



## Youth Studies, Housing Transitions and the 'Missing Middle': Time for a Rethink?

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### Abstract

A recent but growing trend in studies of young people's lives has been to highlight that there is a 'missing middle' in the youth studies research agenda. It has been argued that much youth research focuses on either successful or very troubled transitions to adulthood, with the lives of those who might simply be 'getting by' representing an empirical absence. Building on previous work that has addressed how such a missing middle can add to our understanding of educational experience and attainment, labour market engagement and participation, and issues of identity, this paper pays attention to the housing transitions, careers and aspirations of a group of 'ordinary' and apparently unproblematic working class young men. Because they do not represent groups that have been of especial interest in youth studies to date, their experiences problematize the on-going utility of dominant conceptual frameworks used to explain housing transitions. In addition to their 'lack of fit' with ideal type typologies, the young men also reveal the shifting nature of attitudes towards communal living 'which is traditionally associated with middle class students' in combination with the continuing role of social resources as a determining factor in their housing transition.

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**Keywords:** *Youth; Housing Transitions; Housing Careers; Missing Middle; Social Change; Cultural Resources*

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### Introduction

**1.1** Despite no particular sequence or ranking order in the various interrelated transitions to adulthood status, leaving the family home (even if not permanently) presents individuals with significant adult responsibilities – *usually* (though not always) having to manage one's own finances, consumption decisions and domestic labour independent of parental influence (Mulder 2009). In this sense, and notwithstanding the potentially reversible nature of the process, Mulder (2009: 203) posits that, 'in the long and gradual process from dependence of children on parents to a more equal relationship, leaving home is the clearest and most datable step'. It is perhaps somewhat surprising, then, that despite being given equal prominence as a feature of the transition to adulthood (e.g. Coles 1995), young people's housing careers remain comparatively under-researched relative to the experiences of and journeys through education and employment.

**1.2** The paucity of research in the area of young people and housing has led Heath (2009: 214–215) to suggest that 'any new contributions are to be welcomed'. Rather than a sole interest in the processes involved in, and the trends of, leaving or returning to the family home (e.g. Aquilino 1991; Billari & Liefbroer 2007; Jones 1995; Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1999), Heath is calling for particular attention in two regards: first, a move towards understanding young people's living *arrangements* when living independently, and secondly to move beyond seeing couple-households and/or having a family of one's own as the most significant authentic markers of adulthood. Aside from the focus upon such matters by the likes of Heath and Cleaver (2003) and Ford et al. (2002), such issues seem fairly secondary in the youth research agenda.

**1.3** This article contributes to the literature in this area by considering the experiences of those constituting the 'missing middle' in studies of young people's lives (see Roberts 2011; Roberts & MacDonald 2013). These are young people who appear to sit at the fissure between dualistic notions such

as 'slow' versus 'fast track' or 'linear' versus 'nonlinear' transitions – ideas that have developed as a result of research attention given to social disadvantage, on the one hand, and a mirrored interest in 'successful' youth trajectories, on the other.

**1.4** Such young people have until relatively recently remained largely absent in youth research and policy considerations. However, paying attention to those whose trajectories do not obviously sit one or other side of these conceptual divides reveals new knowledge, which can help more holistically and accurately theorise the contemporary youth period. Accordingly, in line with arguments made in relation to such young people's experiences in education (Roberts 2012a), their encounters with the labour market (Roberts 2012b) and in relation to the domestic sphere (Roberts 2013), this paper illustrates how the housing careers of a group of 'ordinary' young men from the South East of England do not sit comfortably within the dominant conceptualisations developed in youth research to date. In doing so, the experiences of these young men offer a lens through which to view social change but also they enable us to more closely consider the different types of resources that young people are able to draw upon and the limits they face in terms of their housing careers.

**1.5** The limited research interest which is afforded to middle-ground groups ensures that the experiences and aspirations outlined here adds to and complements the existing literature focussing on the housing careers of graduates and young professionals (e.g. Heath & Cleaver 2003; Roberts et al. 2009), students (e.g. Thomsen 2007; Holdsworth 2006; Rugg et al. 2004; Cairns 2011), those leaving home early (e.g. Jones 2004; Aquilino 1991), and those entering the housing market after leaving care (e.g. Biehal & Wade 1999; Wade & Dixon 2006). Moreover, in aiding the development of a more holistic understanding of young people's lives, these analyses reveal how the operation of power and difference manifests often overlooked forms of inequality near – but not quite at – the bottom of the social hierarchy.

**1.6** After outlining the project methodology, the article examines the young men's recent living arrangements and/or their future housing aspirations. Their strategies, preferences and access to various resources are detailed and analysed in reference to the typology set out by Ford et al. (2002). This conceptualisation is shown to be lacking a particular analytical construct that accounts for the housing pathways of these young men. Secondly, the data reveals considerable support for Heath and Cleaver's (2003) understanding that young people actively decide to live with 'families of choice', over and above living with their family of origin or their family of destination; this is an important finding as this notion has to date been primarily associated with students, graduates or professionals.

