



How far do children move? Spatial distances after leaving the parental home

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ABSTRACT

This research used geocoded data from 11 waves (2000–2010) of the German Socio-economic Panel Study to investigate the spatial distances of young adults' initial move-outs ($N = 2113$) from their parents' homes. Linear regression models predicted moving distances by factors at individual, family, household, and community level. Overall, home leavers moved across very small distances with a median value of less than 10 km. Greater distances were found for well-educated and childless home leavers who moved out at relatively young ages from high-income households located in less-urbanized regions. In line with developmental models of migration, young adults stayed closer if the parental household was still located at their place of childhood. We conclude that considering the spatial distance of move-outs may advance our understanding of individual passages to adulthood and intergenerational relations across the life course.

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1. Introduction

How far do young adults move when they leave their parental home? Surprisingly, the rich literature on leaving home and parent–child proximity does not offer an answer to this straightforward question. Whereas research on leaving home mainly focuses on the timing, rather than the distance, of young adults' move-outs, studies of parent–child proximity typically set in after children have left the parental household and, thus, geographical distance has already been produced. This gap of research is partly due to a shortage of suitable data on the distances of residential moves. In recent years, however, large-scale panel surveys that follow individuals and their descendants across their lives have begun to make detailed geographical information available for scientific use. In the year 2000, the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) started collecting data on the geo-coordinates of each sample household on an annual basis, allowing to calculate exact air-line distances of respondents' residential moves. Today, this information is available for a substantial number of young adults who left the parental household between the years 2000 and 2010.

These data present a unique opportunity to investigate the spatial distances of initial move-outs. In this study, we take an exploratory approach proceeding as follows. First, we discuss the relevance of spatial distance as an outcome worthy of theoretical import into analyses of leaving home. Then we review the literature on leaving home and parent–child proximity, considering what factors at individual, family, household, and local community level may affect the spatial distance of move-outs. In our empirical investigation, we estimate air-line distances (in log-meters) of young adults' residential moves using linear regression models (OLS).

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2. Why study the distance of move-outs?

Leaving the parental home is widely considered a milestone in the passage to adulthood, representing an important marker that has profound implications in individual and family spheres. Most studies of leaving home, however, restrict their attention to the timing of exits from the parental household without taking into account their spatial dimension (e.g., Aassve et al., 2002; Ward and Spitze, 2007; White, 1994, for a review). We propose that the latter represents a useful criterion for assessing how this transition may affect young adults and their families.

With regard to the individual passage to adulthood, social scientists typically endorse the view that leaving home constitutes a role transition that alters adult identities (e.g., Benson and Furstenberg, 2007; Liefbroer and Toulemon, 2010). This process, however, requires not only entering an adult role but also permanent acquisition and enactment of that role. In this respect, the implications of leaving home *per se* are rather unclear: On the one hand, establishing an own household constitutes a major change in young adults' lives in the sense that it creates physical independence from their parents. But on the other hand, active parenting may extend beyond this transition and prolong young adults' dependency. For example, if parents continue to assist nest-leavers in their everyday routines (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry), the process of separation might be delayed or even remain incomplete. Considering the availability of such localized services, it is obvious that spatial distance matters. Results from the Netherlands, for instance, showed that the chance of receiving support from mothers and fathers was substantially higher for young adults who lived within a geographical distance of 5 km from parents (Knijn and Liefbroer, 2006; Mulder and van der Meer, 2009). Where the receipt of localized services is concerned, short-distance leavers may thus not differ markedly from those who still coreside with their parents. In contrast, young adults who move across greater distances and relocate outside the parental sphere are likely to experience more radical changes after leaving home. These changes not only concern the level of support received from parents but also the disruption of local ties and the challenge of adapting to a new social environment. Overall, these considerations suggest that the spatial distance of move-outs may serve as an indicator of the degree to which leaving home necessitates, and promotes, young adults' independence and autonomy.

From a family perspective, individual dimensions of residential choice are inextricably linked to the presence and quality of kinship ties. That is, "individual choices oriented towards reaching personal goals might compete or interfere with the desire to maintain family solidarity" (Michielin and Mulder, 2007, p. 656). Bengtson (2001) emphasized the increasing importance of intergenerational contacts in modern "beanpole" families. In the typology of intergenerational solidarity, residential proximity is seen as a measure that reflects earlier and present parent–child relationships as well as a factor that conditions other dimensions of solidarity, pointing to future opportunities to maintain contact, share activities, and exchange support. In this respect, the relevance of young adults' initial residential decisions is twofold: First, the spatial distance of move-outs may reflect earlier and present family life, including characteristics of family members and of the parental household. Parents and siblings, for example, may serve as role models influencing young adults' initial residential decisions. They also represent "location-specific social capital" (DaVanzo, 1981) that increases the costs of moving far away, in particular when family relations are close.

Second, geographical distance in young adulthood may have profound long-term implications for the development of intergenerational relationships and their quality in later life. One of the basic tenets of life course research is the notion that characteristics of early transitions have lasting consequences. That is, experiences related to leaving home are likely to be carried over into later family life (Leopold, 2012). Regarding geographical proximity, empirical findings indicated that with greater distances, young adults and their parents maintained less contact (Bucx et al., 2008). Over time, lower levels of intergenerational interaction and fewer shared experiences may entail detrimental effects on the strength of affective ties as well as the awareness of each other's needs, possibly reducing levels of functional support in later life (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). Importantly, children who moved across greater distances and established their lives in a different local context are later more likely to be tied to an area distant from their parents. This, in turn, may incur high opportunity costs once the issue of assisting elderly parents arises (Konrad et al., 2002). Overall, these life course considerations suggest that the spatial distance of young adults' initial move-outs may be an important predictor of parents' opportunities to receive intergenerational support toward the end of their lives.

3. Theoretical considerations and previous research

There are only very few studies that offer at least some information on the spatial distance of children's move-outs. Mayer and Schwarz (1989) examined self-reported categorical data on moving distances collected retrospectively by a West German life-history study; Mulder and Clark (2000) analyzed US data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics using a measure of whether the child relocated within or outside a state. Despite the limitations of these data, both studies clearly showed that long-distance move-outs are a rare phenomenon: Less than 15% of the German respondents reported on moving distances of 300 km or more (Mayer and Schwarz, 1989) and less than 15% of the US sample left their state (Mulder and Clark, 2000). Similar results were reported in studies that did not look at initial departures from the parental home but at moves in general. Farley (1996), for example, found that 80% of young adults' residential moves in the United States between the years 1985 and 1990 were local. In Germany, the prevalence of young adults' short-distance migration even increased between

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