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Abstract

In today's Western societies, the transition to adulthood is prolonged, creating a separate developmental phase between adolescence and adulthood referred to as *emerging adulthood*. Following from this general delay in adult commitment-making, a considerable number of emerging adults continues to live in the parental household. The present study was conducted in Belgium and aimed to obtain a greater understanding of the home-leaving experience by qualitatively exploring how emerging adults who live with their parents or who have taken steps toward independent living experience their residential status. Twenty Belgian emerging adults, aged 24 to 25, were questioned during an interview. Responses were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Emerging adults' descriptions suggest that the home-leaving process is a complex period in life characterized by feelings of ambivalence, whereby young people are simultaneously trying to combine a strong need for independence with a wish to remain connected to the parents. Implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords

emerging adulthood, home leaving, parent-child relationship, subjective experience

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Given that there is a general tendency in Western postindustrial societies to postpone the transition to adulthood, it is nowadays not uncommon to find people in their mid or late 20s living with their parents (Scabini & Cigoli, 1997). Since the 1980s, the average age at which young people leave the parental home and attain full residential independence has increased profoundly in most Western countries (Cherlin, Scabini, & Rossi, 1997; Galland, 1997). Nevertheless, the achievement of an independent residential status is still considered an important step in the transition toward more mature functioning (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). For both parents and children, leaving home is often viewed as a major statement when children are trying to redefine their roles as adults, even though the relationship between generations clearly does not end with the act of home leaving (Aquilino, 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Hence, the transition to adulthood might be a different experience for young people who continue to live with their parents in comparison to those living away from parents. To gain a greater understanding of the home-leaving experience in the stage of emerg-

democratic welfare regime and cultural incentives promoting individuality, Scandinavians depart home earlier and more commonly live alone or in non-marital cohabiting unions. Mediterranean countries, by contrary, are identified with the latest home-leaving figures. Due to the cultural tradition of strong reliance on, and valuing of, the family as a source of support, it is not uncommon to find children into their 30s living with their parents in Southern Europe. Living arrangements are also less diverse than in the rest of Europe and almost unequivocally restricted to family living. One is either single, childless, and living in the parental home or married with children and living apart. In Northern European countries, like Belgium, the age of leaving home is situated in the middle range. Most of these countries are identified by conservative welfare regimes, giving state support to families rather than individuals. However, before settling down with a partner and family formation, young people experience diverse living arrangements (e.g., sharing, living alone, cohabiting; Aassve, Billari, Mazzuco, & Ongaro, 2002, Douglass, 2007, Iacovou, 2002). Because such nonfamily living arrangements are mostly situated somewhere in between living with one's parents and living fully independent, they are often referred to as semi-independent living (Goldscheider & DaVanzo, 1986; Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009).

In the United States, the timing of home leaving is more similar to countries in Nordic and Northern Europe than in Southern European countries (Cherlin et al., 1997). Nevertheless, within the United States, the median age to leave the parental home varies as well. Rather than a variation between different regions, this variation seems to be rather situated between groups of different ethnicity. Caucasian Americans tend to leave the parental home the earliest, whereas African and Hispanic Americans leave the house on average a few years later (Iacovou, 2002).

The tendency to continue to coresidence with parents seems to go hand in hand with the longer road to adulthood, nowadays characteristic for these Westernized societies. As young people seem to take on adult roles (e.g., stable job, marriage, and parenthood) later than they did in the past, the prolonged stage between adolescence and adulthood has become a separate phase in life. Therefore, this period from the late teens through 20s, with a specific focus on ages 18 to 25, has been demarcated as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000). One of the most central features that distinguishes emerging adulthood from adolescence and young adulthood is that this a time when people get the chance to explore various possibilities without having to make lifelong commitments. The increase in years devoted to pursuing higher education is considered one of the most important reasons for the delayed entry into adult roles (Arnett, 2004). That is, for most young people college seems to create a kind

of prolonged psychosocial moratorium that allows for a continuation and intensification of the role experimentation that began earlier in adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Yet, emerging adulthood does not seem preserved exclusively for college students. On the whole, the conceptualization of adulthood in current Western societies has changed profoundly compared to a few decades ago. Irrespective of ethnicity or social background, becoming an adult in postindustrial cultures is nowadays defined in terms of rather individualistic character qualities, like becoming independent and learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person (Arnett, 1998, 2001, 2003). Contrary to role transitions, like marriage and parenthood, these individualistic characteristics are intangible and develop gradually over time, making the transition to adulthood more gradual and ambiguous than ever before.

However, emerging adulthood is not simply an “extended adolescence” because it is much different from adolescence, with less parental control allowing for a more independent identity exploration (Arnett, 2004). It is particularly this sense of wide-open possibilities that makes emerging adulthood an exciting period with high hopes and big dreams for young people in the Westernized societies.

Leave-Taking From the Parental Home

In a time when the transition to adulthood takes longer than ever before, the act of home leaving might however constitute a critical step (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Yet, we have little information on how young people and their parents truly experience the actual moment of leave-taking from the parental home. By using qualitative methodology, the present study tried to obtain in-depth descriptions of how emerging adults have experienced the moment they left the parental home or—when they still lived with their parents—how they think they will experience this moment. It was also questioned how emerging adults think their parents have/will experience(d) the moment of leave-taking from the parental home.

Emerging adulthood is a time when many different future options remain open and little directions in life have been decided for certain. Therefore, it tends to be an age of great hopes and expectations, with most emerging adults feeling very optimistic about their future (Arnett, 2004). Given that a departure from the parental home creates a great opportunity for change, emerging adults might experience this event as exciting. Nevertheless, the downside of the various possibilities of emerging adulthood is that it can also be a time of anxiety and uncertainty because many young people are unsettled and have no idea to where these explorations will lead (Arnett, 2004). Dealing with these challenges while, at the same time, living away from parents might be

quite difficult for young people. Consequently, leaving the parental home might, at least for some emerging adults, be experienced as a stressful event (Bloom, 1987; Fisher & Hood, 1988). Similarly, some emerging adults might think that their parents will view the moment they leave the parental home as a positive transition and enjoy their augmented spare time and freedom (Clemens & Axelson, 1985; L. White & Edwards, 1990). Whereas others might think that their parents will dread the idea of an empty nest and thus feel rather pessimistic about the moment of leave-taking from the parental home (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009).

