

INDEPENDENCE OR INTERDEPENDENCE

Norms of leaving home in Italy and Germany

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ABSTRACT: This article contributes to understanding the relatively early residential independence of young Northern Europeans, by comparison to their Southern European peers. It explores the norms and underlying meanings that influence the departure from the parental home and the feelings attached to it. Analysing qualitative, biographically oriented interviews with Italian and German university students and their parents (43 participants), two patterns are identified. The first is an ‘independence’ pattern, which prioritizes the importance of leaving home *in order* to grow up. The second is an ‘interdependence’ pattern which supports the togetherness of the family and sees the family home as the best environment for young adults – i.e., they leave home only for ‘inevitable’ reasons related to work, education, or family formation. Both patterns are handed down over generations and are transmitted in the socialization process.

Key words: familialism; individualism; Italy; Germany; transition to adulthood; norms

1. Introduction

During the last two decades, a number of comparative studies have emerged that show that young people in Mediterranean countries tend to leave the parental home later than their peers in northern parts of Western Europe (e.g., De Sandre 1988; Fernández Cordón 1997; Holdsworth 2000; Billari *et al.* 2001; Iacovou 2002; Rusconi 2004; Van de Velde 2008; Buchmann and Kriesi 2011). Studies focusing on second-generation immigrants in various countries (Khoo *et al.* 2002; Giuliano 2007; Statistics Sweden 2008; Attias-Donfut and Wolff 2009) reveal that young people of Southern and Northern European origins tend to follow the patterns of leaving home that are typical to the home country of their

parents or grandparents, rather than the country of immigration, even independently from the economic and educational background of the migrants. The different patterns of leaving home in Northern and Southern Europe can also be observed in earlier epochs, that is, before the industrial revolution and the development of modern welfare states. Reher (1998) identifies a persistence of 'weak family ties' in Northern Europe and 'strong family ties' in Portugal, Greece, Italy and Spain. Until recently, studies have extensively focused on the financial and institutional conditions under which the departure from home takes place. Most researchers, moreover, agree that culture constitutes an influential factor in the departure from the parental home together with the economic and institutional conditions that shape young people's lives.

What 'culture' actually consists of in this context, however, still remains unclear. While some scholars try to operationalize it – supposedly due to the absence of more precise alternatives in survey analysis – as 'religion' (Catholicism versus Protestantism), 'religiousness' and 'conservatism' (e.g., Rusconi 2006), others examine socially shared 'age deadlines' (e.g., Aassve *et al.* 2010). Recent qualitative studies have started to provide a clearer picture. They show that the cultural factors influencing the departure from the parental home can be most fruitfully defined as the diverse shared interpretations of reality that guide human behaviour. From these studies emerges that there are culture-specific, socially appreciated motives for leaving home, such as moving-out to marry and live with a partner in Spain (Holdsworth 2005; Van de Velde 2008) and Italy (Quadrelli 2007) or leaving home before marriage to learn about responsibility and prove self-sufficiency in Norway and England (Holdsworth 2004). Hence, norms for leaving home can be better understood as complex social rules including motives and goals than mere age deadlines. Our knowledge regarding these motives and the related interpretations, however, is still rudimentary.

The present study aims to further our knowledge in this area by analysing interviews with Italian and German respondents. The findings presented here focus on several aspects related to norms such as feeling management and social sanctions. Moreover, I examine the meanings of youth, that is, the strengths and weaknesses which the respondents ascribe to it, and the implications of these meanings for the resulting pathways out of the parental home. The goal of this article is to gain a deeper insight into the 'mainstream' norms and interpretations regarding the departure from home of university students in Italy and Germany. The article thus provides a detailed picture of how the respondents make sense of the behaviour that they perceive as prevalent in their social environment. The findings constitute the basis and starting point for further research, for example, on the negotiation of 'deviant' interpretations and their

