

A Normative Approach to Understanding How “Boomerang Kids” Communicatively Negotiate Moving Back Home

Emerging Adulthood
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Abstract

The present study adopts a normative approach to examine the context-specific dilemmas and strategies experienced by individuals returning to their parental home after living independently. Through 31 in-depth interviews with individuals ranging in age from 22 to 31, we identified that the central communicative dilemma participants experienced was articulating the decision to move back home as an investment in the future rather than a source of stigma. Participants indicated various strategies to destigmatize the decision to move home and make the experience a positive step toward their futures and in their relationships with their families: communicate clear expectations, contribute to the household, embody adult behavior, and articulate clear timelines. The findings shed light on the complexities of creating an adult identity at a transitional time and supplement understanding of the moving—back—home experience by illustrating how adulthood embodies specific meanings in this context.

Keywords

emerging adulthood, normative approach, boomerang kids, communicative dilemmas, moving back home

In the U.S., leaving the parental home has historically been viewed as one of the first steps in the process of becoming a successful adult (Arnett, 2015). This direct path to adulthood, marked by the milestones of finishing schooling, finding a job, settling down with a partner, buying a home, and bearing children, was virtually unquestioned several decades ago (Swartz et al., 2017). Since the 1980s, however, the average age young adults move out and attain full residential independence has increased significantly in most Western countries (South & Lei, 2015). In fact, young adults aged 18–34 are now living with their parents longer than at any point in the past century (Fry, 2016). In 2014, the most common arrangement among adults aged 18–34 was living in their parents’ homes, rather than with a spouse or partner in their own households (Fry, 2016). One study found that half of college students planned to move home with their parents after graduation and nearly a quarter planned to live with their parents until their late 20s or early 30s. Respondents attributed the high cost of student loans as a major reason for returning home (Friedman, 2019).

While some young adults move back home to care for ill parents (Smits et al., 2010) or following a breakup (South & Lei, 2015), recent socioeconomic changes, such as costly additional years of education required to get ahead, higher unemployment, and increased housing and health care costs, have extended the amount of time individuals remain dependent

on their parents (Kins et al., 2013; McDaniel et al., 2013). Student debt creates economic stress as students worry about payments (Stone et al., 2014) and unemployment and decreased wages increase the risk that young adults move back home (South & Lei, 2015), as do racial disparities in debt, which are more consequential for black young adults than for white young adults (Houle & Warner, 2017). Other researchers explain that it is less a debt crisis and more a “completion” crisis (Akers & Chingos, 2016), in that those who stop their education before securing a degree have an increased risk of returning home. Longer life expectancies, high rates of divorce, and the lengthening of emerging adulthood have all contributed to the centrality of parent-child relationships (Furstenburg, 2010). Gender differences also exist in leaving and returning to the parental home as well as in parental support (Gillespie, 2020). After moving back in, daughters typically leave the

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parental home earlier than sons (Sandberg-Thomas et al., 2015), in part because of gendered expectations of cohabitation and marriage as well as closer observation and regulation of their behavior. Parental expectations surrounding parent–child co-residence also differ: compared to sons, daughters perform more household labor and that their social behaviors are more controlled and supervised (Sassler et al., 2008).

Although cultural changes have made the progression of becoming an adult a much more complicated, non-linear, and multifaceted process (Nelson et al., 2015), independent living from one’s parents is still deemed a central marker of successful adulthood (Nichols, 2013), reflecting a gap between the public perception and the current social and economic reality faced by young adults. Indeed, moving back home is culturally stigmatized, prompting the coining of such terms as “boomerang kids” (i.e., individuals who leave the parental home for the independence of college only to return home afterward) or the “failure to launch generation” (Roberts, 2010), people perceived as reversing a successful “launch from the nest” (Mitchell & Gee, 2020, p. 443). “Boomerang kids” have been depicted as entitled, selfish, lazy, and unwilling to “grow up” and become adults (Furman, 2005; Henig, 2010). Those who return home are often portrayed as contributing little to the household while taking advantage of their parents’ generosity (e.g., free meals, cooking, laundry; Mintz, 2015). Indeed, in the Hollywood movie “Failure to Launch,” the 35-year-old main character shows so little interest in leaving the nest that his parents hire an attractive woman to entice him out of their household and into a responsible adult life (Paramount Films, 2006).

