

'I Always Need my Mum'

Social Capital, Social Learning and Student Housing Transitions in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of outcomes from recent research on student housing transitions in Northern Ireland. The study reveals that almost three quarters of respondents in this undergraduate survey were living in the parental home, a finding in line with broader European trends. Statistical analysis using SPSS revealed that there were differences according to socio-economic background in housing behaviour. Social capital, represented by proxy indicators of family and friendship ties, helps further explain how those at home manage living with their parents and throws light on what enables a successful transition to independent living for those who have left home. Using terminology associated with Putnam (2000), living independently relates to possession of bridging social capital, while those living at home tend to have strong ties with their immediate family. Many of these home-stayers also lack affinity with local or broader European identities, while those living independently are not only more spatially dislocated but also more open towards trans-national identities.

Keywords

Housing transitions; Northern Ireland; social capital; social learning.

Introduction

In the last thirty years, a broad range of studies on transition to adulthood have made it clear that substantial numbers of young people are living with their families for prolonged periods (see, for example, Buck & Scott, 1993; Cherlin *et al.*, 1997; Galland, 1997; Bendit *et al.*, 1999; Billari *et al.*, 2001; Aassve *et al.*, 2002; Billari & Liefbroer, 2007). There are many 'well-rehearsed reasons' (Ford *et al.*, 2002: 2455) explaining why so many young people make the choice to stay at home: elongated educational pathways, the perceived cost and complexity of leaving home, a lack of appropriate housing options and modifications in welfare arrangements marginalising youth. These changes have taken place alongside transformations in the normative meanings of youth, adulthood, inter-generational relationships and independence expectations (du Bois-Reymond 1998; Mørch, 1998; Dey & Morris, 1999; Côté, 2000; Brannen *et al.*, 2002; Edmunds & Turner, 2002; France, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; see also Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007).

Despite frequently obvious reasons for staying at home, studies show that despite difficult circumstances, some young people are still leaving home at relatively early ages,

while others are staying at home when material scarcities and other obstacles are not present (Ford *et al.*, 2002: 2460). Deciding to leave or stay at home is evidently ‘a complex process’ (Rusconi, 2004: 627) dependent upon much more than financial factors, for example generous parents and a comfortable family home can provide opulent incentives not to leave (Sgritta, 2001; Santoro, 2006). Neither is home-staying necessarily a negative condition, indicative of a failure to reach adulthood and attain independence (Jones & Wallace, 1992: 93; Jones, 1995: 1; Christie *et al.*, 2002: 212; see also Kenyon, 1999). Living at home can in fact be a positive experience even for those studying at university, in providing an opportunity to maintain existing local friendship networks and avoid the ‘sense of discontinuity’ experienced by those who move away (Holdsworth, 2006: 508).

There are also important class and gender dimensions to consider, with working class young people tending to remain in the parental home for longer and young women exiting sooner (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007: 61–62). Family members and peers may also endorse particular housing pathways through defining what is ‘culturally usual and acceptable’ in respect to where and how to live (Iacovou, 2002: 67–68): ‘familism’ and ‘family solidarity’ may postpone home-leaving and endorse the ‘expected’ pattern of behaviour to leave home to get married and buy a home (Holdsworth 2005: 549–553), while peers can endorse both home-staying and home-leaving in different contexts (Jones, 1995; Jones, 1999; Jones, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Heath & Kenyon, 2001; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005; Thomson & Taylor, 2005).

Social Capital and Social Learning in Youth Housing Transitions

This article further explores the social dimension to youth housing transitions with resources embedded in ‘*relations among persons*’ (Coleman 1988a: 83; emphasis in original), particularly between parents and their children and in peer groups, interpreted as embodiments of social capital. In tandem, housing behaviour is also discussed as being socially learnt. It is not the intention of this article to provide a full introductory summary of theories and studies of social capital owing to the wealth of literature already in existence.¹ We do however acknowledge our debt to Putnam’s notion of ‘connections amongst individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ – and his usage of the concepts of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital. The former reinforces exclusive identities and homogeneous groups, the latter, more outward looking identities and enables the formation of social relations across social cleavages (Putnam, 2000: 19–22; see also Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Bonding social capital thus denotes ‘ties between like people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours,’ while bridging social capital refers to ‘more distinct ties of like persons, such as loose friendships and workmates’ (Woolcock, 2001: 13–14).² Regarding this distinction, we should refrain from being overly prescriptive: bonding and bridging social capitals are not ‘either-or’ categories but rather ‘more or less’ dimensions (Putnam, 2000: 23), and those who possess one variety of social capital may also be endowed with the other.