integration into the dominating norm, or about the way in which institutional structures are intertwined with or influenced by these norms and interpretations. Moreover, the findings point to a possible link between the prevailing patterns of leaving home and different educational values and parenting styles in Northern and Southern Europe.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The results are based on semi-structured biographical interviews conducted in 2009 with higher education students and their parents in Italy and Germany. The focus is on university students because the institutional conditions for young people in higher education are fairly similar in these two countries in that the parents' income constitutes the main source of financial support for university students, while public support in the form of grants plays only a subordinate role (Eurostudent III 2008). The institutional conditions of young employees and apprentices, by contrast, differ more strongly in these two countries due to apprenticeship pay and the availability of unemployment benefits for first-time job seekers in Germany but not in Italy. The norms and meanings identified in the data thus primarily apply to young people in higher education since the interviewees were asked to speak about themselves or their children's life as university students. In several occasions, however, the interviewees also talked about their ideas and expectations regarding the living arrangements of young people in general during the transition to adulthood. Hence, their subjective perspective was not strictly limited to young people in higher education.

The living arrangements of university students reflect the general trends for young Europeans regarding the timing of leaving home. In Western Europe, the group of students aged 21 to 24 living with parents is largest in the Mediterranean countries, with Italy (76%) at the top. The lowest rates of students living with their parents can be observed in the Nordic countries, with Finland (4%) at the bottom. The continental European countries, such as Germany (27% living with parents) are in-between, however, with a clear majority living away from the parental household (Eurostudent III 2008). Similar to students in Italy, most German students study in their home region (Kultusministerkonferenz 2006). Only a small group is forced to move away for admission restrictions and *numerus clausus* regulations (Heine *et al.* 2009). Nevertheless, most German students leave the parental home, while most

Italians remain with their parents during their studies, even though there are fewer, yet bigger, universities in Italy as compared to Germany.

Regarding the economic and institutional conditions of university students in Italy and Germany, it is important to take into account that these two countries have very different rates of home ownership. Young people and their parents in Italy generally use their resources to acquire a home at a relatively young age, usually when getting married and starting a family, instead of financing early residential independence in a rental accommodation during higher education and early career. Young Germans, in contrast, usually postpone home ownership, or refrain from it completely, in favour of early residential independence in a rented dwelling (see Barbagli *et al.* 2003; Bičáková and Sierminska 2008). These different priorities in using economic resources suggest that the low inclination of Italian students to live away from the parents' home does not simply result from a lack of affordable student housing or other institutional conditions related to student life. This observation, hence, underlines the relevance of investigating the norms and meanings concerning residential independence in the transition to adulthood.

I interviewed 17 students and 10 parents in Germany during the spring of 2009, and 11 students (plus one young employee) and four parents in Italy during the autumn of the same year. I recruited most students at the University of Bonn, in North Rhine-Westphalia, a predominantly Catholic region of Western Germany, and at the University of Florence, in Tuscany, a region in the relatively wealthy Mid-North of Italy. Amongst my German interviewees were two students whose fathers had emigrated as young men from Southern Italy. Most interviewees were Catholics. I chose respondents from working-class and middle-class families in various living arrangements. That is, some students from relatively affluent families were living with parents while others of this group were living away from home. Also in the group of students from less affluent families, some were living with their parents and others independently. The analysis neither revealed differences between Catholic and Protestant interviewees, nor between male and female interviewees or social classes for the group of participants. I will thus focus on the different norms and patterns of meaning in Italy and Germany that did emerge from the data.

2.2 Interview procedure

The interviews lasted between 0.5 and 2.5 hours, most of them with duration of approximately one hour. The interview guide for conducting the interviews aimed at producing a retrospective narrative about the

beginning of studies and the individual process of decision making related to enrolment in higher education, choosing a university, and living arrangements. Later, during the course of the interviews, I asked follow-up questions, referring to topics brought up by the interviewees in the initial narrative part, followed by questions about topics which had not been mentioned (see also Schütze 1983; Flick 2002).