**1.7** Much weight is afforded to theories advocating unprecedented social change in an era of 'reflexive modernity' (e.g. Beck 1992, 2007; Giddens 1991). However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's comments that the 'choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time' (2002: 22–23), has provided a much contested terrain in youth studies (e.g. Woodman 2009; Roberts 2010). In light of this, the article also explores the role economic, social and cultural resources play in the young men's housing careers. This ensures that the available options and subsequent housing choices made can be viewed in light of the interplay of agency and structural constraints, and how these intersect to create conditions the respondents deem as 'the right time and the right opportunity'.

**1.8** In relation to these developing debates around the nature and extent of social change, it is important to stress from the outset that in describing and theorising these young people's transitions the author is not taking a normative approach. Indeed, having already questioned the overall utility of dualisms such as fast-track and slow-track transition (see Roberts 2011), there is no effort here to situate non-linear transitions as somehow inferior to those characterised by linearity. Simultaneously, recognition must be given to evidence which suggests that the 'disorderly' nature of a non-linear transition is differentially experienced across social groups, with those most socially disadvantaged running further risk of social exclusion (Webster et al. 2004), while more obviously secure and/or middle class young people often express non-linearity as being indicative of expressions of agency (see du Bois Reymond 1998; du Bois Reymond & Lopez Blasco 2003;). This, again, reminds us of the importance that we should give to the social, cultural and material resources to which young people have access and how these might shape young people's experience of non/linearity or 'bound' their agency (Evans 2002). The housing transitions of the young people discussed here allow for further consideration of this issue.

## **Research methods, sample and context**

**2.1** This paper uses data from an in-depth qualitative investigation into the transitions to adulthood of 18–24-year old males in East Kent, in the South-East of England. All were employed on permanent contracts in low-level retail positions. Despite being among the least deprived third of English councils, Kent exhibits great variation in deprivation across the county, with a particular divide between the more deprived East and the less deprived West.<sup>[1]</sup> As of 2009, over 70% of newly forming households were projected to be unable to afford entry to the housing market in East Kent, whether purchasing or private rental.

**2.2** After a recruitment drive for respondents directly through workplaces and subsequent 'snowballing', 24 young men agreed to take part in the study. This involved a minimum of one rapport-building meeting and a biographical qualitative interview. The interviews lasted mostly about an hour, with the longest taking nearly two and a half hours. Data was fully transcribed and thematically coded, with each respondent being given a pseudonym in order that they would remain anonymous. Using the occupation of the head of household, the vast majority were working-class, and none of them had been to or intended to go into higher education. Many of them were, however, qualified to level III on the UK national qualification framework; and, many of those who were not had at least some good GCSEs at or above grade C.

**2.3** As the inquiry relates only to men from a specific locality<sup>[2]</sup>, the limitations about how widely the findings can apply are duly acknowledged. However, these insights illustrate a contextualised example of a group whose housing pathways are not easily mapped on to dominant typologies and also serves to destabilise current thinking relating to the preferred housing careers associated with working class young people.

### **Square pegs, round holes: applying Ford et al.'s (2002) housing pathways typology**

**2.4** In order to analyse the respondents' housing transitions properly it seems appropriate to first set out the influential typology espoused by Ford et al. (2002). Their framework for understanding housing careers identifies five ideal type pathways: a chaotic pathway, an unplanned pathway, a constrained pathway, a planned (non-student) pathway and a student pathway. Each pathway is based around three dimensions, namely (i) young people's ability to plan their moves; (ii) family resources, and; (iii) the extent and form of constraints that restrict housing options (such as finances and the nature of the local housing market). Each of these dimensions is a continuum, consequently only 'in rare cases will a particular housing biography coincide perfectly with one of the ideal-type pathways' (Ford et al. 2002: 2463).

**2.5** Heath and Cleaver (2003) have noted an overwhelming emphasis on constraint rather than choice as a means of understanding household situations. Although far from a perfect measure of one's intentions, Ford et al.'s first dimension of influence (ability to plan) allows researchers to factor in the role of choice in pursuing a housing situation. Motivations for wanting to move into a home of one's own, they claim, range from 'intentional' (for study or planned family formation), to 'unexpected' (e.g. unplanned pregnancy), to 'forced' (as in cases of parental conflict). Intentionally transitioning from the parental home to establish an independent life for its own sake is not explicitly discussed in this continuum in any detail. However, as illustrated below, this notion is important in this research. Furthermore, as will also be outlined below, the role social networks and informal opportunity plays, such as the *chance* to live with *friends*, is insufficiently factored into this conceptualisation.