Reasons for Emerging Adults' Living Situation

Emerging adults can have diverse reasons for their residential status. Yet regarding delayed home leaving, financial reasons are cited as the key motives to explain why emerging adults continue to live with their parents or return to the parental household after a period of living away from them (Aassve et al., 2002; Cherlin et al., 1997; Clemens & Axelson, 1985; DaVanzo & Goldscheider, 1990). The lack of economic independence that logically follows from the longer time young people nowadays spent in higher education would inevitably contribute to postponement of certain role transitions, including the transition to residential independence (Settersten & Ray, 2010). It seems like young people currently cannot live independently anymore due to low start wages, job instability, and the rising prices on the housing market, and thus have no other option than to live with their parents. This gives the impression that continued coresidence with parents during emerging adulthood is never volitional but instead feels compelled for those who are not financially independent yet. From a contrasting point of view, it has been argued that today's coresidence is more likely to reflect a personal choice in comparison with the past, when young people traditionally were ought to live with their parents until they were married (Nave-Herz, 1997). Although different pathways to residential independence are nowadays socially accepted, the cost-benefit ratio of staying in the parental home could, at least for some emerging adults, be more favorable than other types of living situations. Given that families' living conditions have historically improved and also due to the lower number of children, the parental home might indeed have become a more attractive place to reside in. Furthermore, because the parenting climate has become more liberal, there hardly exists a generation conflict anymore between young people and their parents (Nave-Herz, 1997). Hence, most young people seem to have good and warm relationships with their parents, which in turn seem to contribute why some emerging adults are in no hurry to leave the parental home (de Jong Gierveld, Liefbroer, & Beekink, 1991; Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Van Hekken, De Mey, & Schulze, 1997).

Leaving the parental home, on the other hand, has been frequently associated with the involvement in a romantic relationship. Until the 1970s, the most common reason to leave the parental home was getting married. Leaving home for other reasons than family formation was peculiar and socially unaccepted, especially for women, both in the United States (Arnett, 2004) as well as in most European countries (e.g., de Jong Gierveld, Liefbroer, & Dourleijn, 2001). However, in recent decades, marriage is no longer required to leave the parental home. With the exception of Southern European countries, it has thus become uncommon for most young people to remain at home until marriage. Nowadays, the transition to residential independence seems much more driven by individualistic purposes, with young people leaving home simply to be independent (Arnett, 2004; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Nevertheless, although home leaving has been separated from marriage, it has been suggested that having a partner or not continues to play a key role in an emerging adults' decision to leave the parental home or to continue to live with the parents. Data have for instance shown that being involved in a romantic relationship typically stimulates young people to leave the parental home (Eurostat, 2010; Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Hence, even though marriage has lost popularity, unmarried cohabitation with a romantic partner is still one of the most recurrent types of living situations among emerging adults living away from the parents (Eurostat, 2010; Vettenburg, Elchardus, & Walgrave, 2007).

We thus have some notion about young people's reasons to continue to coreside in the parental home or to move out, with findings mainly coming from sociological research. This research focused for the most part on the impact of sociodemographic variables (e.g., income of parents, family structure, and number of siblings) and has often yielded inconsistent results (e.g., Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; de Jong Gierveld et al., 1991; L. White, 1994). Little is known about how young people themselves think about the reasons for their current living situation. Therefore, it was the second aim of this study to ask emerging adults in a face-to-face open-ended interview about their reasons to either continue to live with their parents or to decide to leave the parental home.

The Parent-Child Relationship

As an increasing number of young people continues to coreside with the parents in most Western countries, it remains to be questioned whether this period of emerging adulthood is just as exciting for those living in the parental home than for those living away from parents. Daily parental monitoring might for instance curtail emerging adults' exploration of possibilities in the areas of love, work, and worldviews. Emerging adults typically have a growing need for more independence and self-regulation, which challenges the parent-child

relationship to evolve from a hierarchical relationship into a mutual relationship between two equal adults (Tanner, 2006). Parents' acknowledgment and acceptance of their offspring's emerging adult status forms a critical step in this maturation process (Aquilino, 2006). Difficulties in acknowledging the child's emerging adult status may however be particularly prevalent when children continue to coreside with their parents. Research gave evidence for this idea, with young people living under the same roof with their parents feeling still treated as children by their parents (Flanagan, Schulenberg, & Fuligni, 1993; White, 2002). In contrast, the act of home leaving itself may promote the transformation of the parent-child relationship toward more mutuality, as it creates more opportunities for the emerging adult to make decisions independently and to interact with parents in more satisfying ways (Aquilino, 1997; Arnett, 2004; Dubas & Petersen, 1996).

Emerging adult's home leaving may thus act as a major source of discontinuity and change for the parent-child relationship in particular. Although the parent-child relationship may still be an important one, it may look different in emerging adulthood compared to childhood or adolescence. Although there is a growing body of research on this topic (e.g., Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, and Carroll (2011)), it is nevertheless interesting to explore emerging adults' lived experiences of the relationship with their parents across different living arrangements.

The Present Study

By using qualitative methodology, the overall purpose of the present study was to gain a greater understanding of the home-leaving process in emerging adulthood. We had three specific research aims. A first aim was to explore emerging adults' subjective experiences of living with the parents versus residing away from them. In this respect, we also aimed to obtain more in-depth descriptions of emerging adults' experiences with the actual or anticipated moment of leave-taking from the parental home. A second aim was to explore the reasons emerging adults refer to, when explaining why they are living in their current living situation. Third, specific attention was paid to the parent-child relationship in the different types of living arrangements.