2.3 Analysis

One basic unit for the analysis of culture are the socially shared patterns of meaning, also called schemas or frames, which can be found in talks, texts and other products of communication. They constitute the 'definitions of the situation' (Goffman 1986: 1) which structure human perception at any particular point. The patterns of meaning help individuals make sense of their environment and act accordingly. Interview partners, however, are usually unaware of the meaning patterns they use because they are part of their atheoretical, implicit knowledge. Hence they can only be reconstructed from 'documents' – from interview passages, for example. A way of reconstructing such patterns of meaning is the 'documentary method'. The method was initiated by Mannheim (1982 [1980], 1997 [1952]) in the 1920s, then taken up by Garfinkel (1967), further developed by Bohnsack (2010), and later adapted to narrative biographical and semi-structured interviews (Nohl 2010). With the help of a consistently comparative sequential analysis, the documentary method aims at identifying the underlying patterns of meaning that implicitly shape the various expressions of the interviewees and their behaviour.

A useful conceptual tool for the investigation of norms regarding the departure from the parental home has been identified by Holdsworth and Morgan (2005, 2007) who employ the concept of the 'generalized other' – coined by Mead (1962 [1934]), to examine how everyday moralities are articulated during interview conversations. References by the interviewees to the 'generalized other' indicate common normative expectations. These common everyday moralities find expression, for example, in interview formulations such as 'most people think . . .' or, more generally, 'you just have to . ..'. In this approach, norms are understood as behavioural rules shared by the majority in a society or social group. Individuals recognize them as prevailing behavioural rules even if they do not agree with them or follow them (Luhmann 1972). Interviewees perceive themselves in relation to the prevailing norms by comparing themselves with family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc., and the generalized other.

Another revealing facet of the investigation of culture is the way people talk about their feelings in relation to certain experiences. According to

Hochschild (1998), culture not only influences our lives by offering meanings and behavioural norms but also influences our inner reactions by establishing rules according to which we attempt to shape our feelings. If our cultural repertoire signals that a feeling is 'out of place' we employ strategies of feeling management to make our reaction more apt to the situation. Therefore, I will not only focus on the analysis of meanings and norms connected to behavioural decisions, but also on the feelings which the interviewees describe in relation to the process of leaving home; how they managed these feelings; and how they made sense of them.

Hochschild argues (metaphorically) that social actors possess two 'books' in which their cultural knowledge is stored: a 'dictionary' and a 'bible'. The dictionary contains the patterns of meaning that individuals have at their disposal to interpret the world. The bible incorporates the moral prescriptions, norms and values, which guide the individuals' judgments and actions. Both 'books' have been 'written' over the generations. They are handed down from one generation to the next, with possible modifications and adaptations (Hochschild 1998: 7). That is, norms and meanings result from the experience of previous generations and are transmitted, for example, through education. They cannot solely be explained by current institutional and economic conditions. Due to intergenerational transmission, meanings and norms can influence the decision of leaving home quite independently from economic factors in the present social context, as in the case of second-generation immigrants, for example.

3. Results

3.1 Norms and Feeling Management

In the interviews, it is possible to identify two patterns of norms and underlying meanings regarding the departure from the parental home. The first pattern can be best summarized under the notion of independence, the second under the concept of interdependence. In the independence pattern, normative expectations and underlying factors prioritize the move-out from the parental home. Conversely, the norms and meanings in the interdependence pattern support the proximity of family members. This implies that, in the interdependence pattern, the separation from the parental home is only accepted for 'inevitable' reasons – such as moving in with a partner with the intention of forming a family or for important work- or education-related reasons. The German interviewees perceived the independence pattern as the prevailing norm. For the Italian interviewees, the interdependence pattern was normative.

3.1.1 The intergenerational transmission of norms: Most allusions to normative expectations about leaving home can be found either in the interviews with parents or when students discuss the expectations of their parents or other older members of their social circle. This would suggest that the norms about moving out or staying at home are handed down from the older generation, rather than being shaped by economic rationality in the current situation of the young. That is, young people learn these normative expectations from their parents and culture. For example, a number of German parents that I interviewed expressed their concern about the ‘late’ independence of their children. Their comments reveal their normative expectations regarding the ‘right’ age to leave home. For example, a German mother said of her son (who was 22 when he left home): ‘It was late...when he moved out. We [she and her husband] were already thinking, ‘do we have a “Hotel-Mama” situation?’’ (Simon’s mother, 49, Germany; all names of interviewees are pseudonyms). This example also reveals that it is not simply the age that matters but the possibility of becoming inactive and even spoiled, as this mother expresses in her concern about having a son who prefers the comfort of the ‘Hotel Mama’ instead of becoming independent. The underlying goal of this pattern of leaving home, thus, is to foster the early independence of young people, as this quotation illustrates.