It is important to acknowledge that a substantial critique of social capital, in particular of Putnam’s work, has emerged in recent years, for example regarding the failure to adequately consider gender and other possible cultural biases in quantifying social capital

(see, for example, Arneil, 2006). Bourdieu (1977; 1986) also places more emphasis on the relationship between social capital and social class habitus. The present research, exploring mobilisations of different forms of social capital resources, takes into account social class, gender and the 'complex and sophisticated agency and actions of young people' (Raffo & Reeves, 2000: 148; see also Seaman & Sweeting, 2004; Holland *et al.*, 2007). A related issue concerns how young people actually learn to live either independently or in the family home, with subsequent discussion employing ideas associated with Bandura's social learning theory. This entails understanding both living independently and inter-generationally with parents in terms of young people's need to attain competence in certain key areas, such as negotiating space in shared households (in both living with parents and friends), finding an affordable and appropriate home and forming peer networks to facilitate house-sharing.

Studying Youth Housing Behaviour in Northern Ireland

The geographical context of this research is Northern Ireland, specifically young people presently studying at tertiary level educational institutions. This represents a contrast with previous studies of social capital in this region, which have gravitated towards themes such as strong but insular sectarian or sub-cultural social ties in disadvantaged communities (see, for example, Murtagh, 2002; Leonard, 2004; McGrellis, 2004; Leonard, 2005, Leonard, 2008).³ While such studies may have considerable value in terms of elaborating upon life in sociologically interesting but perhaps exceptional locales, (not representative of the life experiences of the broader Northern Ireland population), the preference for such research subjects has meant neglect in studying less obviously sectarian communities and contexts. This absence of more 'mainstream' studies is particularly unfortunate, given the fact that in both public and academic discourse in Northern Ireland, there is a need for a more diverse and inclusive range of experiences to be represented.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been utilised. A questionnaire was administered to 250 students in Northern Ireland's two universities, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, equally spread across four different academic discipline groups, namely Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Science and Engineering. This was designed to provide diversity within the sample, which was also balanced in terms of gender and inclusive of young people from different ethnic minority backgrounds. The focus upon university educated youth was also, at least in part, motivated by a desire to focus on cases where financial considerations may be less of an issue. The particular socio-economic make-up of the quantitative sample should hence be borne in mind when interpreting subsequent results. A total of 15 follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted with respondents sourced from this sample. These interviews were semi-structured, consisting of initial questions regarding housing orientations and experiences, followed by more in-depth biographical discussion of individual-specific life events and plans, including 'landmark events' (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007: 210) such as home-leaving, or home-staying.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative survey revealed that 70 per cent of those sampled were presently residing at home with their parents, with the remaining 30 per cent living

predominantly in shared private rental accommodation. This outcome represents a major contrast with other recent work on student housing behaviour in neighbouring regions, which has suggested that student home-staying is less prevalent. For instance, Holdsworth’s excellent study, conducted in the Greater Merseyside area of Britain during 2002/2003, found that only 23 per cent of those surveyed were living at home, with 78 per cent stating that they were doing so for financial reasons (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005: 88; 2006: 497). In respect to how the present outcomes compare with the general Northern Ireland youth population, the European Values Study (EVS) of 1999/2000 (2006) revealed that 27 per cent of those aged 24 or under in Northern Ireland were living in the parental home, again suggesting a major contrast according to educational background and/or over time, while the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Social Networks II 2002 survey in Northern Ireland found that 48.2 per cent of 15–24 year olds were living at home.

Further quantitative analysis reveals that while socio-economic status (SES) seems to be having some bearing upon housing transitions, social relationships and the social capital embedded within them have a more decisive impact. More precisely, it is bonding social capital generated by strong attachments to kin and close friends which discourages moving out, while bridging social capital, stimulated by having a broader if looser network of acquaintances, is more closely associated with living independently. In this latter case, this includes having friends in other regions of Northern Ireland, who open up to their peers the idea that different ways of living and other models of relationships with kin are possible.

As illustrated by Figure 1, our sample of students is predominantly middle class, or at least the majority are from families with parents working in skilled and/or non-manual occupations. In respect to the relationship between SES and living status, from Figure 2 we can also see that living independently is only a majority experience amongst those with skilled manual parents.⁴