Method

Participants

The present study was conducted in Belgium, a Northwestern European country where the age of home leaving is typically postponed in the last decades.

Demographics in Flanders (i.e., the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), for instance, indicated that leaving home before the age of 22 is a rarely occurring phenomenon (i.e., about 5%). And although the percentage that lives independently increases with age, it is not until the age of 25 that half of the Flemish emerging adults are no longer living in the parental household (Vettenburg et al., 2007). Therefore, it was decided to focus on young people in their early to mid-20s in the current interview study. Furthermore, because we were interested in the experiences of emerging adults in the process of home leaving, we wanted our sample to comprise both young people who were still living permanently in the parental home as well as young people that have already taken steps toward independent living. Accounts of both males and females in the different types of living arrangements were aspired. Based on these background criteria (i.e., gender and residential status), we selected a number of young people from a larger questionnaire study on home leaving in emerging adulthood. During this longitudinal survey study, 224 emerging adults were contacted four times to fill out a questionnaire, with a 1-year interval between each point of data collection. All emerging adults were born in 1983 or 1984 and 22 to 23 years of age at the beginning of the survey study. Two waves of data gathering were completed when potential candidates for the current study were recruited. The first author contacted a number of the 183 emerging adults, taking part in the second wave of the survey study, by phone until a substantial sample was reached that was willing to participate in the current qualitative study. Participants who agreed to be interviewed received two film vouchers for their voluntary participation.

A total of 20 emerging adults took part in this study (9 males, 11 females), representing a reasonably homogeneous sample of White emerging adults, aged 24 to 25, and coming from middle-class families. Five of them were still living in the parental home, whereas the remaining 15 lived apart from the parents. For those who did not live with parents, 11 lived fully independently and 4 lived in a semi-independent residential status. Contrary to those living fully independently, emerging adults in a semi-independent residential status live away from their parents but return to reside in the parental home on a frequent base and do not yet take all responsibilities associated with full independent living (e.g., laundry, paying bills). In our sample, three of the semi-independently living emerging adults lived in a students' apartment but returned home during weekends. The other semi-independently living participant frequently stayed over in her boyfriends' home but returned to the parental home on average two or three nights a week.

In the overall sample, a total of six emerging adults came from nonintact families (i.e., parents divorced). Five of them were living currently fully independently and one lived semi-independently. All interviewees living

permanently in the parental household came from intact families (i.e., both parents still together). With respect to level of education, 13 participants had an advanced degree whereas 7 terminated education after high school. The majority of the sample subjects were working (i.e., 17 full-time and 1 part-time employed). Two participants were still students at the time of data gathering and both of them were living in a semi-independent residential status (i.e., students' apartment). Fourteen emerging adults were involved in relationship with a romantic partner with whom they had been together with for less than a year up to 8 years. With the exception of one interviewee who lived alone, all participants that were living fully independently cohabited with a partner. For an overview of the background characteristics of each of participants, see Table 1. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and will be referred to by this pseudonym when quoting them.

Procedure

Data were collected through semistructured interviews that were conducted during a home visit. Interviewees were asked about their subjective experiences with their living situation, the (anticipated) moment of leave-taking from the parental home, the reasons for their current living situation, and the relationship with their parents. An interview schedule (see the appendix) was developed to guide the interviews. However, emerging adults were encouraged to talk about their personal experiences and were probed when important individual topics arose. Interviews were digitally recorded and lasted on average 40 to 45 min. Verbatim transcripts of the semistructured interviews served as the raw data for this study. All interviews were conducted in Dutch (i.e., the participants mother tongue) and translated to English afterwards.

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004). IPA is a method for qualitative data analysis with theoretical underpinnings in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. This approach is dedicated to the understanding of the phenomenological or subjective experience of an individual. However, because we have no direct access to these individual experiences, the achievement of such understandings is believed to involve interpretative work or hermeneutics on part of the researcher. IPA offers a systematic framework to do this interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Instead of wanting to move quickly to more general claims, IPA typically handles each case with great detail as an entity on its own and prioritizes a rich idiographic account before looking at patterns or similarities across cases. Because of this commitment to the detailed examination of the particular case, IPA studies usually have a small number of participants. The aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample so that, within the sample,

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Each of the Participants.

Gender	Age	Residential status	Family structure	Level of education	Professional status	Partner	Duration partner relationship
Jack	25	With parents	Intact	High school	Full-time employed	Yes	5 years
Thomas	25	With parents	Intact	High school	Full-time employed	No	—
Adam	24	With parents	Intact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	1 year
Leo	24	Semi- independent	Intact	Master's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	3 years
Ben	24	Independent (partner)	Nonintact	Master's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	7 years
Louis	24	Independent (partner)	Intact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	2,5 years
Samuel	25	Independent (partner)	Nonintact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	8 years
Ethan	25	Independent (partner)	Intact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	>2 years
Luke	25	Independent (alone)	Nonintact	High school	Full-time employed	No	—
Sophie	24	With parents	Intact	High school	Full-time employed	No	—
Kate	24	With parents	Intact	High school	Full-time employed	No	—
Alice	24	Semi- independent	Nonintact	Master's degree	Student	No	—
Anna	24	Semi- independent	Intact	Master's degree	Student	No	—
Lucy	24	Semi- independent	Intact	Master's degree	Part-time employed	Yes	<1 year
Rosie	24	Independent (partner)	Nonintact	Master's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	1 year
Laura	24	Independent (partner)	Intact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	6 years
Olivia	24	Independent (partner)	Intact	Bachelor's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	>3 years
Chloe	24	Independent (partner)	Intact	Master's degree	Full-time employed	Yes	>3,5 years
Megan	24	Independent (partner)	Nonintact	High school	Full-time employed	Yes	7 years
Jasmine	25	Independent (partner)	Intact	High school	Full-time employed	Yes	>1 year

convergence and divergence can be examined (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By focusing in more depth on the individual experiences of participants, IPA can serve as a valuable supplement to previous quantitative inquiry and bring new insights (Smith, 1996). This qualitative method is particularly suitable to study topics that are multidimensional, dynamic, contextual, and subjective, relatively novel and where issues relating to identity, the self and sense making are important (Smith, 2004). IPA has been used extensively in health psychology (for overview, see Brocki & Wearden, 2006), but it has also been picked up in the areas of social (e.g., Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; de Visser & Smith, 2007) and clinical psychology (e.g., McManus, Peerbhoy, Larkin, & Clark, 2010; Raval & Smith, 2003).