The normative expectations are particularly evident in the interviews with students who do not follow the prevailing norms. In these cases, the interviewees position themselves in relation to the expectations of the generalized other by evaluating their own behaviour in the light of the norms. My interview with Lena, a German student living with her parents in the city where she studies, illustrates this point. Although her parents could afford to pay the rent of a student home, Lena perceived this as unreasonable from a financial point of view. In addition, she had a strong preference for living with her family. While her parents did not interfere with her decision to stay, both parties were aware of the norms prescribing an early departure, as Lena’s formulations reveal:

I don’t feel like taking care of it [moving out] at the moment. But . . . *you* can’t live at home forever . . . at some point *you* have to start to live your own life. [. . .] my father always said, ‘when you are 18 I’m going to kick you out’, equally knowing that he would probably be the last person to kick me out [laughs]. (Lena, 20, Germany, italics highlight her references to a generalized other)

It is the father, a member of the older generation, who reminds his daughter of the norm to leave home at an appropriate age – even if he is clearly happy to have her living with him. Roberto, a 27-year-old German student, also encountered the idea of being ‘kicked out’. However, in his case

it was not his father who ‘threatened’ this but a teacher at his vocational school, who was referring to his own children. Roberto, whose father came from Italy as a ‘guest worker’, remained at the parental home during his professional training after high school, before he entered higher education. In our interview, he recalled that this teacher, who he admired a great deal, had once said that his own children would have to leave home when they were 18, regardless of whether they had a good relationship with him. Roberto asked him why and his teacher explained: ‘They have to leave! They have to stand on their own legs’. Roberto perceived this as two ‘worlds’ clashing – the Italian and German cultures – although he enjoyed the debate. Another Italian-German student in Germany who experienced a similar debate, initiated by a university lecturer, admitted that she felt ‘a little ashamed’ (Letizia, 25) when she had to explain in front of the other students that she was still living with her parents. These examples highlight how parents and teachers in Germany transmit the value of early independence to the younger generation. Furthermore, they show that there may be social sanctions about not following the norm and leaving home ‘late’.

In my Italian interviews, I did not hear prescriptive statements in favour of an early independence from the parental home referring to significant others or the generalized other such as: ‘my *father* always said, “when you are 18 I will kick you out”’; ‘*naturally*, my parents want me to stand on my own legs’; or, ‘I’m almost 22. I should, *actually*, take care of myself’ (italics highlight references to significant and generalized others). Instead, the students from the Italian group who had left home either said that their parents had been supportive from the beginning (although these students remarked that this was rare and special in their social environment) or that their parents tolerated their decision to leave but did not fully agree with it.

An example of the first situation is Martina (27 years old) who explained that her mother supported her desire to leave home at the age of 20, even though she studied in the same city in which her parents live. She added that she found her mother’s supportive attitude ‘atypical’ for the Italian ‘mentality’. Anna (20), a student from the South of Italy, said that because her parents trusted her they let her go to the North for her studies, but she emphasized that this is not the case for many young Italians. In her opinion, she was ‘fortunate’ because ‘many parents just do not allow their children to move away’. An example of the second situation is Francesco (25) who had recently decided to leave home and was looking for an apartment with some friends at the time of the interview. When talking about his parents’ reactions to his plan he affectionately mocked his mother who had said ‘don’t go, don’t go!’ She was open about her feelings of attachment to her son, making it clear that she would be happier if he stayed. His parents then argued that he would find balancing

his studies with running a home difficult, and that he would be spending time working in order to pay the rent when he should be studying. Ultimately, however, they accepted his plan to leave. Francesco's mother's initial negative reaction to his plan can be regarded as characteristic for strong family ties and a pattern of leaving home in which the emotional interdependence between parents and children is expected to be maintained through coresidence and spatial proximity, if possible.