**2.6** The present respondents' housing careers were characterised by both choice and constraint, and do not map easily onto Ford et al.'s analytical construct of ideal pathways. Just over half of the respondents in the research sample had not yet lived outside the familial home – this is what Ford et al. refer to as a pre-pathway. Their reasons, constraints and opportunities will be examined below. First, however, the housing biographies of the 11 who currently/ had at some point lived are analysed.

**2.7** Given their educational status and attitudes towards returning to education, the student pathway is clearly ruled out. Furthermore, none of the sample could be described as being on an unplanned pathway, which according to Ford et al. is characterised by no planning, substantial constraints, but the availability of some family support. The main reason this pathway is not applicable here is that, in discussing a lack of planning, Ford et al. are largely referring to unexpected pregnancy and family formation. The chaotic pathway is also an insufficient means of description because it represents a housing career which is 'defined in terms of an absence of planning, substantial constraints (both economic and in relation to housing eligibility) and an absence of family support' (Ford et al. 2002: 2463). This is likely to have led to the young person being ejected from the family home, something to which none of the present respondents were subjected.

**2.8** The latter two pathways are examples of more 'spectacular' or deviant transitions, which are often associated with socially excluded young people. Indeed, these patterns are often reported by young adult offenders and dependent drug users (see Webster et al. 2004). The two remaining pathways in Ford et al.'s schema do, however, lend themselves to explaining some of the movement in the respondents' housing careers. Yet, at the same time the fit between the biographies accounted for here and the 'constrained' and 'planned (non-student)' pathways is far from perfect.

### **Constrained freedom?**

**3.1** The constrained pathway is argued to have clear planning, set in a context of family support, yet with significant constraint. The constraining factors referred to might apply to anyone in this sample, and indeed beyond, attempting to 'break out' of the family home. Several commentators have noted that British social policies (such as the single room rent (SRR) policy)<sup>[3]</sup>, increases in housing costs and reductions in public provision of stock can all be deemed constraints a young person might face in pursuing independent living (e.g. Heath & Cleaver 2003; Rugg 2010; Stone et al. 2011). Furthermore, the precariousness nature of the contemporary youth labour market – characterised by a lack of full-time jobs, insecurity and inadequate incomes – might prevent young people from leaving the family home with the confidence that they would not have to return (ibid; see also Mulder 2009: 207). The impact of these factors can be mitigated by variable family support whereby independent housing costs are 'managed' by parental contributions. These can range from deposit money, rent, white goods and furniture and, in some cases, continued provision of a room and/ or cleaning facilities and meals in the parental home for young people to utilise to reduce the running costs in their own accommodation (Ford et al. 2002; Iacovou 2010).

**3.2** According to Ford et al. the primary motivations for departing the family home when on the constrained pathway might be for work-related reasons or to establish independence. Correspondingly, many of the young men in the sample here who did have experience of living independently largely did so in pursuit of such independence. These motivations for independence were, sometimes, relatively straight forward. However, their motivations were more often multiple and complex and their actions need to be understood in relation to the opportunities that arose as a result of their social networks, the choices

they faced and the contentedness they felt in regards to any given situation. Indeed, as Heath and Cleaver (2003) have previously noted, not all young people view their constraints as particularly problematic. This complexity is now illustrated through some case specific examples.

### **Luke (age 22)**

**3.3** Following his mother's decision to sell the family home and co-habit with her new partner, Luke's older sister offered him accommodation at her home on the condition that he was employed and paid rent. This familial support was vital, though Luke did not perceive himself as being in a particularly harsh situation. Luke's housing options were clearly constrained by financial resources. He had managed to get a job working one day per week in a shop, but this clearly would not afford him the means to live independently. Even after quickly gaining a 20 hour per-week contract, Luke did not consider living elsewhere or seek any assistance from the benefit system to facilitate a move into the social rented sector. He said it was a 'weird but comfortable time with not much cost'.

**3.4** His first move away from any form of familial support was motivated by his efforts at maintaining a relationship, and resulted in him moving to Kent. The fact that his partner would be moving to a university campus ensured that Luke would need to fund his own living arrangements. As previously, Luke did not explore any options around social support and instead moved in to a 'random house share' at the first possible opportunity. Clearly, this housing situation was partly a product of financial constraints. However, Luke, like all but one of the sample, held a predominantly negative attitude towards living alone:

**Luke:** I'd hate that. I don't particularly know my history, but I can't think of a time when people did wanna live on their own... when has that ever been the model? Obviously people have had to do it from time to time, but why would you wanna do that?

This move, therefore, needs to be understood in the context of his preferred living arrangements as well as the objective constraining factors associated with the housing market.