Verbatim transcripts of the semistructured interviews with the emerging adults were analyzed using a step-by-step approach as described in detail in Smith and Osborn (2003). First, the transcript of each interview was read a number of times to become as familiar as possible with the account. Following the ideographic approach of IPA, we began by looking into detail at the transcript of one interview before moving on to examine the others. While reading and rereading the transcripts, initial comments to what the respondent said were annotated in the margin of the text. When returning to the beginning of the transcript, these initial notes were then translated into emergent themes at a higher level of abstraction. At this stage, it is important to find a balance between finding themes that are high level enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases but that are still grounded in the particularity of what the respondent said. In a next step, these emergent themes were exported to a list to find connections between them. This rather analytical or theoretical ordering resulted in a clustering of themes for each of the cases, where subordinate themes with identifying information were nested within higher order clusters. Typical for IPA, is that, the clustering of themes involves an iterative procedure where the researcher constantly returns to the transcript to check whether the participant's phrases support the researcher's interpretation. This approach resulted in a final list of themes classified coherently as clusters with a superordinate or higher order theme, with each of the relevant themes being allotted an identifier that provides a particularly good interview example of its respective theme.

This process was repeated for each case. However, the list of themes that emerged from a previous case was used to inform the analysis of the next interview transcript. By remaining aware of what had come before, we were able to discern repeating patterns but also to identify what was new and different in the subsequent transcripts. Where convergences were found in the data, existing themes could be further illuminated. Divergences by contrary lead to the occurrence of additional themes. Consonant with the iterative

process of IPA, earlier transcripts were reviewed in the light of such new themes. Once each transcript had been analyzed by the interpretative process, a final list or master table of higher order themes was constructed for the group. Such a list respects both patterns of convergence across cases, but also individual idiosyncrasy in how that convergence is manifest (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In a final step, the master table was translated into a narrative account where themes are explained in more detail and illustrated with verbatim extracts from the participants.

Given that our approach to qualitative inquiry is based on a phenomenological interpretative paradigm, the researcher's interpretative engagement is necessary to make sense of the verbal accounts being analyzed (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). However, as the researcher does not enter this process as a *tabula rasa*, his or her interpretations are potentially biased by personal experiences and the own (theoretical) background. Researchers should aim to suspend or at least acknowledge their previous assumptions or understandings in order to be open to the research phenomenon as it appears. This process, which is referred to as "bracketing," is considered necessary to increase the trustworthiness of the research process (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, to enhance credibility of our findings, the technique of analyst triangulation was used whereby transcripts were analyzed by three different researchers (Patton, 1999). The first researcher, who analyzed the transcripts, is a female clinical psychologist and PhD student. She is just past the age of emerging adulthood and has left the parental home several years ago. However, the event of home leaving is still fresh enough in her memory to empathize with the interviewees and to recognize a lot of the things they reported. The second researcher is a male clinical psychologist, family therapist, and assistant professor. As a family therapist, he often works with families who experience various kinds of difficulties when emerging adult children are trying to make the transition to adulthood. The third researcher is male psychologist and professor in developmental psychology. He was not directly involved in the analyses of the verbatim transcripts using the step-by-step approach but contributed to the comprehension of the emerging themes at a rather theoretical level. Comparing the findings of two or more researchers who independently analyze the same qualitative data provides an important check on selective perception and blind interpretative bias (Patton, 1999).

Results

Emerging adults who coresided with their parents and who were living away (i.e., semi-independently or fully independently) were encouraged to talk as

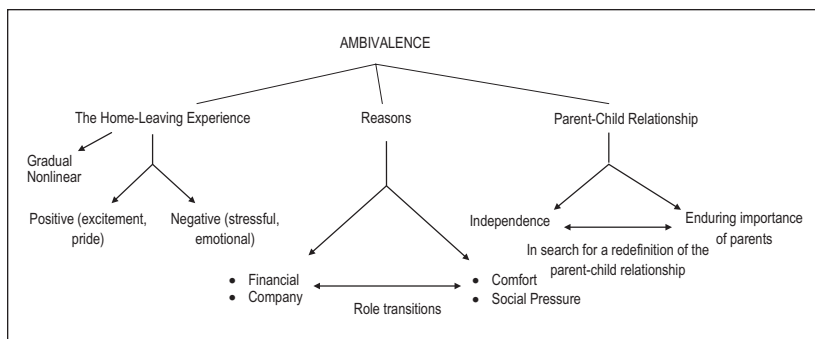


Figure 1. Schematic overview of the emergent themes.

widely as possible about how they experienced their living situation during an interview. The participants' accounts clustered around three superordinate themes: the home-leaving experience, reasons, and the changing parent-child relationship. Each of these clusters comprised several subordinate themes. The complexity of the home-leaving process was illustrated by the ambiguity or ambivalence that seemed to occur among these various emerging themes. As such, each of the themes that emerged within the three higher order clusters could be placed within a framework of "ambivalence." For instance, regarding the parent-child relationship, a strong desire for independence and union are simultaneously expressed. See Figure 1 for a schematic overview of the different themes emerging from the interviews.

The Home-Leaving Experience

Gradual and nonlinear. For the majority of the participants, leaving the parental home was considered a gradual process. Some of the participants living away from their parents could not even remember the exact moment of leave-taking from the parental home, as they slowly evolved from a rather semi-independent residential status to living fully independently. This seemed to be particularly true for emerging adults with a university degree who moved out for college before taking the step to full independent living. However, the transition to living apart does not necessarily follow such linear movement toward more independence. Sometimes, young people move out and occasionally return to the parental home for a longer or shorter period in time. Some of the emerging adults living with their parents, for instance, reported that they already reckon in the possibility that they might return to the parental home sometime in the future.