These findings raise the following question: if formulations indicating the existence of norms for an early move-out are absent in the Italian sample, is it possible, instead, to find evidence of norms for leaving home at marriage, as found in previous research? For the sample of the present study, the simple answer to this question is no. None of the Italian interviewees mentioned, neither implicitly nor explicitly, norms about leaving home at marriage. It is rather an emotional preference for close companionship within the family and a more general norm prioritizing togetherness over independence that binds family members together.

3.1.2 Emotional attachment and feeling management: Most of the students living with their parents that I interviewed, as well as most of the parents with grown-up children at home, mentioned the great emotional benefits of this living arrangement. According to a number of interviewees, it is mainly this emotional support that motivates them to continue living together. For some students living with their parents, especially younger students, the emotional benefits are so strongly and clearly engrained that leaving home is not an option they take into consideration. For example, Lidia, a 19-year-old student in Italy, says that for her leaving the parental home would mean a great loss of emotional security. When asked whether she would leave home and study elsewhere if she had the financial means she answered: 'If I had the economic opportunity? I've never posed this question to myself before [. . .] I have my friends, my family . . . everything, here. Therefore, if I had to detach myself, it would be traumatic . . . very traumatic' (Lidia, 19, Italy).

A father from the Italian sample also used the word 'traumatic' to describe the separation from his daughter Sonia, saying: 'It was a trauma at the time'. The main reason for his strong emotional reaction was her 'unjustified' departure – she left home, at the age of 21, simply to gain independence, rather than for work or study-related motives. Thus for him, his daughter's decision to leave the family home was 'unjustified' and hurt his feelings.

As in this example, it sometimes appears to be a one-sided emotional need on the part of the parents for keeping the family together, whereas some young interviewees admitted that they would prefer residential independence. Some of these young interviewees explained that they

found it difficult to share their plans for leaving home because they were afraid of hurting their parents' feelings, as in the case of Letizia:

[My father] became very quiet and didn't say anything. Nor did my mother . . . I was a bit afraid of how they would react. I didn't know if it would hurt them . . . or whether it would be okay for them. I said 'by the way, I have to tell you something' but then I couldn't really get the words out and my mother said 'you're moving out?' and I said 'yes'. Then I almost felt more like crying than my parents did. (Letizia, 25, Germany, preparing to leave home; father from Italy)

Among this sample of interviewees, it is more usual for the Italian parents than the German parents to reveal their feelings of loss to their children when they move out. The German parents usually try to suppress these negative feelings and, above all, they try not to show them in front of their children. While, naturally, they usually *do* feel sad or emotional when their children leave, they attempt to manage these feelings by, for example, convincing themselves that an early move-out can have positive effects for personal development. They also interpret and accept the early move-out as a 'natural' step, or rite of passage. These interpretations help them cope with their feelings of loss and attenuate painful emotional reactions. A German mother whose daughter left home at the beginning of her studies describes her feelings, and how she managed these, in the following way:

Mother: When she left home it affected me deeply. Actually, I didn't expect it to be like that because it had always been clear in my mind [that she would leave]. But when she was gone, I became conscious of it: it meant she would not come back. And this is really like cutting the umbilical cord.

Interviewer: Did you share these feelings with her?

Mother: Yes, to some extent. Although . . . *you* try to contain yourself [laughs]. Yes, because I think that *you* don't want to make it more difficult for the kids. I always had the feeling that if I let it show too much, then I would make it more difficult for them. Because I think for them, it is also a process of cutting the cord. (Louise's mother, 54, Germany, italics highlight her references to a generalized other)

The generalized formulations of this mother ('*you* try to contain yourself' and '*you* don't want to make it more difficult' rather than 'I tried' or 'I didn't want . . .'), indicate that she sees her reaction as a common response to such a situation. Her attempts to 'contain herself' and not let her feelings

show 'too much' had the intended effect. Her daughter perceived her parents' reaction as fairly unemotional: 'For my parents it was definitely okay [that I left]. But . . . I think it is always a bit strange for parents . . . But, it was okay' (Louise, 23, Germany). As the mother predicted, it was also a process of cutting the cord for the daughter. Although Louise felt happy about leaving home she says that initially she had 'strange feelings', which she likened to 'children's feelings', about being alone. It was only later that she revealed to her mother that, during her first semester, she found being on her own rather difficult (from an emotional point of view). However, Louise concludes that this was an important life experience.