**3.5** This home was far from a house-share representing a 'family of choice'. Instead, Luke lived with a group of people who were essentially strangers and who lived largely independently. Luke explained that this move to non-familial surroundings was not felt as a monumental and definitive move across the threshold to independent living. As Jones (1995; see also Mulder 2009; ECOTEC 2009) suggests, leaving home is more a process than a one off event, and this is certainly the case here. Luke suggested that living with his sister had been very different from living at home with his mother and this consequently made the transition to living with people who might be 'difficult' considerably easier. There were a number of unsavoury incidents, however, which made for an unsatisfying living environment:

**Luke:** I got on well with a couple of people I lived with, [but] it was a shit hole... nothing was getting sorted out, council tax wasn't getting paid, it was a stress... Can we get the bills paid? Can we do the washing up? Can we vacuum the front room without having to get into a fight about it, you know? If you move in with a bunch of people all the same age there is no obvious hierarchy. You can have some real chaos with nothing getting done... I went for a fortnight without any light because I said to them, 'look I'm not gonna keep on getting the electricity, so either you guys can get it together to pay for it or we can fucking sit in the dark. I'm not paying for it anymore'. For two weeks we sat in the dark until the rest got it together to find some fucking money (laughs).

This experience reflects Rugg's (2010: 4) concerns that young 'blue collar workers' might be left with 'less secure and less salubrious options' when it comes to house sharing. Nonetheless, the lack of an obvious quasi-parental authority discussed here is at once a problem – in that it meant roles and responsibilities in the house were ambiguous – but was also helpful for Luke and the others as it provided a sense of independence. When asked if living alone would have been a preferred option even in the light of such events, Luke forcefully rejected the idea:

**Luke:** No. I dunno why anyone would wanna live alone. It's the most depressing thing in the world to come back to an empty house.

Eventually, Luke ended up moving from this house to his current lodgings, and again this was to a room in a shared house. This time, however, his strategy seemed predominantly financially motivated as he explained that he had 'moved in with students, mostly to avoid paying council tax'. His financial strategy, however, must be understood in regards to the opportunity that arose.

**3.6** One of the four girls Luke lived with at the time of the interview was his now ex-girlfriend. Luke had not planned to leave his previous lodgings and specifically seek accommodation where he would not have to pay council tax. Instead, while Luke was room-hunting after getting tired with his then present living conditions, his ex-girlfriend and her friends were looking for a fifth housemate. This was an opportunity extended to Luke and one which he took up when he realised he would be able to save money on council tax and simultaneously live with people he knew well. The combination of events is critical. Luke's housing pathway, then, had some semblance of the constrained pathway. He faced the objective constraints of the housing market, such as the limited availability of affordable housing stock, and also the limited extent to which his economic means could plausibly provide anything other than a house share. Unlike the constrained pathway, however, evidence of clear and consistent planning is largely missing. Luke did, indeed, have something of a plan – to move to Kent with his girlfriend – but this was largely ad hoc. It was the opportunistic nature of his housing biography that seems to be the most consistent feature. This has some resonance with Giddens' (1991: 113) discussion of 'fateful moments' in

the reflexive construction of the self. Giddens positions these moments as instances of empowerment, where people learn lessons which ultimately 'reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue' (*ibid*: 143). Such 'fate', of course, needs to be understood in relation to the wider significance of the social network he had developed – Luke's opportunity to act came directly as a result of the relationships he had made and maintained over the duration of the last few years.

### **Billy (age 22), Pat (age 24) and Christian (age 24)**

**3.7** Billy, Pat and Christian also all lived away from their parents in shared accommodation (though not together). All three lived with their parents until well after finishing their education and all had been employed for several years before moving out. Pat and Christian, as with an increasing proportion of young people (Heath 2008), left the family home in pursuit of independence. However, the strategy and degree of planning employed varied quite considerably, with Pat being very definite in his desire to move out:

**Pat:** I wasn't desperate to leave, but I was 21 and I liked going out, I wanted to be near town, close to work, and, well, you know, be an adult. Wanted to make my own decisions about shit, and not have to worry about what anyone thought. Not that I got that much shit for coming in late from my family, or whatever. Just knew I wanted to not live with my parents anymore!

**3.8** Christian, on the other hand, faced similar restrictions at home, yet never made plans to move out. Instead, he acted when an opportunity presented itself:

**Christian:** I moved out because I wanted my freedom, which I have got a lot more of, my independence. It was my age, (almost 24 before moving out) but it was the opportunity as well because the opportunity came, and it was last year my friend offered to let me live at his house, his wife had left him. So the opportunity came to move out, I was ready to move out and I was frustrated with the rules...

**Researcher:** What rules?

**Christian:** I wasn't allowed girls round! (laughs) Not just that, but I couldn't invite friends round whenever I want... I kept saying [I'd move out], but I never actually looked. It was more that it fell to me...

**3.9** Billy's situation was slightly different. He had recently moved in with friends, partly to seek independence and partly to live closer to work, but this was in the context of difficult circumstances in the family home:

**Billy:** It's nice to have space because unfortunately I don't get on with my step-dad. I mean, I am 22 and I had been looking at moving. I think it was something I was intending to do, or think about it gradually. But I think I had the spur of the moment thing, I thought 'right gotta do it, no hanging back anymore'. I was paying the same amount living with parents as I'm paying here. So no difference there... It was definitely a good move. To be honest, I quite like having other people's company, you know, it's nice to sit up and watch telly 'til fairly late, just all the little things you can do as a group.