On the other hand, the need for parental help is not always due to struggle or crisis but may represent an opportunity to strengthen the child’s possibilities for future success and accomplishment. As emerging adults navigate the path toward autonomous adulthood, two circumstances may aid in their transition (Swartz et al., 2011). First, scaffolding provides temporary parental support that promotes children’s human capital or the attainment of certain socioeconomic goals. Second, safety nets offer transitory assistance during challenging life chapters to cushion the fall in the transition to adulthood. Indeed, parents give more support to children they view as high achievers and may perceive grown children’s accomplishments as a marker of their own success (Fingerman et al., 2009).

While socioeconomic changes and structural pathways that have contributed to the rise in young adults returning home are well documented (South & Lei, 2015; Swartz et al., 2011), underexplored is how moving back home is understood and communicatively navigated by young adults. After all, despite the cultural stigma, one survey found living with one’s parents only became a source of embarrassment for children after age 28 and that over 80% of parents would welcome their children returning home after college (Friedman, 2019). Additionally, Mitchell and Gee (2020) found nearly three-quarters of parents with co-resident “boomerang” adult children reported being very satisfied and that many parents welcomed their children home, sometimes suggesting the arrangement. Thus, the goal of the present study is to explore how individuals who moved

back into their parental home understand, talk about, and effectively navigate this process. The following sections overview the literature on emerging adulthood and our theoretical framework before providing the results of this qualitative study.

Emerging Adulthood

Arnett (1998) argued that people do not typically become adults until their mid- or late 20s. Emerging adulthood describes the developmental period between adolescence and adulthood during which young people neither feel like an adolescent nor an adult. This transition period of feeling “in between,” which typically ranges from ages 18 to 25, is characterized by increasing independence and exploration of work, relationships, and worldviews (Arnett, 1998). As opposed to earlier research on young adult transitions that centered professional status (i.e., beginning a career), attainment of a college degree, marriage, or parenting at the fore of adulthood (Furstenberg, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2005), emerging adulthood is viewed as a psychological state (Arnett, 1998) constituted by assuming greater personal responsibility, making independent decisions, and financial autonomy (Arnett, 2015). Instability is another distinctive feature of emerging adulthood, particularly regarding residential status (Arnett, 2000, 2004). For example, moving out is not necessarily a one-time event—emerging adults may move back into the parental home at least once and then back out again. Adult children who return several times after an initial launch are greater violators of life transition norms (Mitchell & Gee, 2020).

While abundant research focuses on understanding the 18–25-year-old age range, emerging adulthood has more recently been defined as extending until the late 20s (Arnett, 2015). Less research explores the identity struggles and challenges faced by individuals as they enter their mid-20s and approach their 30s. In the present study, we incorporate this age group. This population is significant to examine as fewer than 20% of Americans in their late 20s have completed college, acquired a full-time job, moved away from their parental home, married, and had children, and only a third of 30–34-year-olds have reached these traditional symbols of adulthood (Mintz, 2015). Yet returning and living home until after one’s mid-20s is often considered a “delayed launch” by many in Western society (Burn & Szoeke, 2016). Parents and extended family may perceive this delay as a “failure” (Arnett, 2015) and individuals who leave the nest later may feel shame and perceive themselves to be trailing behind their peers in becoming adults (Kins et al., 2013). The belief that those who move back home have failed to achieve a normal developmental milestone lingers in our current cultural landscape. This perception means those who boomerang are tasked with two distinct yet interwoven identity tasks: managing the cultural stigma of a “failed” launch while simultaneously attempting to assert themselves as adults.