These examples vividly illustrate how one group of interviewees successfully attenuate their feelings of loss and loneliness in order to reduce potential obstacles and difficulties in the process of leaving home. Among the German interviewees in particular, this kind of feeling management appears to be common practice. By contrast, the Italian parents in this sample who do not agree with their children leaving home (because they consider it 'unjustified') disclose their negative feelings. These parents do not feel that they should 'contain themselves' and conceal their feelings in order to make it easier for their children to leave home. In sum, the interviewees who follow the norm of interdependence were very much guided by the desire to avoid the possible feelings of loss and loneliness from the outset.

This behaviour is, of course, fairly natural: the separation from a loved one can be an immensely painful experience (Insel 2003). So why is a large group of interviewees in the German sample so convinced that it is beneficial to move out when young, despite the emotional stress which at least some of these interviewees experienced? This behaviour, which seems 'natural' to Northern Europeans, may appear 'unnatural' and even heartless from a Southern European perspective. The goal of the following section is to investigate the meanings which the interviewees attach to the norms regarding the departure from the parental home, and how they justify the emotional and financial difficulties that can be associated with it.

3.2 Meanings

The different norms described above and the different ways of managing emotions and feelings are rooted in diverse patterns of meaning which the interviewees use to interpret the process of becoming an adult. Here again, we can identify two different patterns. In the pattern of independence, young people are supposed to leave home in order to become adults.

In the pattern of interdependence, the home is seen as the best place to learn about adulthood.

3.2.1 Independence: Leaving home early to attain adulthood: A recurring motive for the early departure from the parental home, as stated by several German interviewees, is learning to ‘stand on your own legs (or feet)’. This metaphor shows that leaving home is interpreted as an opportunity to increase personal independence – both in a practical and mental sense – and as an opportunity to gain experience beyond the parental home. One essential aspect of the definition of adult behaviour is the capacity to become self-reliant and responsible. The German mother of Simon, for example, explains that when her son lived at home, he did not do what she thought was his ‘share’ of the housework. She stresses proudly that, by moving out, her son learned to organize his own life. In her opinion, he needed to leave home to become an adult: ‘He does everything alone. He has grown up’. In the individualistic social context of Northern Europe, being able of doing things alone is an important developmental goal in the transition to adulthood. This mother, moreover, believes that leaving the family home in order to live with a partner does not have such a triggering effect on reaching adulthood: ‘At some point you have to stand on your own feet. You cannot move from ‘Hotel Mama’ to your girlfriend’s place’ (Simon’s mother, 49, Germany). Yet clearly, being supportive of early residential independence does not mean that these parents love their children any less, or do not get along well with them. Another German mother explains that it is more difficult to acquire personal independence at the parental home because, as a mother, she would often let her kids off their household tasks. She explains that when her children are at home, she sometimes starts to pamper and coddle them (and they enjoy this). She sees this as a ‘danger’ (Louise’s mother, 54, Germany) because, in her opinion, it obstructs the process of growing up. For her, the risk of becoming ‘spoiled’ and dependent as a young person is far greater for those living at home.

However, moving temporarily back into the parents’ household due to financial issues or other difficulties is not perceived as contradictory to the norm of leaving home early. These so-called ‘yo-yo transitions’ (see Biggart and Walther 2006), are also seen as a part of the process of learning to be independent. The tolerance among the interviewees toward ‘yo-yo’ transitions suggests that the main goal of leaving home is not necessarily the permanent independence of the children. Instead, it is the *experience* of living independently in early adulthood that is considered important for individual development.

Interestingly, this is even the consensus among the German interviewees who, for various reasons, prefer to stay with their parents.

The broad consensus indicates a prevailing pattern of meaning that is shared by the majority of Germans. The frequent references in the German interviews to a generalized other such as ‘at some point *you just* need to detach from the parents’ suggest that the German interviewees consider it useful and normal in their social context to become residentially independent during higher education and the transition to adulthood.