**3.10** Interestingly, whereas young people often find living with their parents offers significant financial savings (Jones 2001; Webster et al. 2004), Billy's rent at the family home was equal to that which was charged in the house with his friends. This was rare across the sample, yet it nonetheless shows that moving away from one's family does not always involve increased financial constraints. Significant, again, was that the opportunity emerging from his social network was the main catalyst. The difficult situation with his step-dad had produced a desire to leave home, or a recognition that it was time to do so, but his 'spur of the moment' actions came when the chance to move in with friends was presented to him.

### **Constrained at home?**

**4.1** Thus far only the housing careers of those who are living independently have been considered. The thoughts and aspirations of those young men who were yet to take their first steps on an independent housing pathway are also of important consequence for these matters. The overall picture in this regard was again one where 'families of choice' would be the ideal platform to facilitate a preferred degree of freedom. This is not to downplay the role of (particularly) financial constraints, as these quotes from respondents who lived with their parents indicate:

**Adam (age 21):** My sister is still living at home rent free, and she is 23. So, I'm not going anywhere until she has gone. I'm having as much time in my house for free as she is before I have to go!

**Bobby (age 19):** No, I'm not in no rush. I don't think I'd be able to cope to move out at the moment, just for the money situation...

However, once again, for these young men who were yet to move out of the family home, finance alone was not the primary issue. They wanted to live with their friends:

**Adam:** I'd rather live with friends because of the fact that I don't like spending too much time on my own. So above and beyond the financial situation, it's just the whole banter that,

you know, you would tell someone what you did , but you would be able to all talk about other stuff...

**Bobby:** It'd be better to live with some people I know... I couldn't afford to live on my own at the moment. And I wouldn't particularly want to live on my own anyway.

In relation to this, the important role the 'right opportunity' plays was revealed again and again. Whilst not something which policy makers can easily account for, it is the responsibility of sociologists to consider, acknowledge and analyse the role of opportunity, and how this is product of social capital, when developing theoretical explanations for living patterns and housing biographies. While there has been some movement towards better understanding how young people mobilise social capital (e.g. Raffo & Reeves 2000; Holland et al. 2007), deviating from a view where young people are deemed mere recipients of the social capital of their parents – as appears to be the case in the prominent formulations of social capital expounded by Putnam (2000), Coleman (1990) and others – tends to be a minority position. This is perhaps particularly the case in relation to housing transitions, and especially the case when considering the situation of working class, non-students, where young people are not often considered as active agents in the formation of social capital. The young men in this study clearly made use of their own social capital, or at least planned to do so, in making their transition to independent living and in doing so replicate what Raffo and Reeves (2000: 149) describe as instances of 'resistance, innovation, negotiation and accommodation to a range of socialising forces, as well as agency' .

**4.2** Giving due regard to the significance of the 'right opportunity' in this context allows us to also better understand the limitations of the ways in which agency can be mobilised. For instance, drawing on a Bourdieusian (1986) perspective, we might consider that the absence of social capital – in this case developed through friendship relations – as a resource could prove a particularly difficult barrier to overcome in one's efforts to transition to independent living. Further still, Bourdieu's (1986) concern with the interlocking relationship between social, cultural and economic capital allows us to hypothesise that even with an 'adequate' social network in place, the resources within these networks could still determine whether a young person has the capability to move out, and, of equal importance, the quality of conditions in which a young person can expect to live. As a further corollary, this approach also allows for a more nuanced and detailed examination of typically conceived objective constraints such as the costs of housing, the limited stock of social housing, and/or the appropriateness of age-discriminatory social policies such as the SRR. In this sense, a lack of the right social networks and the informal opportunities they may facilitate can be seen as a constraint on the housing plans of young people – whether or not they have access to economic resources. Concomitantly, the right opportunity – emerging from appropriate and convertible social capital – enables and, perhaps, even encourages young people to make the move out of the family home. Indeed this was the case for Mike, who, despite having the objective means to make a move into the private sector after obtaining 'a whopping pay rise to 16.5 grand a year', waited for a combination of events that culminated in a particular opportunity to live with a group of friends as a 'family of choice'. The potential implications, however, for inequalities in the experience of housing transitions among different social groups are quite stark.

**4.3** The fact that many respondents relied on their social networks to provide the platform for the right opportunity to arise is, in many ways, an indictment of current housing provision, although it could also be argued to reflect a certain degree of social change. Ford et al. identify the student pathway as one which carries with it cultural expectations of shared and/or communal living and an attendant lifestyle. As others have shown, some young people may then seek to sustain this type of living arrangement beyond their formal student status (e.g. Kenyon & Heath 2001; Heath & Cleaver 2003); indeed, Rugg et al. (2004) insist that such living arrangements reflect the 'post-graduate' extension of the general student housing pathway.