With today’s reality of marital delays, extended time and costs to complete education, and economic uncertainty, individuals who do move back home must make sense of their own

path to adulthood. During an era in which the traditional markers of adulthood have become more elusive, delayed, and challenging, this population is likely navigating many competing demands in the process of constructing adult identities. The current study applies a normative framework (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004) and posits that individuals who move back home after having lived independently perceive challenges within this context that they attempt to manage by addressing situated demands and meanings.

The Normative Approach

A normative approach (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004) offers insight into how individuals who back home frame their decisions and elucidate the challenges they face, helping to understand how communication goals shape meaning. The belief that communication is strategic and goal oriented is an inherent assumption within interpersonal communication scholarship (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004). In any interaction, people have several desires or purposes. Goals can be instrumental, such as accomplishing a task (e.g., getting permission to move back home). Goals can also involve managing one's or another's identity. Identity goals focus on impression management and validation of selves, demonstrating how individuals want to be perceived by others (e.g., as an independent adult, as respectful of parents' authority, as responsible). Goals can also be relational, and can begin, maintain, or dissolve a relationship (Caughlin, 2010), or in the case of the current study, involve modifying or renegotiating an established parent-child relationship.

Because people frequently have several, often competing, goals in any interaction, they can face challenges and dilemmas in navigating them (Caughlin, 2010). The normative approach focuses on how specific communication processes and social situations relate to individuals' intentions and objectives. For example, researchers (Middleton et al., 2017) have explored how emerging adult confidants of sexual assault disclosure recognized and responded to the difficulties they experienced. These emerging adults navigated how to be supportive without being prescriptive and how to respect the survivors' desires for privacy while providing support, illustrating how confidant reactions are critical to the trajectory of survivorship.

Rather than asserting the effectiveness of particular behaviors a priori, a normative approach considers the relevant challenges and evaluates the extent to which individuals' communication and behavior navigate such dilemmas (Goldsmith, 2001). Some communication strategies more successfully meet situational needs than others. For instance, Middleton et al. (2017) explored parents' communication challenges and strategies in response to their emerging adult child's substance use disorder and argued that parents found strategies to cope that differed from clinical recommendations, such as sharing their own substance use history as opposed to confrontation and direct communication.

To make sense of how individuals manage challenges or dilemmas that arise from various types of communication processes, the normative approach concentrates on the presence of

communicative practices or strategies (Goldsmith, 2001). In the present study, the normative approach was adopted to better understand the context-specific dilemmas and strategies experienced by individuals returning to their parental home after living independently. In a time when moving back home is becoming a more common reality but culturally stigmatized, the normative approach can be a useful heuristic for understanding how individuals make sense of their experience in the midst of changing cultural meanings. Guided by this framework, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1: What communicative dilemmas do individuals who moved back home face?

RQ2: What communication strategies do individuals who moved back home adopt as they negotiate an adult identity?

Method

After securing Institutional Review Board approval, during March and April of 2019 individuals who had returned home after moving out were recruited to participate in phone or face-to-face (on-campus) interviews (see Appendix) about their experiences. Moving home for reasons related to school, work, or military service were described as possibilities in the recruitment verbiage but those groups were not specifically solicited. Participants had to have been 18–35 years old at the time when they moved back in with their family so as to capture generational experiences. No incentives were provided. This study was conducted by 15 trained student researchers as part of the second author's graduate-level qualitative research methods class. The majority of the students were graduate students in Communication. Participants were recruited through social media posts and snowball sampling.

Participants

Thirty-one adults were interviewed. Ages ranged from 22 to 31 ($M = 26.58$). The majority of the participants were ages 25–29 (17), seven were ages 20–24, and seven were 30–31. Twenty-six participants were female and six were male. At the time of the interviews, seven interviewees were living at home (23%) and 24 participants (77%) had moved out. Two interviewees declined to provide subsequent demographic information, but 18 participants (58%) identified as Caucasian/White, four as African American (13%), three as Asian (10%), three as multiple races (10%), one as Hispanic/Latinx (3%). The vast majority of participants' highest level of education was bachelor's degree (68%, $n = 21$), two had master's degrees, two had attended some college, one held an associate's degree, one had graduated high school, one attended trade school, and one was currently a graduate student. Participants resided in California, Illinois, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Procedure