It's likely that I will think "oh no" and move back to my parents. (Kate)

If things go wrong, I want my parents to be prepared so they can evaluate if and when I will be back at their door step. (Adam)

Positive experience. Most emerging adults described the moment of leave-taking from the parental home as a positive experience. Participants, who had already left the parental home, reflected on this event as something exciting they really looked forward to. Similarly, those who still coresided with their parents were very optimistic and believed everything will work out just fine.

To me, it was not a farewell but instead "yippee, finally on my own two feet!" I was very happy that I could go and live on my own. (Laura)

I hope my parents will help me moving. But all in all, I have a positive feeling about it. I don't know, but I don't see problems cropping up immediately. I believe it will work out just fine. (Lucy)

From the participants' perspective, the moment of leave-taking from the parental home is also for the parents a positive experience that is associated with positive feelings. Whereas some emphasized the practical advantages of having one family member less in the house, others underscored the feelings of pride parents encounter when their child leaves the nest.

For my parents, it will be a bit more peace and quiet and a bit less cleaning up, I guess. (Adam)

My parents are happy that we are settled, and that we are doing so well. (Laura)

Negative experience. Despite these positive feelings, participants commented that the home-leaving experience is at the same time also a stressful event both for themselves and their parents. For instance, a considerable number of the emerging adults expressed their worries about their capacities to manage all responsibilities that come with living apart during the interview. Some were even quite emotional when they came to realize that they were (or would be) on their own and (had to) miss(ed) their parents.

I think that it will be a lot harder. Going out shopping, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, those are all things I don't have to worry about now. (Thomas)

I think that for me, it will be emotional. Because you've always lived there, it's a place where you had your childhood and everything. You have all those memories over there, so yes, it won't be easy for me. (Kate)

A lot of participants believed that especially for the parents their leave-taking from the parental home was or will be a harsh experience. Their descriptions resembled those of the empty-nest-syndrome where parents feel sad and lonely because one or more children leave home.

There were a lot of tears . . . But of course I'm the youngest and I was the last one to leave. All of a sudden my parents realized that they were all by themselves now. (Olivia)

I can already picture it: My father going to work and my mother quietly crying at home. (Leo)

Reasons

A wide variety of reasons was mentioned when emerging adults were asked to explain why they were currently living away from their parents or why they were residing in the parental home. There seems to be a dynamic interplay between all these reasons, as the pros and cons of each of the arguments are constantly weighed against each other. Accordingly, the home-leaving process puts an emerging adult in an ambivalent state, both when he or she decides to stay in the parental home or to leave. Taking on new roles (e.g., by starting a new job) seemed to help some emerging adults to stop doubting about their reasons to stay in the parental home or their reasons to leave. As such these events withdraw them—at least for a while—from their ambivalent state of mind with respect to the decision to leave, stay, or return to the parental home.

Financial status. Participants frequently referred to their financial status to explain why they were currently living with their parents. Some said they had no other choice than to live with their parents because they were financially unable to buy or to rent a place of their own. For others, it was a well-reasoned decision, as they believed it was more beneficial to stay with their parents and to save their money. Those that lived away from parents less frequently referred to financial reasons for their decision to leave the parental home. Yet, the need for financial certitude, as a prerequisite to move out, was also mentioned a couple of times, especially by the fully independently living emerging adults.

Financially, I'm unable to live on my own. (Alice)

I would like to save some money first. And then if I have saved enough, I would be like "There, now I'm going to look for a place of my own." (Kate)

Before cohabiting, I had to be sure I had an income. (Olivia)

Social pressure. Even though some participants still lived with their parents, emerging adults acknowledged that they have reached the age to leave the parental home or think at least about taking that step somewhere in the near future, because it is socially unacceptable to live with your parents at a certain age. However, they were not explicit about what age was deemed as the ultimate age limit to coreside with the parents.

At a sudden moment, I think everyone should take that step to leave the parental home. (Thomas)

Returning to my parents' house was definitely ok. But on the other hand, I was already thinking about moving out again. Because you don't want to continue to live with your parents, I guess. (Lucy)

Of course, there is a desire to live on my own, now that I'm 25. You can't live in the parental home forever, you need to start your own life. (Jack)

Comfort. Many emerging adults described the parental home as a convenient place to stay in, which made it difficult for them to decide to leave. For some, the parental home very much resembled a hotel, where the cooking, laundry, and so on gets done for them, sometimes even without any charges. Having all these domestic chores done for you was considered as very easy and as a huge advantage of living with the parents. Participants who moved out responded that they felt somewhat overwhelmed now they had to face all these tasks by themselves.

My living situation is very comparable to a hotel actually. I have no charges, but my meals are prepared, my laundry gets done, everything gets cleaned and the only thing I have to do is letting my mum know if I already had a hot meal or not. (Adam)

I did think "oops." I was used to do a quite a lot of chores at home, helping and stuff. But now I had to do everything completely by myself, always cooking and so, taking your own decisions and getting by on the money you have. (Ben)

I don't want to leave, I'm pretty comfortable here. I have no problems with it, so why wouldn't I stay here? (Jack)

Company. One of the most frequently discussed topics when questioning emerging adults about the reasons for their current residential status was the importance of company. Irrespective of their current residential status, all participants reported to be afraid of loneliness. Living by themselves was

considered out of the question or at least not a voluntary choice. If they had no romantic partner or a housemate, they rather stayed with their parents. Respondents were reluctant to trade the coziness of the parental home for an empty house. Some emerging adults felt it was a pity that they had to miss all that now they no longer lived there.