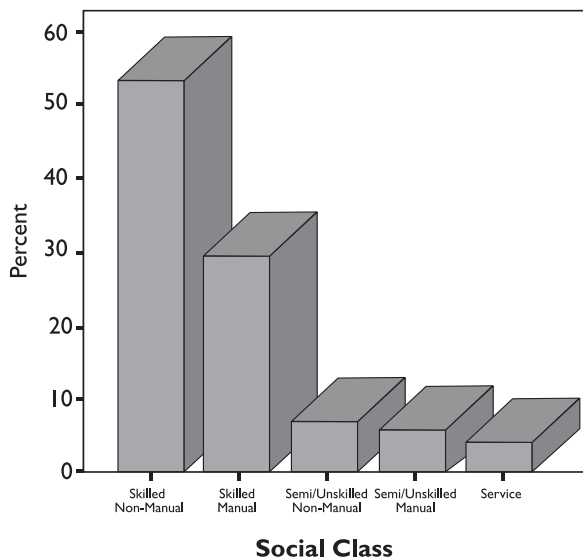


Figure 1: Parental Occupational Class Composition of the Sample

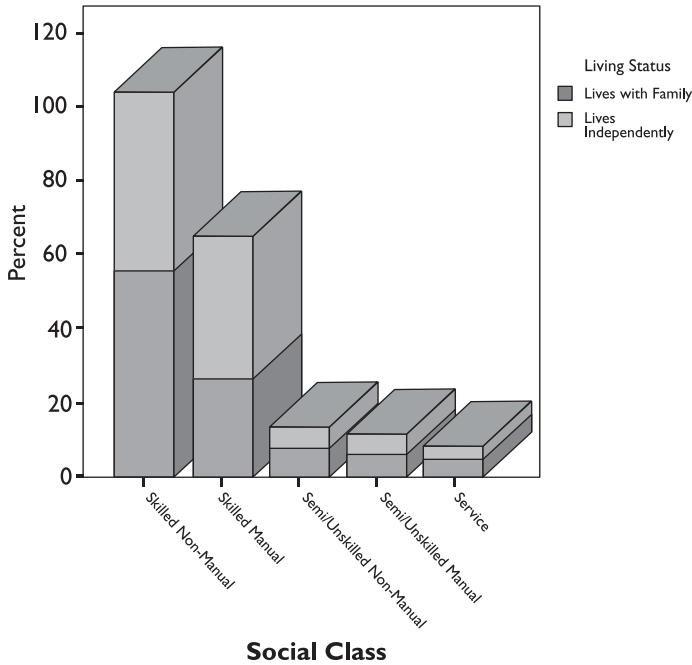


Figure 2: *Social Class and Living Status*

While these figures are open to interpretation, this outcome does imply that the reasons why young people live at home are not necessarily related to material resources, considering the likelihood of those from skilled non-manual backgrounds being equally or better-off than their counterparts from other socio-economic backgrounds. To gain a better understanding of these trends, the following analysis explores factors influencing housing decision-making amongst those with parents in skilled non-manual and skilled manual occupations respectively.⁵

Housing Transitions: Skilled Non-Manual

Table 1 illustrates housing transitions amongst those with skilled non-manual parents (117 cases), also exploring the significance of gender, age, having a child, having siblings, working part-time, locale and always having lived in the same place. Proxy indicators of social capital, family and friendship ties and community attachments, are also included.

	Model 1			Model 2				
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref. cat.=male)	-0.395	0.618	0.522	0.673	0.242	0.735	0.742	1.273
Age	0.411	0.210	0.051	1.508	0.812	0.335	0.016	2.252
Having children (ref. cat.=yes)	-2.941	1.693	0.082	0.053	4.756	2.722	0.081	0.009
Having siblings (ref. cat.=yes)	1.062	0.977	0.277	2.892	2.503	1.486	0.092	12.217
Working status (ref. cat.=yes)	0.831	0.556	0.135	2.295	0.800	0.670	0.233	2.225
Urban vs. rural locale (ref. cat.=urban)	-1.420	0.744	0.056	0.242	-2.024	0.932	0.030	0.132
Always lived here (ref. cat.=yes)	2.099	0.686	0.002	8.156	2.423	0.865	0.005	11.285
Think it good to live with parents (ref. cat.=yes)					1.331	0.784	0.089	3.785
Family lives near me (ref. cat.=yes)					1.255	0.722	0.082	3.507
I need family support (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.763	0.689	0.268	0.466
Have friends from childhood (ref. cat.=yes)					0.520	0.804	0.517	1.682
Have friends in other part of N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)					-4.691	2.549	0.066	0.009
Have friends in other countries (ref. cat.=yes)					1.553	0.879	0.077	4.726
Go to church every week (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.017	0.714	0.154	0.362
Support local football team (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.175	0.802	0.143	0.309
Feel more European than N. Irish (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.751	0.937	0.423	0.472

	Model 1			Model 2				
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Would not consider having a relationship with someone from another country if it meant leaving N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.196	1.009	0.236	0.302
Constant (BETA coefficient)	-6.746				-6.329			
p value of the model	0.000				0.000			
Chi-square	42.202				60.720			

Table 1: Standardized logit regression coefficients on living independently for skilled non-manual parents

With living status as the dependent variable, the logit regression model reveals that age matters in this particular socio-economic group: the older the young person the more probable it is that he or she will be living outside of the parental home. Having a child also raises the probability that they will live independently, although this is a tendency rather than a significant effect. Living independently is also positively related to living in an urban area and negatively related to always having lived in the same place. Having a part-time job doesn't seem to impact upon housing transitions, likewise gender and having siblings (Model 1).