After securing Institutional Review Board approval and independently identifying and reviewing the literature on emerging adulthood and young adults who move back home after moving out, the class together devised research-informed interview questions to understand how young adults negotiated the process of moving back in with their families. Following several weeks of training on qualitative research design and interviewing, including conducting an in-class interview together and subsequently debriefing and refining interview questions, students conducted the first round of semi-structured interviews on their own. Interviews were audio recorded and after participants provided consent, they were instructed to choose a pseudonym to protect their privacy. Over the next several weeks, students each conducted and transcribed an additional interview, which they individually coded and discussed with the class, generating preliminary themes of stigma management and uncertainty about how to negotiate roles.

The concept of data saturation, the point at which no new themes “emerge” in the data, is heavily referenced in thematic analysis as the gold standard for validity within qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). However, data saturation is a concept generally aligned for realist, discovery-oriented types of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). Meaning is generated through interpretation, not “excavation” (Braun & Clarke, 2019b, p. 1) of the data. Judgements about when to stop data collection are inherently situated and subjective. Thus, for the present study, data collection ended after the course was complete. Interview length ranged from approximately 19–101 minutes ($M = 43$ minutes).

Instruments and Analysis

Following the completion of the semester, we returned to the transcripts to conduct a more systematic thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019a, 2020). We did not begin the study with the normative approach as its framework, but rather we iteratively applied it in the course of data analysis. As we began immersing ourselves in the transcripts, we noticed participants described an awareness of the cultural stigma that lingered around their decision to return home and the ways they managed their relationships with their parents. Given these insights, we decided that a normative theoretical framework would be insightful to deepen the participants’ meaning-making processes we identified. Thus, our proceeding analysis was informed by normative approach concepts (Goldsmith 2001, 2004).

Thematic analysis (TA) is often conceptualized as a broad term for a variety of approaches that share some common characteristics but differ in critical ways with regard to paradigmatic and epistemological underpinnings, as well as in analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Our approach aligns with TA as originally conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2006) and rearticulated and deepened in more recent years (2019a, 2020) as *reflexive TA*. We followed a six-stage approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which included immersing ourselves in the data, generating categories after a careful and

thorough reading of the transcripts, forming broader “chunks” of meaning (e.g., stigma surrounding moving back home), ensuring that identified themes were representative of participants voices, finalizing themes for clarity (e.g., embodying adult behavior and articulating timelines as a way to establish an adult identity) and conducting a final write-up.

Our identification of dilemmas and strategies was an interactive and inductive process wherein we embraced the notion that “analysis is not a linear process where you simply move from one phase to the next. Instead it is a recursive process, where you move back and forth as needed, throughout the phases” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). We continually returned to data when developing our analysis, seeking to describe with more detail and clarity how the themes intersected with one another. This “defining and refining” process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22) entailed not simply restating the theme, but identifying why it was meaningful and noteworthy to the study. Our goal was to provide a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting” analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). To do so, we interspersed exemplars from the transcripts in a rich analysis of the participants’ voices with the goal of telling the story of the data and making arguments that tied the exemplar to the research questions in meaningful ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

As interpretive researchers, we believe the production of knowledge is always partial, situated, and subjective. Tracy (2010) argues that “researchers can practice self-reflexivity even before stepping into the field through being introspective, assessing their own biases and motivations, and asking whether they are well-suited to examine their chosen sites or topics at this time” (p. 10). As a millennial, the first author graduated college in the middle of the economic crisis of 2008 and watched her own family dynamics shift when her brother “boomeranged” after finishing graduate school. These experiences undoubtedly impacted the way she related to this topic. However, our analytic method (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2020) views subjectivity as a resource and emphasizes its importance in intentional interaction with theory, data, and interpretation.