I would never leave the house by myself. So, as long as there is no second person where I could live with, I don't think it is going to happen. (Alice)

I come home and I'm alone. I can never complain about my day at work or talk to someone. I have to wait until the next day until I see living beings again. When I still lived home, it was fun. When I came home late from work for instance, my mum would have stayed up and then we would talk for a while. (Luke)

Role transitions. In some of the interviews, it became clear that certain events that include a kind of role transition play an important part in the home-leaving decision. For instance, a number of participants found a job and became financially able to leave the parental home. This transition to employment helped them make the decision to leave the parental home and put an end to their ambivalent state of mind where one simultaneously reflects on the pros and cons of both staying in the parental home and moving out. For some respondents, the end of a partner relationship was what made them decide to move back to the parental home. However, it is very likely that taking on these new roles might, at least for some emerging adults, only temporarily resolve the ambivalent state of mind with respect to the home-leaving process.

My boyfriend is a few years older than me and he already wanted us to live together when I was still studying. But that wasn't possible for me. I had to be sure I had an income first, absolutely . . . From the moment I worked, we started looking for a place of our own. (Megan)

I decided to end our relationship, because that was never going to work out. And my first option was to return to my parents again. At the time that was the best. (Sophie)

The Changing Parent-Child Relationship

All emerging adults were highly involved in making the transformation of the parent-child relation into a more adult-like relationship. The participants' reports clearly illustrated how they struggle to find a balance between closeness and distance. That is, on one hand, emerging adults stressed their need

for independence, and particularly independent choice making, the latter being particularly true for participants still residing in the parental home. However, at the same time, there was also a great consideration for the relation with the parents and this finding was irrespective of whether emerging adults lived with their parents or away from them. Although this relationship with the parents is different from childhood and adolescence, it was clear that for most young people changing the parent-child relationship into a more adult-like relationship constitutes a process that was not finished yet at the time of data gathering.

Independence. Participants frequently reported a strong need for independence from parents. During this stage in life, young people want to stress their individuality by making their own decisions and by proving that they can manage things without their parents' help.

I'm not my parents, I am a different person. (Leo)

And I really had the idea now I can do it on my own. Maybe I also wanted to prove myself somehow to my parents. Like, look I can do this by myself; you really don't need to worry. (Lucy)

When participants coresided in the parental home, the need for more independence from parents was typically articulated as having enough privacy and freedom to decide things for yourself, especially about going out. Yet, most emerging adults acknowledged that living with your parents also involves that you still have to show some consideration for their rules and wishes.

I'm well off here with my parents . . . I'm free to do whatever I want. If I go out in the weekend until 6 a.m., that's no problem and nobody complains about it. So that's perfect actually. (Thomas)

I can do what I want. Of course, you should show some consideration for the other people living at home. But other than that I have no restrictions. (Jack)

No matter how you look at it [returning to the parental home], some form of social control is reinstalled. You're free to do what you want, but when you live together with people it's inevitable that they will ask you sometimes: "Where are you going?" "Where have you been?" and "It was quite late last night." So yes, there is some kind of social control that makes it sometimes less enjoyable. (Lucy)

Participants who lived no longer permanently in the parental home, on the contrary, mainly emphasized how they were able to indulge their independence from parents in their own place of residence. Standing on their own

two feet gave them the opportunity to gain more self-governance and most of them expressed that they would not want to give that up by moving back in with the parents.

I figured out all these things [cooking, laundry] by myself. I tried to take care of myself, and it seems to work out (*laughs*). I found it pleasant that way. I would really not like it if my mother would bring my food every day or do my laundry. (Laura)

I believe I could not do that anymore, living with my parents. If you're used to doing your own thing . . . (Ethan)

After being several years away from home, I didn't feel like moving back in with my parents. That would be a huge adaptation for me. I enjoy the freedom I gained during college, and actually I don't want to give that up. (Anna)

Enduring importance of parents. Notwithstanding the great value that is attached to becoming more and more independent from parents, the participants' accounts simultaneously demonstrated a great consideration for the relationship with the parents. The underscoring of the importance of an ongoing connection to the parents indicates that the bond with the parents clearly does not weaken when the child grows up or leaves the parental home.

I could not do without them. (Laura)

I think they [parents] will still be there for me, I'm quite sure of that. (Leo)

This need for closeness to the parents might in fact be interpreted very literally, because even though Belgium is a small country, a reasonable number of the interviewees mentioned that they did not want to live far from their parents.

In any case, I'm not planning on moving very far from the neighborhood. (Adam)

I would not live far away from this area, definitely not. (Kate)

The ongoing importance of the relationship with the parents also shows from the fact that respondents described that they actively ask for their parents' advice when they have to take important decisions. This applied to both emerging adults that lived in the parental home as well as to emerging adults living away. Moreover, it seems that some emerging adults not only want to hear their parents' opinion but also try to obtain their parents' approval and thus need some kind of blessing.

All big decisions are run through with my parents once more, because they still have more experience with such things. So I believe it's the smartest to ask for their advice. (Thomas)

In general, my parents confirm a bit what I believe is reasonable too. (Adam)

I wouldn't say "Now I'm going to look for an apartment by myself." As a matter of fact, my mother wouldn't want that, because it's better to spend your money on other things. (Kate)

In search for a redefinition of the parent-child relationship. Most young people acknowledged that the relationship with their parents has changed compared with childhood or adolescence. The descriptions below illustrate that they are trying to establish a more mutual, adult-like relationship with their parents. However, it seems like this redefinition of the parent-child relationship is still in progress and an equilibrium is yet to be found. Emerging adults living away from the parents did not seem more advanced in this process compared with participants still residing in the parental home.