The proxy indicators of social capital, along with local, national and trans-national identifications (Model 2) tell us that family and friendship ties matter in respect to living status in this SES group: the chi-square figure rises and we observe a lot of significant effects. In respect to family, it may well be the case that these children of skilled non-manual parents live in the parental home are 'willing stayers' (Christie *et al.* 2002: 228): they find living at home emotionally rewarding and want to remain close to their parents, although this relationship is not necessarily acknowledged in terms of constituting parental support (see Coles *et al.*, 1999). They also lack interest in the broader world, demonstrated in a lesser propensity towards feeling European rather than Northern Irish, commitment to supporting a local football team or regular attendance at church. A relatively narrow range of interests may further serve to augment the insularity of these young people and keep them living at home. What enhances the probability of moving out is having friends in other parts of Northern Ireland. Reflecting ideas associated with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), such peers are more likely to live differently compared to those still at home, e.g. in private rented accommodation shared with friends, thus providing a model for living independently and a demonstration of how to maintain looser or at least more distant family ties.

In respect to interpreting these results, it is possible that there is a social habitus reproduction effect in the case of these particular young people, which could be crudely typified as parents consciously or unconsciously delaying the exits of their children for long enough in order to set social boundaries or inculcate particular familial values and reproduce ‘usable’ social relationships (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 31; Bourdieu, 1986: 251). Such an effect might help explain the social insularity and lack in interest in the outside world of these respondents. Holland *et al.* (2007: 111) also refer to how ‘good’ middle class parenting may compel parents to manage their children’s lives more rigidly, while young people themselves may not venture beyond parental bounds due to the risk posed to their ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991). However, given the lack of information regarding, for example, peers’ social class backgrounds and actual parental motivations, this is a purely speculative deduction which should be treated with caution.⁶

Housing Transitions: Skilled Manual

For students with parents in skilled manual occupations (63 cases) the decisive factors in housing decision-making are somewhat different. According to Table 2, age has no apparent impact on living status but having a part-time job is important (Model 1), but only when social capital factors are not entered into the equation (Model 2). The impact of working part-time is not what we might have expected to find. These results suggest that students with jobs are more likely to be living with their parents, suggesting that personal incomes are being used to fund consumer expenditure: clothes, cosmetics, socialising and bigger but more occasional purchases such as foreign holidays and cars, rather than being saved for rents or mortgage down payments.

	Model 1			Model 2				
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref. cat.=male)	0.443	0.733	0.545	1.558	0.756	1.076	0.483	2.129
Age	0.002	0.203	0.993	1.002	-0.327	0.281	0.245	0.721
Having children ref. (cat.=yes)	-19.41	40193	1.000	0.000	-20.66	40193	1.000	0.000
Having siblings ref. (cat.=yes)	.665	1.260	0.598	1.945	2.526	1.911	0.186	12.499
Working status (ref. cat.=yes)	1.525	0.872	0.080	4.596	1.355	1.247	0.277	3.878
Urban vs. rural locale (ref. cat.=urban)	-2.202	0.778	0.005	0.111	-3.032	1.190	0.011	0.048
Always lived here (ref. cat.=yes)	1.198	0.688	0.082	3.313	1.954	1.199	0.103	7.059
Think it good to live with parents (ref. cat.=yes)					0.962	1.163	0.408	2.617

	Model 1			Model 2			
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B) B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Family lives near me (ref. cat.=yes)				2.172	1.666	0.192	8.778
I need family support (ref. cat.=yes)				0.640	0.972	0.510	1.897
Have friends from childhood (ref. cat.=yes)				-0.629	1.059	0.553	0.553
Have friends in other part of N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)				1.632	1.572	0.299	5.116
Have friends in other countries (ref. cat.=yes)				-0.124	1.239	0.920	0.883
Go to church every week (ref. cat.=yes)				-2.029	1.184	0.087	0.131
Support local football team (ref. cat.=yes)				-2.124	1.154	0.066	0.120
Feel more European than N. Irish (ref. cat.=yes)				-3.668	1.903	0.054	0.026
Would not consider having a relationship with someone from another country if it meant leaving N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)				-1.144	1.265	0.336	0.319
Constant (BETA coefficient)	36.209			52.817			
p value of the model	0.000			0.001			
Chi-square	27.024			42.307			

Table 2: Standardized logit regression coefficients on living independently for skilled manual parents

What is decisive in making these particular young people want to move out of the parental home is feeling more European than Northern Irish: this is a crucial factor, along with regularly attending church and supporting a local football team. However, such local ties go together with European identification, pointing towards the same outcome: living independently. The key opposition within this group is between having a complex identity and having no distinct outward identifications. A lack of interest in activities such as sports and religion, and not identifying with Europe, may in turn be indicative of a lack of social competencies – or a lack of opportunities within which social competencies could develop – which would potentially be of value to and enable leaving home, such as forging a broader, if looser, friendship network.⁷ We can also see that emotional attachments to parents aren't decisive in respect to where these young people want to live.

