role as a launch pad. A difficult graduate labour market demanded extensive job searches. Further, a first degree was felt to be no longer enough to secure a desired job: in order to maintain labour market competitiveness it might be necessary to seek higher or vocation-specific qualifications and unpaid internships. These features of the graduate labour market increase the likelihood of constrained earning ability after graduation: co-residence with parents supported young graduates through these periods.

The experience of co-residence

Return to the parental home in the immediate post-university phase was accepted by the vast majority of parents and described as inevitable by most returners. Normative acceptance of co-residence was especially strong among South Asian parents and children. A minority of returners and parents felt resentful and uncomfortable about the necessity of co-residence. Tensions and anxieties could become more pronounced if graduates’ progression to a career or to independent living had stalled: the parental home remained a refuge, but also became a trap.

Virtually all parents felt that they had obligations or responsibilities to support their graduate children – in effect, a normative sense of obligation. Those who did not tended to focus on a more affective sense of love and care. Most parents offered emotional support and careers advice, although in some cases intervention was resented, especially if the young graduate was struggling to find employment.

The majority of parents felt some uncertainty about the situation, particularly if the returner had not gained suitable employment (a ‘graduate job’). They felt an obligation to allow their children to continue to search for the kind of job they wanted, but experienced anxiety about the length of co-residence.

Nor was there a ‘roadmap’ for parents. Very few parents had returned to the parental home after graduation, so that many felt they were in ‘uncharted territory’. Nevertheless, many parents tried to take comfort from knowing that they were not alone in experiencing the difficulties that accompanied the return of a young adult child, while many young adults similarly took comfort from knowing that many friends had also returned home. There is therefore the possibility that returning home after graduation may become the new norm for a wider part of the population.

All the returners had experienced a period of semi-autonomous living as students. While a number welcomed the opportunity to live in comfort ‘at home’, most reported some difficulty adjusting to the reduction in control over decision-making, especially regarding their social lives. There were negotiations over what was eaten, TV, socialising, friends to stay and even decoration; graduates did not feel ownership of space. This is complex psychological terrain, and young adults’ responses were varied: some simply felt that they could not be the kind of person they wanted to be at home, while others were more positive about the possibility of self-expression. On the whole, students tended to be more positive about returning home than their parents.

Contributions to the household

Participation in the study was asked about the contributions which graduates made to the household, in relation to chores, household finance and organisation.

Parents sometimes felt that the returner was not taking enough responsibility for contributing to the running of the household. Some had anticipated that their household responsibilities would be
reduced once the young adults left for university. Where parents had experienced such a reduction (for instance, if all their children had left home), then the graduate’s return might be experienced as especially disruptive. Where younger school-aged siblings remained in the family home, then the graduate’s return might be less disruptive, and in some cases helpful.

While many young graduates often said that they wanted to play a more adult role in their households, this was difficult to achieve in practice. In some cases those household routines and divisions of responsibility which had existed prior to the departure to university were restored. In other cases, there was a more complex re-integration into the household. Young adults attempted to make a contribution, but could exercise only limited autonomy as decisions and routines remained in parents’ hands.

The development of new skills, tastes and interests could present challenges. It is not surprising that young adults might come back from university with new ideas about diet or daily timetables to which the household might have to respond. But parents too could develop changing tastes or preferences which required accommodation by the graduate, such as a specific diet or routine.

Instances of especially rapid adaptation by both parents and graduates to a new division of labour and more equal interactions arose when parents themselves were embarking on a new phase of life - for example, in the case of parents who had split up while the graduate was living away.

Financial relationships
All the parents had contributed towards – or paid in full - the costs of their children’s undergraduate degrees. A small number had, in addition, paid for postgraduate degrees or courses. A range of other gifts and loans were made, including a car, use of a car or car insurance. Around a quarter of the parents paid for family holidays for their children and the same proportion gave small monetary gifts and/or loans. There was some limited reciprocity, with at least half of the young adults sometimes buying groceries.

The return of the young adult potentially creates a dilemma: should the child be asked to make a financial contribution to the household? Arrangements varied, and might depend upon a number of factors. Some returners were not employed, were in precarious employment or were studying. In these cases parents did not request financial contributions; there was often no discussion, merely an assumption that no payment would be sought. In a number of such cases parents gave allowances to their children, thus continuing past patterns of financial support.

In some families cultural norms meant that contributions from children would not be sought. There was no discussion about rent, although there were some minor but amicable disagreements about other types of contribution. While these young adults did not contribute to the household’s daily costs, they might instead make one-off contributions through purchases of household items, such as replacing a small kitchen appliance, or paying for a family meal.

Where young adults were working, it was sometimes decided or agreed that the returner should save in lieu of contributing.

Finally, in a small number of cases regular financial contributions were requested by parents and paid by returners. The amount ranged between £100 and £400: it was for the most part a nominal contribution to household costs and did not constitute a market rent.

There was, in sum, generally little financial input from graduates to parental households, and in some cases there were considerable transfers from parents to children, whether directly through allowances or indirectly by funding their children’s postgraduate studies.

Our research shows that intergenerational relationships and exchanges are complicated. Parents are doing a great deal for their young adult children, both financially (sometimes with implications for their own retirement provision) and in providing non-financial support.

While return to the parental home after graduation is more accepted, there is little by way of common understanding as to how parents and children may best conduct themselves during another period of co-residence. Parents in particular were often ambivalent about their graduate children returning home, and tended to express more anxiety than their children about the uncertainties of their situations.

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