Among the Italian interviewees, there is not such agreement. Only a few Italian interviewees see a causal link between leaving home and acquiring adulthood. One example is Lorenzo (23, Italy) who lives with his parents. He says he would like to leave home, if he gets the opportunity, in order to ‘prove himself’ as an adult. However, he feels alone in his desire to prove his maturity by leaving home because he feels supported neither by his parents nor by the institutions that provide financial assistance for students. It is Lorenzo’s perception, as well as that of other Italian interviewees, that leaving home solely to become more ‘grown-up’ is not, in general, endorsed by Italian society. In fact, one requirement to be eligible for public housing allowance for students in Tuscany is that the student’s parents live more than one hour away from the university, while in Germany, the spatial distance between the university and the parental home is not crucial to be eligible for housing assistance. Beneficiary students in Germany, however, need to repay half of the allowance after their studies, whereas the Italian allowance is a scholarship.¹ German student grants, thus, imply the readiness to incur debts for residential independence during higher education. This contrasts with the inclination of young Italians to save money for early home ownership.

3.2.2 Interdependence: Leaving home when grown-up: In many of the Italian interviews, there is a pattern of meaning that can be reconstructed which does not frame leaving home as a triggering factor for the attainment of adulthood. In this pattern, the interviewees interpret the family home as the ideal place for growing up. These interviewees do not perceive the departure from the parents’ home as a useful challenge to ‘prove themselves’ in order to grow up.

Instead of promoting practical and psychological independence, the interdependence pattern is based on the maximization of security. For example, Lidia (19, living with her parents) argues that she would need ‘certainty’ to leave her home and hometown. To her, this certainty implies a place to stay ‘for good’ so that, ‘I know what to do there, that I can move forward there, that I can construct my future there. I would do it only on

1. See www3.uni-bonn.de, www.fh-bonn-rhein-sieg.de, www.studentenwerk-bonn.de, www.unifi.it, www.dsu.toscana.it (accessed April 2011).

these terms' (Lidia, 19, Italy). In her mind, the family home is the best place to stay during her studies and during the transition to adulthood. It seems that Lidia's interpretation and behaviour is absolutely normal in her social context because she neither mentions that she would be missing an opportunity for new experience and proving maturity, nor does she point to potential norms conflicting with her attitude. In this, she differs from the German interviewees living with their parents.

Because of the implicit 'logic' of togetherness, the Italian father (54) cited above who experienced the departure of his daughter as a 'trauma' does not understand her desire to leave home and 'have a different life'. His daughter Sonia (30 at the time of the interview) left home at the age of 21 because she wanted to be more independent and make her own decisions. Her way of interpreting her situation comes close to the pattern of independence. However, for her father, her desire to leave home was immature and 'superficial', even though she had a job and could thus afford her rent and support herself. By contrast, he describes the decision of her younger brother to move out, for study reasons, as 'mature' (Sonia's and Paolo's father, 54, Italy). He had also accepted the departure of his other daughter without any problems (she left home to get married). This interpretation contrasts with the views of the German parents, as discussed, about making their children leave home at the age of 18 for the sake of independence. Many of the German interviewees interpret an increasing number of small conflicts between parents and adult children about everyday issues as a sign that it is the right time to move out. Sonia's father, instead, considers the disagreement with his daughter as a failure because they could not sort it out and continue living together.

3.2.3 Different interpretations of youth: These two patterns of norms and meanings are related to perceptions of young people. In the pattern of independence, young people are seen as strong and capable of confronting challenges. As a consequence, remaining in the parental home is seen to spoil the young person. In this pattern of meaning, the transition to adulthood is understood as a period in which young people learn to be fully independent; by solving problems on their own and, if necessary, by learning from their mistakes. In this pattern of meaning, it is the challenge that young people should embrace in order to grow up. The departure from the parental home does, thus, not mark the achievement of adulthood (see also Newman 2008), but a step on the way of achieving adulthood.