It's different than before, when children listen to their parents, and parents are actually above you. Now, it's just different, you have to interact differently, make decisions differently . . . That can cause resentment sometimes. (Anna)

You're not that close anymore with each other . . . well no you are in fact close with each other, but each has a bit of his own territory now. (Laura)

To put it in my father's words: before he was the main stockholder, and now I am the main stockholder. (Adam)

I feel like they [parents] don't consider me that much anymore as their little one, but that we can communicate somewhat more as adults to one another. (Ethan)

Discussion

In today's postindustrial Western societies, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is prolonged, creating a separate developmental phase that is referred to as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, parent regulation is gradually replaced with self-regulation and young people learn to stand on their own (Tanner, 2006). Leaving the parental home forms a part of this process toward more independence. However, since a few decades, there is a trend for young people to live increasingly longer with the parents (Cherlin et al., 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). By conducting

face-to-face open-ended interviews, the present study investigated how emerging adults who coreside with their parents and emerging adults who have taken steps toward independent living subjectively experience their residential status. Emerging adults' descriptions suggest that the home-leaving process is in general a complex period characterized by feelings of ambivalence. Major themes, relating to the home-leaving experience, reasons for the residential status, and the parent-child relationship, all reflect this ambivalent state emerging adults find themselves in.

Such feelings of ambivalence emerged most explicitly when emerging adults talked about the relationship with their parents, by simultaneously emphasizing their developmental need for more independence as well as the great importance they still attach to their parents' opinion and approval. Even though asking for parents' consent while yearning for individuality sounds rather paradoxical, these findings are in fact consonant with the basic principles of separation-individuation theory. According to separation-individuation theory, the child needs to establish a sense of self, separate from other primary love objects (i.e., separation) and obtain its own individual characteristics or unique individuality (i.e., individuation) to maintain a reliable sense of individual identity in adulthood (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Ideally this individuated self is established within the context of an ongoing connectedness to the parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). Hence, separation-individuation does not imply complete detachment from parents, but instead refers to a complex dialectic between establishing an individuated sense of self while remaining connected to the family of origin (Baltes & Silverberg, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Smollar & Youniss, 1989). Nevertheless, because the separation-individuation process involves a major redefinition of the self, the relationship with the caregivers will need to be redefined as well.

When children make the transition to adulthood, the parent-child relationship is indeed confronted with a unique challenge whereby an adult relationship is negotiated in which children are afforded the freedom to make choices and decisions based on their own beliefs and values (Aquilino, 1997; Tanner, 2006). Although developmental theorists have typically situated this redefinition of the parent-child relationship in adolescence, it has been argued that the formation of a mutual adult-like relationship nowadays continues beyond adolescence into emerging adulthood (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004; Tanner, 2006). Our findings contributed to this body of research, as most emerging adults in the process of home leaving were engaged in making the transformation of the hierarchical parent-child relationship of childhood as a means to resolve their feelings of ambivalence, caused by their concurrent need for independence and wish to remain connected to the parents.

However, contrary to expectations, emerging adults who coresided with their parents did not express more difficulties with the transformation of the parent-child relationship toward more mutuality. Irrespective of their residential status, all emerging adults were trying to find out how their relationship with the parents should currently look like and most had not yet found a state of equilibrium yet. Possibly, though physical distancing in the literal sense of moving out of the parents' home might entail more privacy and independence, parental support in the form of both financial and emotional assistance might not diminish nowadays when kids move out. The same dynamics seem to occur in the parent-child relationship for those emerging adults who continue to coreside with parents compared to their peers living away. In fact, the changing nature of the transition to adulthood in Western societies has prompted all parents to be engaged in parenting activities for a longer time, to help navigate their children through this phase of experimentation and exploration (Nelson et al., 2011). Considering that this is a fairly new development, both emerging adults and parents have little guidelines on how to interact with one another during this stage in life, and particularly on how to integrate the seemingly contrasting needs for support and independence. That is, although emerging adults in the process of home leaving could reflect on their strong need for independence and on the enduring importance of parents separately, they seemed to struggle somewhat to integrate both needs and find an optimal balance between both independence and relatedness.

This feeling of ambivalence concerning issues of independence versus connectedness can be extended to the other clusters-themes as well. For example, when emerging adults talked about their reasons to stay in the parental home or to live away from the parents, the paradox between the importance of being independent on one hand and the wish for relatedness on the other hand emerged again. Irrespective of their residential status, emerging adults were aware that they have reached an age they should start thinking about leaving the parental home and that to leave, they need to be sufficiently financially independent from the parents. However, there was also some sadness when they realized that living on their own implies missing the comfort of the parental home and having to do everything by yourself. Their worrying about being alone and fear of loneliness, gave cause to a general consensus among the emerging adults that leaving the parental home should under no circumstances be without the company of another person. In line with findings from previous research, being involved in a romantic relationship thus still seems to play a convincing role in the decision to leave the parental home, even though having a partner is nowadays in most postindustrial countries no longer a necessary precondition to move out (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Being involved in a

partner relationship but also other role transitions, like finding a job that allows for financial independence from parents, may temporarily put an end to emerging adults' ambivalent state when considering reasons to leave, stay, or move back to the parents.

However, from emerging adults' descriptions, it appears like this ambivalence seems to return shortly after they have made a decision concerning their residential status. For example, even when young people decided, it was smartest to move back to the parental home or to continue to coreside with the parents because they wanted to save more money or because they were involved in a relationship breakup, topics concerning their privacy and freedom often raised again. Likewise, some of the emerging adults that moved out acknowledged that they contemplated from time to time about the pleasant activity and comfort characteristic of their parental home. Such unresolved issues with independence and relatedness assume again that emerging adults in the process of home leaving have not yet come to terms with the process of separation-individuation.

Similar feelings of ambivalence also emerged when emerging adults described their actual or anticipated home-leaving experience, which also relate to the complex dialectical interplay between independence and relatedness that typify the separation-individuation process. On one hand, they truly enjoy their newly gained freedom and believe everything will work out just fine. These feelings of mastery and optimism are typical for emerging adulthood, a time when possibilities are endless and young people have the world at their feet (Arnett, 2004). However, despite the excitement, emerging adults also worry if they will be able to manage things both practically and emotionally without the parents. Parents too are expected to have ambivalent feelings with respect to the home-leaving experience of their child. Feelings of pride and relief were believed to alternate with feelings of sadness and loss when confronted with the empty nest. These in-depth descriptions of the actual moment of leave-taking from the parental home, suggest that the home-leaving experience is difficult both for emerging adults and parents, bringing issues of separation and individuation strongly to the fore.