Housing Transitions: All Social Classes

The breakdown in Table 3 provides an opportunity to observe possible influences upon the housing transitions of the young people surveyed, irrespective of their SES, with a total of 231 valid cases.⁸

	Model 1			Model 2				
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref. cat.=male)	-0.106	0.404	0.794	0.900	0.329	0.477	0.491	1.389
Age	0.351	0.129	0.006	1.421	0.348	0.150	0.020	1.416
Having children ref. (cat.=yes)	-2.920	1.396	0.036	0.054	-3.921	1.390	0.005	0.020
Having siblings ref. (cat.=yes)	1.214	0.651	0.062	1.421	1.565	0.750	0.037	4.781
Working status (ref. cat.=yes)	0.729	0.393	0.063	2.073	0.657	0.450	0.144	1.930
Urban vs. rural locale (ref. cat.=urban)	-1.700	0.469	0.000	0.183	-2.284	0.546	0.000	0.102
Always lived here (ref. cat.=yes)	1.724	0.393	0.000	5.608	1.824	0.477	0.000	6.196
Think it good to live with parents (ref. cat.=yes)					1.496	0.455	0.001	4.462
Family lives near me (ref. cat.=yes)					0.840	0.496	0.091	2.315
I need family support (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.246	0.422	0.560	0.782
Have friends from childhood (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.665	0.463	0.151	0.514

	Model 1			Model 2				
	BETA	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Have friends in other part of N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.098	0.789	0.164	0.334
Have friends in other countries (ref. cat.=yes)					0.241	0.481	0.617	1.272
Go to church every week (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.122	0.449	0.012	0.326
Support local football team (ref. cat.=yes)					-1.326	0.498	0.008	0.266
Feel more European than N. Irish (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.839	0.600	0.162	0.432
Would not consider having a relationship with someone from another country if it meant leaving N. Ireland (ref. cat.=yes)					-0.550	0.518	0.288	0.577
Constant (BETA coefficient)	-4.694				2.645			
p value of the model	0.000				0.000			
Chi-square	84.495				116.283			

Table 3: *Standardized logit regression coefficients on living independently for whole sample*

As was the case in the previous two models, gender doesn't appear to be decisive when we take into account multiple socio-demographic variables; this of course does not discount the existence of gender specific dimensions to both living at home and independently, such as same-sex shared houses (see qualitative analysis). From this broader perspective, we can however see that living in an urban area is associated with living outside the parental home, likewise having a family of one's own and being an only child. Conversely, students with part-time jobs tend to live with their parents. Strong emotional attachment to parents also inhibits moving out: these young people enjoy their 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991) at home as their parents meet their

emotional needs. Activities such as regularly going to church and supporting a local football team are more likely to lead to independent living, alongside having more far reaching, if abstract identities, such as feeling more European than Northern Irish, and having friends elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

A further issue of note concerns the gender dimension to housing orientations (Figure 3). Social learning theory leads us to expect that young women are socialised by their parents into believing that relationships are decisive for their housing transitions while young men are more influenced by their need for achievement. These effects differ according to SES (Table 4), with the young female respondents exhibiting a stronger tendency towards staying at home compared to their male counterparts. Table 4 also highlights that this effect is most pronounced amongst those with skilled non-manual parents: these particular parents may be socialising their children in such a way that discourages females from leaving home while enhancing or being more indifferent towards males should they want to leave home. However, this effect is not present for the young men and women who have skilled manual parents.

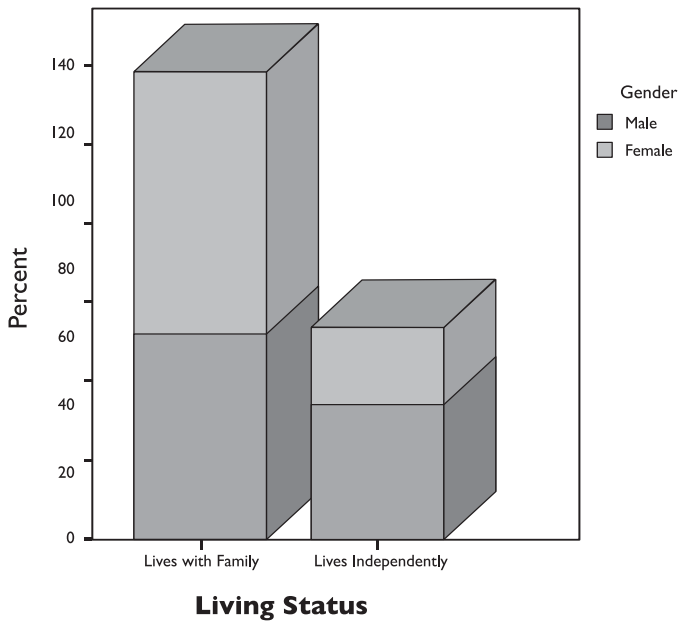


Figure 3: *Living Status and Gender*

SES	Gender	Living Status (%)	
		Living at Home	Living Independently
Skilled Non-Manual***	Male	58.9	41.1
	Female	85.7	14.3
	Both	73.8	26.2
Skilled Manual	Male	59.4	40.6
	Female	63.2	36.8
	Both	61.4	38.6
All**	Male	60.6	39.4
	Female	77.4	22.6
	Both	70.4	29.6

*** chi square level of significance>.001

** chi square level of significance>.005

Table 4: *Living Status, Gender and Social Class*

While there may well be a gender dimension to youth housing transitions, at this quantitative level of our analysis, we can see when we take into account other socio-demographic factors, it loses its significance. However, we can see from Table 4 that young women with skilled non-manual parents tend to remain closest to their families in respect to where they want to live.