In the interdependence pattern, the interviewees interpret the period between childhood and adulthood as a sensitive phase in which young people need to be protected or guided, or even controlled. Francesco, for example, sees himself and young people in general as fragile: 'we are very fragile, as young people, very, very, very fragile in terms of self-esteem.

You don't know what you are going to do' (Francesco, 25, Italy, planning to leave home). This interpretation justifies a longer stay in the protective environment of the parental home.

Other students in the Italian sample reveal that there are parents who simply forbid their children to leave home as young adults. Anna (20), for example, reports that she knows parents who would not let their children move away to pursue their studies because they think that, being far away from parental control, their children would not focus on their studies and, instead, 'party' all the time. She criticizes the tendency of some Italian parents to be over-protective, and keep their children 'underneath a glass cover'. Tommaso (32) says that parents who do this do not see the departure of their children as an opportunity but as a problem – they have a tendency to control their children and to assume that staying as close as possible to the parents, during the process of growing up, is the 'best' thing for them. Hence, seeing young people as either 'fragile' or 'imprudent' supports the interpretation in the interdependence pattern that the parental home is the most suitable place for development.

4. Discussion

In sum, two different patterns of norms and meanings can be identified in the interviews. The first pattern, which is perceived as normative by the German interviewees, supports the independence of young people. It encourages the young to leave the parental home early on, and doesn't restrict the motives for leaving. In this perspective, leaving home is considered a challenge which promotes personal maturity and is, therefore, a necessary step in the transition to adulthood. In this pattern, young people are seen as capable individuals who should prove, and want to prove, their independence.

Conversely, the pattern perceived as normative in the Italian sample supports the interdependence of family members. There are restrictions about what a justified motive for moving out would be. Leaving home is largely accepted if it happens for 'inevitable' reasons related to work, education or marriage. Residential independence, in itself, however, is not seen as a useful experience for reaching adulthood. Instead, the parental home is seen as the most suitable place for growing up. This view is based on the perception of young people as either fragile or imprudent which, consequently, leads to the assumption that they need the protection and control of the parental home.

The norms and meanings of independence are largely shared by the German interviewees, even among those who choose to remain living with

their parents. The Italian interviewees instead, perceive the meanings of independence as a minority pattern in their social environment. There is far greater support and recognition for the norms and meanings of interdependence in the Italian interviews.

The students interviewed, in both countries, frequently refer to the attitudes and comments of their parents or teachers when evaluating and explaining their living arrangements. This observation suggests that the norms and meanings regarding the ('right') pathway to residential independence are transferred from one generation to the next and supported by social sanctions – rather than being shaped only by the current economic and institutional conditions. Also because of this process of intergenerational transmission, the current patterns of leaving home in Southern and Northern Europe still resemble the historical pathways out of the parental home described by Reher (1998, see also Van Poppel and Oris 2004).

The independence pattern, prevailing in Germany, is characteristic for individualistic societies in which the family plays a minor role in social life, compared to familialistic societies in Southern Europe. In individualistic societies, the early departure from the parental home and the resulting spatial distances between family members contribute to the reduced relevance of the family. The promotion of self-sufficiency during the transition to adulthood can, therefore, be regarded as a means supporting the enculturation of the young into individualistic societies. Similarly, in Italy, the prioritizing of family togetherness during the transition to adulthood is part of the ongoing enculturation of young people into a familialistic social context, characterized by a strong relevance of the family in fulfilling manifold social tasks.

The results presented here raise the question whether the parents who favour the early residential independence of their children start to prepare their offspring already at a younger age for the detachment from the family, in contrast to parents who favour the continuous proximity of family members. Results from the World Values Survey (1990–1993) indicate that 70% of the German respondents consider independence an important goal in the education of children, while only 31% do so in Italy (Inglehart 1998/2000: V227). Studies in cross-cultural psychology reveal that parenting styles regarding the encouragement or discouragement of autonomous behaviour differ in Northern and Southern Europe (e.g., Hsu and Lavelli 2005; Valentin 2005; Taverna *et al.* 2011; Bornstein *et al.* 2012). Exploring the link between the normative expectations regarding the departure from the parental home and the promotion of interdependence or autonomy in the upbringing of children would thus be an interesting question for future research.

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