We attempted to increase our sincerity and credibility through a rigorous data collection and analysis process, transparency about the methods and challenges, and “showing rather than telling” (Tracy, 2010, p. 10). We sought to incorporate multivocality in this analysis through thick, rich description that attended to multiple viewpoints. In addition, we strove to enhance credibility by embracing the notion that differences in race, class, gender, age, or sexuality influences different interpretations and meanings (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The results are divided into two sections: Communicative dilemmas facing participants (RQ1) and the communication strategies participants adopted to manage these dilemmas (RQ2).

Communicative Dilemmas

One major communicative dilemma emerged among participants: Wanting to articulate the decision to move back home as an investment in the future rather than a source of stigma.

Wanting to articulate the decision as an investment in the future rather than a source of stigma. As participants storied how their life paths led them to move back home with their parents, they expressed an awareness of the cultural stigma that lingered around this decision. In this stigma, the transition to successful adulthood was achieved by financial independence and living on one's own. Thus, moving back in with your parents after moving out was a deviation from expectations, a mark of failure, a source of embarrassment and shame. Gretchen, 27, described how she believed others perceived her decision to move back home:

I think it [made] me feel like insecure in my success, that others may judge me for it. Having moved back home, that they may think, "She must not be making good money or have a good job, or what has she done with her life?" Thinking that I bummed through school and that I am throwing my life away, that I'm not successful.

While Gretchen gave voice to this lingering stigma, participants overwhelmingly shared that the markers of adulthood were shifting. These changes indicated a new normal and widened the range of acceptable, and even commendable, choices. As Rachel, 31, voiced:

I think achieving adulthood is changing. In high school and early college, I felt like the media and movies definitely pushed the "real adult" and "own apartment" mattered. It is normal now for people to go to college and move back home. I think this happened in 2008. Everyone is trying to get yourself together and trying to make it. That really shifted our perspective.

Rachel, like many participants, expressed a sense of shared struggle faced by young adults in the wake of the economic recession over a decade ago. Similarly, Taylor, 24, echoed "the common thread that unites all like 20–25-year-olds is the [financial] struggle is real." Vanessa, 30, described moving back home as "a very Millennial thing to do. Everyone was very understanding, I never once got a judgmental feedback from it." Despite cultural stigma, participants strongly viewed the decision to move home as a savvy, wise, and worthy investment in their future. They shared how it helped them to avoid insurmountable financial struggle, grow their savings, and be more selective about jobs. As Myra, 27, reflected on her experience:

If I hadn't moved back in my parents' house and I was working at the same place that I'm working now, I'd be struggling financially to pay my bills. I'd be a lot more stressed than I am and it would just not be a good situation.

Eliza, 25, described how her plan for her future made living at home the right choice for her:

I could have made the decision to live on my own but it just would have been far too expensive. I was working in D.C. but living in Maryland and housing prices in the area are absurd. It just didn't make sense because I wanted to pay off some of my undergrad debt and also save up money so that I could go to law school because I always knew I was going to do that. So I opted to just live at home instead.

Eliza, like many participants, weighed the costs and benefits of moving out alongside with her future goals, determining the financial rewards outweighed potential risk of stigma. For participants, what destigmatized moving back home was the *intention* to build a better future. Moving back home was a chance to regroup, find their footing, and take a breath in between life chapters. Overwhelmingly, interviewees voiced that framing moving back home as an opportunity to better themselves should remove any embarrassment and shame. Travis, 31, advised:

Don't feel embarrassed about [moving back home] as long as you are really trying your damndest to figure out your next steps. That you're not just like, "I'm gonna move back home and just sit on the couch and do nothing." If you're taking that opportunity very seriously, then I don't think you should be embarrassed by it in any means.