Qualitative Analysis

In the subsequent qualitative analysis, four exemplary case studies have been chosen out of the 15 interviewees to illustrate different youth housing scenarios, with names changed to protect respondent anonymity. The selection of cases was made specifically to represent four of the most significant housing situations observable out of the proceeding quantitative analysis, namely the majority and minority living conditions in the two largest socio-economic groups.

Rachel: 'Living at home helps my studies'

Rachel, a twenty year old second year Social Sciences student at Queen's University Belfast, represents the majority amongst those from skilled non-manual backgrounds. This position was one of living at home and being satisfied with this position, with a suggestion that there are sufficient financial resources to enable leaving but the young person has chosen to stay. This can also be interpreted as exemplifying the operation of what could be conceivably termed 'middle class bonding social capital' (Holland, 2007: 23). This finding is also consistent with prior European studies which have shown that individuals from relatively privileged backgrounds are less likely to leave home because they have access to greater material resources: a comfortable and spacious parental home can be an important resource (Iacovou, 2001: 20; see also Avery, *et al.*, 1992). It should be added however that at the other end of the

socio-economic spectrum, strong bonding social capital can also tie more disadvantaged young people to their communities of origin (see Raffo & Reeves, 2000).

Rachel lives with her parents approximately 30km south of Belfast in the town of Ballynahinch, County Down. Her justification for living at home is presented in terms of practical advantages:

I think this definitely helps my studies. I have the computers and stuff I need at home and I always need my mum to remind me of when things are due and to make me do them, plus if I lived away from home I'd probably be too bored to sit at home on my own and do them.

The utility of the family home was frequently cited by the home-stayers interviewed, consistent with Coleman's view that the home 'provides the physical resources that can aid achievement' (1988a: 109). Living in Ballynahinch also gives Rachel the opportunity to continue her part-time job at a local dog kennel, which provides a steady income and is something she clearly enjoys. This helps explain the relationship between working and living at home previously uncovered in the quantitative analysis. She can also maintain existing friendships while living with her parents. Such is the extent of Rachel's commitment to her friends that she finds it hard to find time for her studies amid her busy social life:

[...] most of my friends are in Ballynahinch anyway so [living at home] doesn't [negatively] affect my social life. It has maybe meant that I haven't made as many friends at uni, but I don't really care about that.

Rachel's remaining in Ballynahinch is thus validated by the presence of her family, her job and an active social life, albeit at the expense of making friends at university. Such 'non-material resources' (Hekken *et al.*, 1997: 699) are important to Rachel and would not be easily transferable to another housing situation (see also Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

Peter: 'I moved out as soon as possible'

While the majority of young people from skilled non-manual backgrounds were still living with their parents, a substantial minority had left home. These young people tended to feel less emotionally attached to their parents and have a broader range of acquaintances, including friends who lived in different parts of Northern Ireland. Peter, a 21 year old Civil Engineering student midway through the fourth year of a five year degree programme at Queen's University Belfast, is one such case. He lives with four male friends in the university area, having previously resided with his family in another nearby leafy suburb of Belfast. Physical distance hence played no part in precipitating his move. In fact, in his first year at university, Peter lived at home with his parents, but as he explains, '... that was no fun at all. So I moved out as soon as possible'.

Regarding how he arrived at his present living arrangement, while the year at home provided an opportunity to save money towards meeting eventual accommodation costs via undertaking various part-time jobs, Peter's friends were crucial:

One of my best friends now and was in first year is the son of an estate agent. So he got us a great house. And I pay a pretty decent rent for it. But I did have to work pretty hard in first year with a part-time job to save up enough money for it.

This is a useful illustration of 'intertwining' social and economic capital (Tolonen, 2007: 40), with both capitals working together to produce the desired outcome. It is also possible to see this particular instance of social capital creation as a 'by-product' of other activities (Coleman, 1988a: 118), in this case, the act of making friends at university. This highlights the positive impact of new but looser friendship ties. Brooks also notes that friendship ties developed as a result of living in close proximity to friends, e.g. in shared housing arrangements, can lead to 'closer and deeper relationships' (2007: 696–697), providing additional value in terms of emotional support.

Suzanne: 'I'm going to have to move out soon'

While it is the majority position, living at home is not universally popular among these students. There are some young people for whom living with their parents represents a state of profound dissatisfaction. This feeling was found not so much among younger respondents, who were often biding their time until feeling ready to make a move, but more often with older respondents enduring strained family relationships. This was due to factors such as a lack of living space and tension induced by the realisation that it is time to leave home (see Tang, 1997). A number of these scenarios were present among those from skilled-manual occupation backgrounds. For these young people, material shortages may be a factor in accounting for their frustrated housing transitions, but the lack of an appropriate social network, namely peers with shared housing goals, may be equally if not more significant. These young people also complain not only of being physically stranded in the parental home but also of feeling mentally stuck. Neither do they identify with local or European identities or involve themselves in civic activities in their local communities. What such young people do tend to have is a strong sense of individuality, which they feel unable to fully express in their present living circumstances.

