

LEAVING HOME BEFORE MARRIAGE

ETHNICITY, FAMILISM, AND
GENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS



RANCES K. GOLDSCHIEDER & CALVIN GOLDSCHIEDER

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*Ethnicity, Familism, and
Generational Relationships*

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&
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Leaving Home Before Marriage



Life Course Studies

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To the memory of
Ida and George Engeman

Preface

A revolution is in progress in the transition to adulthood. Whereas most young people once remained in the parental home until they married, in the last few decades a new pattern has emerged: young people leave home before marriage—and not just to dormitories or barracks, but to a separate home or apartment, either alone or with roommates. In this book, we explore this new phenomenon as it figures in the plans of young people and their parents and in the decisions they eventually make about their living arrangements.

What difference does it make whether young people leave home before marriage? Does this shift reflect changes in their relationships with their parents and in their roles in the parental home? Does it change the role of marriage as a defining transition to adult status? Does it simply reflect their increase in resources—higher incomes among young adults and perhaps their parents—allowing both generations to “purchase” privacy? Or is it a response to changed ideas about the appropriateness of intergenerational coresidence? Has living independently from parents well before marriage become a new life course requirement, one that potentially competes with investments in education or with family responsibilities?

In this book we address these questions by looking at recent national data on the expectations and decisions of a large group of young people (60,000) and a sub-sample of their parents. The young adults were completing high school in the early 1980s and then beginning the process of moving out, weaving in living arrangement choices with the other decisions they were making in the crowded and rapidly changing years between 1980 and 1986.

We found that nonfamily living in young adulthood is a new and fragile life course stage. It is one that a substantial majority of young people expected to have (70%), even though they were not always realistic about what its costs might be. We also found that parents play an important role in determining whether their children finally achieve a spell of nonfamily living. Transferring resources to them, divorcing, and remarrying were

all ways parents could influence their children's decisions, and parental expectations were often more important to the eventual outcome than were those of the children themselves. The results of our study demonstrate the variety of ways that living arrangements are really household-level rather than individual-level decisions.

Another surprise emerging from our analysis was that values pertaining to various dimensions of familism had far more impact on whether young adults expected and experienced nonfamily living in early adulthood than did measures of financial resources. Direct and indirect measures of values, such as attitudes about gender role traditionalism and parent-child relationships, or those indexed by ethnicity and religiosity, strongly influenced the routes these young people took to residential independence.

Most research on living arrangements changes has highlighted the importance of increases in resources—the general rise in affluence over time—far more than changes brought by decreased familism or secularization. To the extent that the cross-sectional differences we document mirror the shape of change over time, our results suggest that changes in values, more than increases in affluence, influence the decisions young adults make about living arrangements. We show that the relationships between resources and nonfamily living are fewer and weaker than are measures of values and preferences. It is clear that nonfamily living has simply not been as well accepted in more familistic ethnic groups and religious denominations as it has in the dominant, largely secular culture. This new life course stage is virtually taken for granted among highly educated Protestants and Jews—and hence, by most family scholars as well—but it figures much less clearly in other communities.

Our project evolved over a number of years. The idea to study young peoples' and their parents' expectations about nonfamily living in early adulthood first took shape on a boat taking us from Venice, Italy to Haifa, Israel. These ideas became the basis of a research proposal entitled "Premarital Residential Independence among American Ethnic Communities," funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) as part of Center Grant No. P50 HD-12639 to the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California. As some portions of the analysis emerged and sparked ideas and hypotheses, we presented them as papers to colleagues in formal and informal settings, such as the meetings of the Population Association of America, the American Sociological Association, and NICHD/NIA-sponsored workshops on intergenerational relationships.

Some of these papers were revised and subsequently published as journal articles. Our new questions, focusing on the decisions themselves, on the role of parents, and on the strategies that we would follow to answer

them, led us to propose additional analyses, again with the support of NICHD, grant No. R-01-HD23339 ("New Patterns in the Transition to Adulthood"), awarded to RAND and Brown University. Thus, while parts of the analysis have appeared before as journal articles, their focus was on the plans of young adults rather than their behavior. The book format was chosen for the sake of presenting a more complete and systematic story than would have been possible otherwise.

Many have contributed to the whole that finally took shape. We particularly want to express our appreciation to Peter Morrison of RAND, who helped in assembling and encouraging the basic team in Santa Monica, and who supported our work throughout our decade-long series of peregrinations to the beaches of southern California. Our colleagues there listened patiently and provided numerous constructive suggestions as our work unfolded, most notably Julie DaVanzo, Arleen Leibowitz, Jim Smith, and Linda Waite. Most of all, these colleagues became friends and helped us make a home away from home. Ross Stolzenberg provided patient and thoughtful comments on the intergenerational flows portion of the research, and, most recently, Lee Lillard provided a welcome opportunity for us to expand on our ideas linking the expectations of parents and their children.

Most of the data analysis was carried out at RAND, and we are most grateful to Joan Keesey, who patiently constructed the files for the first analyses of expectations data, in the years when too little behavioral data were available to analyze. Patti Camp provided Herculean labors in constructing the files for the study of the actual leaving home process and for testing the wide range of statistical models that were at the heart of our argument. Final mop-ups were done by David Rumpel, helping us to turn over a few last stones. A portion of the analysis was also carried on in Providence, under a sub-contract from RAND to Brown University. Dr. Elizabeth Cooksey, then a graduate research assistant, thus had the opportunity to learn that the study of demography included considerations of intergenerational financial relationships (and that not all data are clean). We are grateful to all for their patient and thoughtful work and collegial suggestions. We are particularly indebted to the program in population at NICHD for supporting our research and facilitating its development.

We first began to piece together a whole from the various parts we had been seeing during a wonderfully productive month at the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center in the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio (Como), Italy, under the sponsorship of the Rockefeller Foundation. Both as a retreat (in the Italian Alps!) and as a community of involved scholars, Bellagio provided a wondrous opportunity for two authors to write, sort,

think, argue, and discuss, as well as to present evolving ideas to an interdisciplinary group of researchers from around the world. We want to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for being supportive of the initial draft of this volume.

Important portions of this book (as well as plans for the analyses that went into it and the preface that we wrote when it was all over) were completed at the Engeman cottage, on Assembly Point, Lake George, New York. It is a concrete symbol of familism. Older generations have worked, played, loved, and passed traditions on to younger ones there. Children who had left home (or whose homes had left them) have returned over and over and found a home. We dedicate this book to the memory of Fran's parents, Ida and George Engeman, the founders of the cottage, and to all their children, children-in-law, grandchildren, grandchildren-in-law, and great-grandchildren. May our family traditions continue.

Lake George, New York
October, 1992

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