As participants shared new understandings of what constituted adulthood, they also expressed how older generations, particularly parents, perceived their reality differently. At some points, this meant participants had to navigate what they perceived as parents' out of touch perspective and comments that made them feel shame. Despite the study indicating that a high percentage of parents would welcome back their children (Friedman, 2019), many current participants reflected stigma and judgment from their families. Emma, 26, who at the time of the interview had recently moved out to rent an apartment, admitted: "My mom will throw to my face that when she was 21, she had me and she had a house. And here I am 26 with a child and still renting." Travis similarly shared:

The negative part of this is really just the tension of expectations. I still remember my dad being like, "Oh I worked the whole summer to pay for a semester of college" and I'm like "That was 50 years ago!" [He'd say] things like, "Why don't you have a high paying job yesterday?" And "Why hasn't this happened yet? Why hasn't that happened yet?" Just unreasonable expectations.

Travis expressed the tension many interviewees experienced between encountering and confronting different generational realities. Part of participants' dilemma in some cases was attempting to correct what they perceived as outdated expectations, assumptions, and changed economic times. Shari, 29, echoed Travis' acknowledgment that parents were out of touch with entry-level workers' economic struggles:

Parents want their kids to succeed and for their kids to do well and everything. And I guess part of it may be like because they feel like

it's a reflection on them because if their kid isn't doing well it's like they didn't prepare them enough. But, there's also the realization that, you know, things aren't like how they used to be, wages aren't what they used to be depending on [where] you work and what you do.

While some parents placed their own generational realities onto their children, others seemed to embrace their children's struggles and welcomed them back home. In these cases, parents' encouragement served to communicate to participants that the move back home was a worthwhile option, not symbolic of failure or stigma. Rachel shared that in the last few months of college, as she was looking and applying for jobs, her mom consistently mentioned that until she got a job: "You know that you can always come home." Other interviewees shared that once home, their families' support helped them not just financially, but emotionally and professionally. Victoria, 28, recalled how helpful her parents' support was during her first "real" job:

I could come home and get their advice on things I could do better at work or things that I could do differently or what a certain situation means at work. It was really nice having that and having tenured adults to be able to talk to.

Consistent with Swartz et al. (2011) participants recounted how parents provided a scaffold of emotional support that helped them navigate the uncertainty of new professional and financial challenges. Twenty-five-year old Eliza moved home while holding a job and applying to law schools. She described how her parents attempted to support her during this time:

I was working and also studying for the LSAT and also preparing to go to law school. They gave me as much support as parents could give while I'm studying. Like, "Oh, if you need to study like for this whole month, then you don't have to wash the dishes at nighttime and you don't have to do like, X thing, we can handle that."

Eliza and other participants with supportive parents reflected on how pivotal their understanding was during stressful transitions in their lives. Feeling that their parents were on their side not only eased participants' responsibilities but helped minimize the lingering stigma of returning home.

Communication Strategies

In response to RQ2, participants overwhelmingly shared that once they returned home, their actions shaped their experience. In the context of boomeranging, participants had to simultaneously navigate deflecting the stigma of returning home as well as asserting their own adult identity within the relational dynamics of their families. As they desired to illustrate the ways in which the decision to move home was an investment in their future, interviewees discussed various strategies to destigmatize their decision and assert their own adult status. In doing so, they strove to frame the experience as a positive step

toward their futures and in their relationships with their families. The following four communication strategies surfaced from the interviews (RQ2): communicate clear expectations, contribute to the household, embody adult behavior, and articulate clear timelines.

Communicate clear expectations. As participants moved back home, they strongly desired an adult-adult relationship with their parents. Many attempted to resist any assumption that they were taking advantage of their parents or in the words of Josie, 25, "that feeling like, you know, that you're sorta like leaching off of your parents or putting them out." In so doing, communicating clear expectations emerged as a strategy that enabled participants to establish boundaries and assert themselves as responsible adults. Participants shared how the move home involved the importance of asking themselves if their relationship with their parents made living at home a smart or even a realistic, option. While financial challenges could make a return home seem optimal, participants cautioned others to look at their family dynamic before making that decision. As Taylor advised:

Really think about what your relationship is with your parents. If there's any animosity or anything unhealthy about it, then try and find other means, because moving in with them will just exacerbate any these negative feelings. Even if you need to save money, you know, at what cost cause you could really damage the relationship like even more if it is problematic.