This scenario is illustrated most vividly in the case of Suzanne, a 23 year old third year Social Sciences student at Queen's University Belfast, living with her parents in the adjacent city of Lisburn, County Antrim:

I'm 23 and I'm still living with my parents. And it's startin' to get to the point now where I'm kind of thinking that I'm going to have to move out soon. [...] I've a wee brother and sister and they're starting to annoy me. And it's not really ideal. [...] we have to like [share] the PC. If I want to do coursework, it's in my brother's room. And sometimes there's been arguments about like, when I have to use the computer, I do get a bit miffed about it. So stuff like that. And also because they're quite a young age, they're in their teens, so they're a bit annoying anyway. But sometimes it's been a bit hard. And sometimes I would go to the library more to get my head down, because I would have more peace and quiet there.

It has been demonstrated in prior studies that larger family sizes put a greater strain upon limited family resources (Galland, 1997: 659) and that the presence of younger siblings can alter family dynamics (Ward & Spitze, 2007: 273). Coleman's pioneering work also refers to a family density hierarchy in respect to resource depletion within families (1987; 1988b; 1990). From Suzanne's account, we can see that without sufficient family resources for herself, living at home is difficult. In respect to why she

is living at home, her justification parallels the ‘no choice’ students cited in Christie *et al.* (2002) and Patiniotis & Holdsworth (2005):

[...] it's really just too expensive like to get somewhere to live, you know, in Lisburn, because of house prices. [...] So at the moment, because all of us are studying, nobody has a good career if you know what I mean? So it's easier to stay at home, financially. [...] Ideally, I would like to get somewhere to live. Probably I would have to rent it because the house prices are really high at the moment. So it would be like renting out. I would probably actually share it. Me and my friend have talked about, you know, sharing the rent kind of thing. Getting a house together. I think that's really the only thing you can do at the moment.

Suzanne’s situation also highlights the importance of regional disadvantage in local housing markets. Lisburn is one of the most expensive areas in Northern Ireland in which to live, while Northern Ireland had recently become the most expensive region in the UK outside of London in which to buy property (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2007) at the time this interview was conducted. Suzanne’s situation seems the norm for her local peers. Although house prices have levelled off recently, the cost of housing is still high enough to limit their options. However, it may well be the case that Suzanne has been unrealistic in the past regarding her housing aspirations, in wanting a home of her own, and has only belatedly realised that the most likely means of leaving home is via renting a house with her friends. Adopting the ‘getting a house together’ philosophy also provides an illustration of the social dimension of economic capital, with the pooling of material resources enhancing the utility of such reserves, although in the case of Suzanne this relationship became evident as a result of ‘social resource deficiencies’ as opposed to ‘structural and functional social efficiencies,’ as was the case with Peter (Bassani, 2007: 22–24).

Sophie: ‘We all got together to get a house’

Among the students from skilled manual backgrounds are young people who are both civically engaged in their local communities and outward looking in terms of their identifications with Europe. Their identities are hence perhaps best described as complex. While they may or may not be living at home, their attachments to their parents are not definitive in terms of shaping their housing decision-making, for example they may live independently but maintain a close relationship with their parents. This final scenario is illustrated by the case of Sophie, a 19 year old first year Arts student at the University of Ulster in Belfast. She has recently moved out of her native town of Lisnaskea, County Fermanagh, over 100km west of Belfast, to live in a house shared with friends near her university. Physical distance has hence been a factor in her housing decision-making. Sophie sees this move as a permanent transition and intends to remain living in the city ‘[...] because I’m only after moving up here, so I don’t want to move again.’ She does however return to Lisnaskea at weekends, illustrating a form of ‘mixed living’ (Nave-Herz, 1997: 677).

In respect to how she managed her move, Sophie’s (all female) friends were instrumental, although her housing network contrasts with Peter’s (all male) group not only in gender composition but also in terms of the strength and duration of her peer relationships, in being with long-standing, close friends as opposed to Peter’s more recent acquaintances. This observation implies that both bonding (Sophie’s strong ties)

and bridging (Peter's weak ties) social capital can be employed in housing transitions. This dichotomy may also be related to gender differences in forming social capital (Burt, 1992) with female networks more cohesive and with fewer contacts compared to males. Returning to Sophie and her friends, their collective house-search was well-organised and conducted with extensive prior knowledge of the local housing market:

We all got together to get a house and we came up here [to look] and decided to move to where we are because it's a quiet enough area. We didn't want to go anywhere where there's too much partying.