In sum, all identified themes could be placed within a larger framework of ambivalence reflecting an inner conflict between the need for independence and a wish for relatedness. Such a complex dialectical interaction between independence and relatedness is characteristic for the developmental process of separation-individuation when children gradually reduce dependence from parents while trying to maintain connected to them (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). In line with previous research, our findings suggest that issues of separation-individuation are likely to become prominent again in the parent-child relationship when

emerging adults are in the process of home leaving (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990). Given that the separation-individuation process is typically not resolved until the child succeeds at finding an optimal balance between closeness and distance (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Smollar & Youniss, 1989), it seems like emerging adults are still trying to reconcile oneself with this developmental process. The relationship with the parents remains very important, but seems not yet transformed into a truly adult-like mutual relationship. The period of home leaving gives the impression of a kind of vacuum where emerging adults are trying to figure out how they should connect to the parents. Reports of emerging adults who coreside in the parental home and who live away illustrate that both are in search for what is possible and what is no longer appropriate. Overall, it turns out that, even though emerging adulthood is an exciting period, young people struggle with feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty and tend to have little guidelines to deal with the challenges of this fairly new stage in life. Clinicians working with emerging adults and their families would do well to help emerging adults and their parents to find new and adaptive ways to relate to one another. After all, parents may have a lot of questions too now that the changing nature of the transition to adulthood in western societies may be extending the length of time parents have to engage in “parenting activities” (Aquilino, 2006; Nelson et al., 2011).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study revealed a greater understanding of the home-leaving process in emerging adulthood, some limitations are worthy of discussion. First, our findings were exclusively based on a sample of twenty 24- to 25-year-old, White emerging adults coming from middle-class families. Such a relatively homogeneous sample is required for the purpose of interpretative phenomenological analyses, which rather aims at gathering rich ideographic accounts instead of making general claims (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, limited generalizability is intrinsic to this method of qualitative data analysis. As a result, it remains to be examined whether our findings can be generalized to a broader sample of emerging adults in the home-leaving process.

Furthermore, we focused exclusive on a sample of Belgian emerging adults. Belgium is small country and it is likely that the home-leaving experience may be somewhat different compared to larger countries. Because everybody lives relatively close to one another, leaving the parental home may be a less radical change for Belgian emerging adults than for young people living in countries like the United States or Canada. It is for instance typical in Belgium that when children move out for college, they return back

home for the weekend. Moreover, even when emerging adults have left home to live fully independently, they still live quite close to the parental home, making it possible to meet up frequently with the parents. Future research in countries where independent living implies a more substantial geographical distance from the parental home is needed before we can conclude that the home-leaving process is an ambivalent and uncertain period for all emerging adults. It is for instance possible that when emerging adults live further away from the parents, fewer troubles are experienced with finding an optimal balance between closeness and distance to the parents.

Finally, we constructed an interview schedule that could be followed when emerging adults coresided in the parental home as well as when they lived semi or fully independently, by making some small adjustments to the questions. Our interview questions were aimed at enlarging the differences on the various topics between the emerging adults who lived with the parents and those who lived away. However, contrary to our expectations emerging adults drew a similar picture irrespective of whether they lived with the parents or not. Perhaps future research with emerging adults in the process of home leaving should focus less on between-group differences regarding the residential status. Possibly other factors that have been shed insufficient light on in the context of home leaving, like having a partner or not and the quality of motivation an emerging adult has for his or her residential status, may elucidate more pronounced differences between emerging adults than their living situation per se.

Conclusion

This present study showed a clearer picture of the home-leaving process in emerging adulthood. We identified several themes that reveal the ambivalent character of this stage in life. Whereas emerging adults have a strong need for independence, requiring a shift from parent regulation to self-regulation, their relationship with the parents remains extremely important. Nevertheless, emerging adults seem to encounter difficulties to transform the former hierarchical parent-child relationship into a mutual adult-like relationship. The formation of such an adult relationship, where an optimal balance between closeness and distance is warranted, constitutes the outcome of the developmental process of separation and individuation. Clinicians could help emerging adults and their parents to find more adaptive ways to relate to one another by learning them how they can be there for each other while at the same time allowing each other the independence they want and need. Future research should further focus on the ambivalent state when emerging adults are in the process of home leaving and on the process of separation-individuation in particular.

Appendix

Interview Schedule

1. Could you, to begin with, describe me your current residential status?
 - What is the type of residence? Who are your housemates?
If the emerging adults resides independently: How far away do live from your parents? How often do you visit your parents? Does it happen that you stay over in your parents' house? Do you still have your own room in the parental home?
 - Are you satisfied with your current living condition or would you like to change something about it?
 - Has your residential status recently changed? If yes, where did you live before?
 2. Could you tell me something about the (anticipated) moment of leave-taking from the parental home?
 - *If the emerging adult resides in the parental home:* Do you intend to leave home in the next year? For what reason(s) would you consider leaving the parental home? How do you think the moment of leave-taking from the parental home will occur? How will you experience this moment and how will your parents experience it?
 - *If the emerging adult resides independently:* How did you experience the moment of leave-taking from the parental home? How do you think your parents experienced this moment?
 3. Why are you currently living here?
 - Have you actively reflected upon your residential status? Was it an intentional choice to live here?
 - What are the most important reasons why you are currently living here?
 - Do you fully endorse your choice to live here because of these reasons? Or does it by contrary feel sometimes like an obligation to live here because of these reasons?
 4. Could you tell me something about the relationship with your parents?
 - *If the emerging adult resides in the parental home:* How is it to live under the same roof with your parents at this age?
 - Do you see each other often? Are you often doing things together? Is it enjoyable to spend time together?
 - To what extent do you still discuss things with your parents and ask for their advice?
 - Do you experience conflicts in the relationship with your parents? What are these conflicts about? How often do they occur?
 - Is the relationship with your mother different from the relationship with your father? In what way?
-

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