Participants explained that it was best to negotiate expectations ahead of moving in as it was more difficult to voice opposition once parents had already imposed their own expectations. For example, 23-year-old Ellie described her mom as very strict, noting that she re-imposed a curfew on her when she moved back home: "It felt very like childish to me. She kind of reverted back to like the high school Ellie." Ellie was not prepared to encounter the same expectations her mother held for her before she was an adult.

Before moving home, some participants described how they had "straightforward" conversations with their parents. These conversations served as a way for participants to assert a mature, adult identity. They entailed what they should both anticipate now that they were back under one roof, to minimize assumptions and conflict. Taylor expressed:

I would rather take this time and set myself up for a better future. Definitely just have a conversation . . . what are your expectations for me? What are my expectations for you? Let's go ahead and talk about these things before I make this decision.

Other interviewees recalled that conversations about expectations emerged after they moved back. As Sarah, 31, reflected:

My mom would cook dinner, and she'd be like, "Alright, let's eat." And I would be like, "Wait. You cooked me some dinner too?" When I was in high school, ya know, it was always, "Alright,

[Sarah], dinner time.” When I moved back home as an adult, I wasn’t sure like, “Are y’all still cooking for me every night? Or do I need to bring home my own food? How do we do this?” We had a group chat from then on out, and Dad was like, “What do y’all want for dinner tonight?” And so I knew if he asked that, that that meant, they were doing that, or he would text and be like, “Y’all need to get your own dinner tonight.”

Such clarification was helpful for participants like Sarah, who strived to show their parents they did not expect to be treated as the child they were when they first left home. Other participants described how setting expectations was not always a smooth process and that they continually needed to communicate and remind parents of their capable, independent adult status within their household. Carol, 25, shared:

I love to do my own grocery shopping and to cook. And my dad does not know boundaries with like what’s mine and what’s his when it comes to food. And that was a real issue with, because I was like, “You ate my lunch for tomorrow.” When I got mad at him, he would then get mad at me and be like, “You eat our food all the time!” And I’d be like, “It’s different!” I would say, “Hey, if you don’t know where it came from, like food wise, do not eat it, because it’s probably mine.”

Participants voiced that setting expectations (particularly before moving back home) was critical to a smoother transition and for allowing participants to combat stigma and maintain their dignity.

Contribute to the household. Another aspect of destigmatizing moving back home was emphasizing the ways participants contributed to the functioning and maintenance of their parents’ household via paying rent, doing chores, or performing critical tasks. Ellie described how she paid for “health insurance, if there is anything in particular that I need I pay for it, car maintenance, gas, phone plan.” Several participants contributed financially to the household. As Maggie, 25, who paid monthly rent to her parents, indicated about paying rent: “I’ve always been independent and it makes me feel better that I’m not mooching.” Likewise, Sophie, 26, shared: “My mom handled the main mortgage and then the utilities was something that me and my sister took.” Additionally, Sarah reflected, “I wasn’t just freeloading, I helped pay rent.” While many participants did not pay rent to their parents, they positively contributed to their household in other ways, largely in the form of household chores. Twenty-three-year old Stephanie described how many of the chores she had growing up continued when she moved back home, “the dishes, the laundry, the chores I did as a kid they’re still in place now.” Carol echoed “cleaning up for myself, emptying the dishwasher, vacuuming, just little things, if you see that is has to be done, then do it. For others, contributions took the form of outside tasks and household repairs. For instance, Sophie stated: “Yard work things, I was the person that was like the handyman because nobody else

would be fixing stuff.” Sometimes participants shared that what they contributed was not financial, but emotional. Referring to her mom, Maggie shared: “We love to come home from work and share drama. I’m very invested in her work drama and she’s very invested in mine.” Similarly, Victoria reflected:

So I get to see my family every day. We get to talk and laugh. Which is what I love. I love family. I get to be active in my brother’s life, in him, seeing him grow up, I’m going to his athletic events and school events. My dad loves having us kids close by. Even now and I’m almost 30. If it was up to him, we’d have a 15-bedroom house and all live in it.