Unlike the young people looking for accommodation cited in Christie *et al.* (2002: 218), who appeared to 'scramble' for whatever was available, this was a well-planned and effectively managed operation, demonstrating the utility of friendship ties in leaving home. Uncovering the shared nature of the house search process is also interesting in terms of shared responsibility and the collective realisation of tasks where the group's resources constitute more than the sum of the resources held by the individuals within it (Bassani, 2007: 19).

Discussion

The results of the quantitative research found that the majority of respondents are not taking their first steps into the local housing market while at university. This state of affairs is obviously important in respect to developing skills for use in future housing careers, and may represent an abrupt change in housing norms and/or a regionally peculiar mode of living to Northern Ireland. In respect to why so many of these students chose to live in the parental home or live independently, socio-economic status seems to be having a bearing upon housing orientations. Social relationships and the social capital embedded in them are however more decisive, to the extent that without a supportive family and home environment conducive to study, living at home becomes untenable, as illustrated in the case of Suzanne. A peer network made up of close friends (Sophie) or a new, more heterogeneous, range of friends (Peter) is crucial to moving out. The most common scenario uncovered is one of strong contentment at home (strong family, friends and work ties) and a disinclination to leave (Rachel).

Regarding how these students learn how to live at home or independently, there are indications that student housing behaviour is not only socially enabled but socially learned. Particularly striking in the quantitative analysis was the finding that possessing a broader if looser network of acquaintances, including friends in other parts of Northern Ireland, was strongly associated with living independently. It may also be the case, as observed in the case of Rachel, that social closure takes place due to what Bassani terms the 'curvilinear' operation of bonding social capital (2007: 21): the action of maintaining existing locally-based and long-standing friendships negates the possibility of forming new peer relationships at university. This finding also reflects the description of one insular community in Northern Ireland as 'the bubble' by a respondent in a recent youth transitions study (cited in Holland *et al.*, 2007: 102). On a more positive note, we should also bear in mind Coleman's (1990) assertion that shared (family) values among (family) group members can enhance functional efficiency, thus strengthening social capital (Bassani, 2007: 27).

This article obviously represents a consideration of particular manifestations of social capital in a specific geographical, and educational context. But at worst, the present discussion does move the debate on youth housing transitions away from assumptions of leaving home being almost mechanically determined by income and affluence and towards a more socially informed understanding of how these students in Northern Ireland either leave home or stay with their parents. At best, we have some vivid exemplars of how young people use the social resources at their disposal to either enter and navigate a course through the local housing market or negotiate successful inter-generational cohabitation. It is certainly anticipated that the forms and usages of social capital in youth housing transitions will differ markedly with other geographical contexts and over time, and even within the present context, this research presents only a partial picture of youth as it is restricted to the possibly atypical experiences of university students. This theme is hence ripe for further investigation.

Consideration of social capital and social learning certainly adds significant nuances to our understanding of students' housing transitions. It would of course be unwise to completely discount the importance of the economic dimension to housing behaviour. However, there is little or no evidence in the present context that such thinking is decisive in housing decision-making. Further complications in studying youth housing behaviour are also present in respect to the 'conceptual murkiness' (Buck & Scott, 1997: 864) of fragmented housing trajectories, for example making returns to the parental home, and in the often ongoing role of parents even when their children are living outside their home. But among those surveyed, emotional and social considerations determine living status more than cost-benefit analysis or 'rational choice theory' (Rusconi, 2004: 628).

Notes

1. For a concise and effective introduction to theories and applications of Social Capital, see Field (2003). We would also like to acknowledge the importance of ideas derived from Granovetter (1973), Portes (1998), Woolcock (2001), Lin (2001), Beugelsdijk & Smulders (2003) and Burt (2005) in our study.
2. Alongside bridging and bonding social capitals, Woolcock (2001) also discusses 'linking social capital,' which relates to '[...] alliances with sympathetic individuals in positions of power.' As none of the respondents to this study demonstrated any evidence of possessing such resources, at least in relation to their housing transitions, this is treated as a residual category of social capital and not discussed in the article.
3. A number of local government-funded studies of social capital have also analysed social class and sectarian dimensions in Northern Ireland (see, for example, OFMDFM, 2006; Cairns *et al.*, 2003).
4. T-test of equality of means ($p=0.07$) on living independently shows a tendency for children of skilled non-manual parents to live with their families rather than independently in comparison to those with skilled manual parents, who tend to live independently.
5. With the semi/unskilled non-manual, semi/unskilled manual and service class represented by only 6–8 per cent in each case, these groups are too small in size to support meaningful statistical analysis.
6. In an interesting contrast to the findings of the present research, Patiniotis & Holdsworth (2005) also discuss class habitus as an influence upon the housing choices of students, albeit arguing that many young people from working class backgrounds decide to remain at home to avoid risking losing their self-identities via moving into a new (middle class) university campus world. See also Kenyon (1999).
7. For recent discussion on European identity, see Grundy & Jamieson (2007).
8. In the remaining 19 cases, it was not possible to deduce SES due to incomplete information regarding parental occupations due to bereavements, unemployment and class ambiguous designations such as 'housewife.'

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