**4.4** Among the young men here was a preference for living patterns and situations that have, until now, largely been associated with students or professionals. Consequently, whilst 'graduates and young professionals... are arguably at the forefront of shifting attitudes and behaviours with respect to household formation' (Heath & Cleaver 2003: 4), it is not an attitude that should now be exclusively associated with such young people.

**4.5** Kemp and Rugg (1998) and Jones (2001) deem such circumstances as a response to the constraints of the housing market, since housing only really becomes affordable for most young people when costs are shared. Yet, the views of these respondents could not be any clearer. The experiences detailed above reflect 'the emergence of new and diverse forms of social dependency, based on 'families of choice' involving friends and ex-partners as well as blood relatives and current partners' (Heath & Cleaver 2003: 3), but for groups with whom they have not been typically associated.

**4.6** Living with friends or enjoying some form of independent living was, then, often deemed an essential first step to take *prior* to setting up home with a partner. It is as much an active choice for some non-HE educated young people as it is amongst those young professionals with whom it is typically associated. Here, Tim's sentiments here are indicative of what many respondents felt their future housing biography would resemble:

**Tim (age 20):** Mates will be the start... Then maybe even go back to live at home for bit because you have fallen out with your mates or you can't afford to live in a house, or you gotta look for somewhere else. Then obviously you are gonna be with someone, and then comes the whole shall we move into together and stuff, and then you just go from there, maybe a flat and then save up for a house...

**4.7** Tim presents a vivid understanding of the fact that things might not quite go according to plan and that this might result in a stint back in the family home, an increasingly common outcome among

contemporary young people, often referred to as the boomerang generation given the need to return to the family home as a result of unemployment and the precarious nature of the labour market (Kaplan 2009) or the end of university studies (Sage et al. 2012). Among the rest of the sample, those who had moved out of the family home had all done so largely on the understanding that it was permanent, but always believing they could fall back on their parents if needed. Even difficult circumstances in the family home, as in Billy's case, were not deemed insurmountable should things not go according to plan:

**Billy:** I know my room is still there, it's just got nothing in it. That's what my mum said to me. I can go back if I need to.

**4.8** There were several other young men who had left home, thinking it was a permanent break, but who had returned with relative ease after happening upon financial difficulty:

**Jez (age 21):** I moved back in with my mum... Just because my social life had taken a toll on finances, so mum had said come back for a while. It was at the end of the contract [at the house share] so it was [easy].

**Dave (age 24):** Hours got reduced. Mum and dad always asked me to come back home anyway, cos they miss me... so when I said I wanted to move back, my Dad was packing my bags for me... It feels like I never moved out to be honest.

The reliance on family support as a back-up plan, at the expense of even considering state welfare, may be something of an increasing feature of contemporary housing biographies. Here, in fact, just one respondent described the idea of returning to the family home in negative terms.

**4.9** Overall, the respondents' attitudes towards returning to the family home showed that leaving in ordinary and unproblematic circumstances is often a potentially reversible process. This reflects Cairns' (2011: 10–11) position that, following a review of research in this area, a 'period of continuous or intermittent inter-generational cohabitation now often stretches into the mid-twenties age range and beyond', with 'generally harmonious inter-generational relationships coupled with the often literal comfort zone of the family home habitually leading towards a disinclination to leave home even when material shortages are not present'.

**4.10** This attitude is congruent with policy emphasis in recent years which has laid responsibility for children on the family for an increasing length of time. As the transition to adulthood has become extended, familial responsibility and continued support seems to have become a normative expectation, irrespective of there being no legal requirement for parents to provide a home (see Holdsworth & Morgan 2005). While cases such as those presented here might well encourage policy makers to increasingly expect families to fill the role of the 'safety net' in the wake of further welfare state retrenchment, such support is not afforded to all young people, and not all families can afford to welcome their children back into their home. This is an important caveat, and one that is increasingly relevant in view of the UK's forthcoming 'bedroom tax' for the social housing sector.

### **Planned to perfection?**

**5.1** Even when a household with a partner is formed, young people are not necessarily more independent of family support. This is now illustrated through the accounts of those respondents who had, at first glance, encountered the planned (non-student) pathway of Ford et al.'s conceptualisation.

**5.2** A significant difference between the constrained pathway and the planned (non-student) pathway is that, whereas motivations for leaving home were related to work in the former, the latter tends to be typically related to both family formation and the availability of economic resources from employment. Further still, the planned (non-student) pathway is described as being one in which plans are made in the context of fewer and more manageable constraints (*ibid.*) Among the sample in this research, two of the young men, Mark and Rob, left for reasons of family formation, i.e. to set up home with their respective girlfriends. Consequently, these young men might be described as being on the planned (non-student) pathway.

**5.3** Neither Mark nor Rob had set up home for reasons of impending parental responsibility. Both felt they had made the conscious decision to move in and set up a household with the person they anticipated being their life partner. In addition, both spoke about independence as a corollary of moving in with their partner:

**Rob (age 21):** We didn't move in together until we were about 5 or 6 months together. So it wasn't like straight away. I just wanted my independence... It was fine [at home], we all got on and that, but I just wanted my independence.

**Mark (age 21):** I didn't wanna be Mum's little boy all the time! I wanted it to be me and my mrs.

**5.4** They felt they were making a permanent break away from the family home. However, even with considerable planning and fewer obvious constraints, things can still go wrong. Though for different reasons, both respondents relied upon parental support in that they needed at least the option of returning to live in the family home, with their partners joining them. For Rob, this was brought about by his girlfriend's pending redundancy. She worked for her family's independent travel company which had recently gone into administration. At the time of the interview Rob was looking for another job with more hours and better pay. Asked if he could get any help from his parents, Rob seemed grateful that he had

them to fall back on:

**Rob:** We can both live there. I mean they haven't got any money to give us, but worst case scenario we can live there which is great. I just hope we don't have to sell, but at least we got somewhere to go if I don't get a new job.

**5.5** Mark's situation was fairly similar. He had recently moved into a privately rented flat with his girlfriend. Between them they worked a maximum of 32 hours per week. Mark's partner was due to start a teaching qualification in the following September and would obtain 'a fat bursary', meaning she would not need extra hours to cover her half of the rent. Mark, however, would need to find a job, especially because September was four months away and paying rent was already becoming a problem. Discussing potential avenues of support, Mark mentioned only his parents, suggesting that this would be in the form of providing cheap residency if necessary.

**5.6** Both respondents' situations here reflect the fact that even couple-households are not necessarily stable or some kind of end point in the journey to adulthood. These two young men, like many of the others who had left home for reasons related to independence, felt they were making permanent and concrete decisions to break away from the family home. However, the option to return to the family home remained. It may have even been a necessary building block to provide the confidence to try and make moves towards living independently.

**5.7** These two cases raise another problem with Ford et al.'s framework. The planned (non-student) pathway does not account for any returns to the family home. These two young men, as with the others in the sample, are found to be without an obviously compatible pathway. This is because the only mention of returning to the parental home in the housing pathways framework is associated with seemingly deviant or difficult circumstances. However, 'yo-yo' experiences – where young people move back and forth between having apparently 'achieved' and subsequently having to relinquish the traditional markers of adulthood status – seem to be an increasingly normalised process in all realms of the transition to adulthood (Biggart & Walther 2006; Kaplan 2009). Such processes make it more problematic for researchers to identify an empirically observable, endpoint of transition – but such an obvious and evident 'conclusion' to youth should not be something that we take for granted (Woodman 2013). For example, fatherhood, once considered one of the key markers of adulthood, has become increasingly delayed and decoupled from housing formation, with around two thirds of babies born in the UK in the last decade born to fathers over 30 (ONS 2013).

## **Conclusion and discussion**

**6.1** Researching groups that are neither obviously at risk of social marginalisation or on a potentially successful route through higher education can reveal 'shades of grey' and a degree of complexity that are not well captured by many sociological frameworks which aim to rigidly categorise social experience. The case of the apparently unproblematic and (in youth research terms) not especially spectacular young men presented here problematizes a number of theoretical standpoints. Their experiences also reveal a degree of social change in some areas; yet, at the same time they also demonstrate the ways in which agency remains constrained unless access to appropriate and convertible social, cultural and economic resources is available.

**6.2** Ford et al. note that their pathways construct presents a comprehensive series of ideal types, which captures the experiences of most young people. Yet, the responses in the present research quite vividly deviate from these pathways. Therefore, small scale as the sample may be, these findings dictate the need for further consideration. In the first instance, and at the very least, we might consider an additional, adapted pathway. This modified pathway might be described as a 'responsive pathway'. This would acknowledge that young people negotiate a variety of constraints, but also that often there are choices available and opportunities that need to be acted upon. Opportunities which derive from social networks then become recognised as being critical to the process of moving out. At the same time, a context of familial support underpins attempts to move out in that it gives young people the confidence that they can return to the family home, and that such returns can be multiple, if necessary.

**6.3** Rather than making and following the best laid plans, the reality seems to be that 'ordinary and unspectacular' young people are likely to follow a pathway that is characterised by responding to the right opportunities to form 'families of choice' (Heath & Cleaver 2003). Each of these young men faced substantial objective constraints, yet many had not wanted to wait until they met a significant other to form their own household. For many respondents, the form of independent living they pursued was often actively chosen. Agency, it seems, is a key function in these young people's housing biographies. However, whilst their stories illustrate how agency can be enacted in everyday life, this does not decouple their lives from structural constraints. A simple equation ran through all accounts and expectations of current and future housing biographies: affordability, plus opportunity, equals increased likelihood to move out. Most of the sample talked about living, or even did live, with their friends in shared housing rather than living on their own. Even though living with strangers in shared accommodation was rarely ever discussed, when it was mentioned it was clearly preferred to living alone, across the sample.

**6.4** This understanding opens up a space to consider the role of social networks and social capital in creating the 'right opportunity' in housing biographies. The lack of the right opportunities, to live with friends for instance, can mean that even when objective financial constraints have been overcome, young people may still not pursue independent living. On the other hand, with these opportunities in place, young people have the impetus to make a move into a home of their own. Young people do want to move away from the family of origin, yet they do not necessarily want it to be with long term partners in the first instance, and on the whole they seemingly do not want to live alone. This kind of understanding has often



been associated with students, graduates or young professionals, but the responses here are unequivocal: this kind of lifestyle preference does not pertain solely to the well educated or the middle classes.

**6.5** Beyond considering an additional pathway, and more importantly, what we can deduce from these perspectives is that the social dimension of these young people's plans and experiences of housing careers potentially problematize one of the key bases of the transition paradigm. To date, research in housing transitions, exemplified by the pathways framework, presents a highly individualised and largely linear process. In this context, social capital is viewed as something the individual has access to only via parental resources or as something that is in decline as individuals become increasingly separated from communities (e.g. Putnam 2000). Moving forward greater attention needs to be given to the *collective dimension* of housing transitions – the role of friendships, being much more than social networks, and perhaps more in line with what Heath et al. (2007) call 'networks of intimacy', has seemed to be significantly under conceptualised in accounts of social capital. Given that young people are 'tied together by chains of mutual dependence to form changeable social configurations' (Furlong & Cartmel 2007: 114), this appears to be an essential new direction for the youth research agenda.

**6.6** The comments documented in this paper also problematise the notion of a housing strategy, which until now has largely been equated with the ways young people respond to constraint (see e.g. Forrest & Kennett 1996; Lister 2004). Here, much like their HE educated peers, the participants are responding to opportunity as much as they are actively responding to constraint. These findings then speak more closely to the considerable middle ground between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' strategies identified by Pickvance and Pickvance (1994)

**6.7** Whilst none of the sample discussed housing benefit, the reality is that they would likely lack any entitlement due to their (albeit quite low) income level. Consequently, they must face the housing market and get by on their own relatively meagre resources. This is made all the more difficult because the purchasing power of the wealthy has inevitably driven up the cost of housing through increasing second home ownership and buy-to-let investment. This is particularly pertinent given the increasing reliance on the private rented sector across the population. Bone and O'Reilly (2010: 240) suggest that this leads to a situation where many are denied access to limited but essential housing unless they are willing to pay increasingly onerous rents, or become increasingly indebted to meet inflated prices. With this in mind, it is clear why Jones (2001) posits that developments in shared living arrangements reflect structural constraints, such as the lack of social housing and young people's inability to afford to form an independent household. These issues must, of course, be recognised. Here, however, the respondents have clearly explained their housing biographies and preferences to not live alone in regards to an interfusion of choice and constraint.

**6.8** These preferences, however, need to be further located in the reality facing young people as they make these transitions. Considering the current prospects for having a home of one's own, in terms of becoming single or joint owner occupiers (whether with friends or with a partner), the young people described here, and millions of others like them, face an uphill struggle. Recent estimates by Resolution Foundation suggest it will take **31 years** for someone on a low to middle income to save up a *deposit* to buy an averagely priced property. Of course, in discussing the notion of a home of one's own, young people are not necessarily referring to home ownership. A home of one's own can also be linked to residential independence achieved in the private renting sector or in social housing. Here, too, there are substantial obstacles for young people to overcome, and this again has to be seen in the context of the social, cultural and material resources to which they have access. In terms of the private sector recent evidence shows that, while some people navigate this market fairly successfully, such people tend to have had a background in higher education or are very likely to be in the median to higher earning bracket. Meanwhile, those on the lowest incomes, as well as those who are vulnerable or with unmet support needs, are often in no position to exercise any real choice in the market, which leaves them open to exploitation and to living in the worst conditions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Kent County Council Bulletin 'Deprivation in Kent', (online)  
<<http://www.business.canterbury.gov.uk/assets/docs/deprivationinkent.pdf>>

<sup>2</sup>For full discussion of the reasons for studying a male only group see Roberts (2011).

<sup>3</sup>The SRR policy restricts housing benefit for under-35 year olds to the locally assessed cost of a single room in a house with shared use of a toilet, kitchen, bathroom and living room. If young people reside in accommodation not meeting these criteria they are required to personally meet the shortfall. Prior to January 2012, this had applied to those under 25.

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