For those close to their parents and siblings, like Victoria, the move back home allowed them to be physically close to their family again and fostered their ability to play an active part in daily life. Their myriad tangible contributions lessened their guilt of moving back home and enabled them to resist cultural notions that boomerang kids are a drain on parental resources.

Articulate intended timelines. Interviewees emphasized the importance of letting their parents know they viewed the return home as a temporary step as they navigated their futures. Part of articulating the impermanence of the move was an attempt to show parents a plan was in place and a considerable amount of effort had gone into thinking through how the return to home fit into their life and career trajectory. The temporality of the plan helped deflect stigma, while asserting a timeline helped participants project an organized, adult approach to the transition that resisted the common perception that returning to live with your parents suggests stunted development (Nelson et al., 2015). Victoria shared it was really important to, “put a plan in place—a 1-year plan, a 2-year plan, 5-year plan whatever it is. Stick to it. Set a limit with your family. Don’t go in all willy nilly.” Vanessa explained how details about timing looked for her:

I have always made sure to tell them this is not an extended period of time. I’ve always given them like that timelines and deadlines. I always had a next step. I just needed a cushion, but I’ve always had next steps. I told them it would be like a 2-year commitment basically and we’re pretty much on track for that.

In some cases, participants realized their aspects of their identity made living at home long term unrealistic. Ellie described:

I’d come out to myself as bisexual, and then coming home I was starting to realize like “Oh, this isn’t gonna work out. If I ever want to try to date someone of the same sex, there’s no way it’s gonna fly if I live at home.” That was again part of the reason why I moved out the second time so quickly. The viewpoints of my parents were not gonna allow for me to be who I am, and they just were not gonna be okay with it.

In examining their family dynamic, participants suggested that sometimes, despite the financial challenges, the strain on their mental health meant moving home was not a viable long-term option after all. Other interviewees described the importance of having a plan and telling family how the move home fit into the bigger picture of their career goals. Travis described thinking through this plan before talking to his parents: “Look at the long term. Where do I want to be in a year from now? Where do I want to be 2 years from now? That helps the conversation.” Gretchen described how having a timeline helped her regain some sense of adult authority that had been diminished when she moved home. She argued: “It [moving home] gives you less credibility in some ways, but I try to be very direct about like, I’m moving there for, you know, this short period of time.” Myra similarly echoed:

Give yourself a timeframe, set a goal for when you want to get out of there and do what you gotta do to get outta there within that timeframe. Like, don’t be like me these 5 years and you’re still here. Save your money, do whatever you gotta do. Get out. Don’t get comfortable.

Articulating how moving home “is just a transition period” lessened shame and made the move more acceptable because of the acknowledgment that it would be short-lived.

Embody adult behavior. When participants returned home, many found that their parents still viewed their relationship as parent-child rather than a relationship among adults. Consequentially, many interviewees attempted to prove themselves as adults through engaging in mature, responsible, adult behavior. This behavior focused primarily on waking up early and not inappropriately socializing. Participants reflected on demonstrating their capability to function independently and manage daily routines and responsibilities on their own. This demonstration served as a way to communicate a stable and sensible adult identity. For instance, Gretchen shared: “I have like a full-time job where I’m usually up by 6:30.” Many participants described needing to show their families that they were in fact adults and were not simply reverting to their child identities when they left home. In some instances, this meant refraining from socializing with friends or significant others in the house or having romantic partners spend the night. This was especially true for daughters. For example, Ellie shared:

My family is very, like, conservative, and they don’t indulge in like going to parties or anything like that. So, like, even if I had been invited to go anywhere my mom would have been very like against it. Even if I had said “I’m going to go do this.” She probably would have been like, “Uh, no, you’re not.”

Sharie described how dating can be more complicated when living at home, “It is still a little awkward if you’re like yeah I am in my late twenties and I still live with my parents and this is my parents’ house and this is their dog, and oh look they’re still here.”

Other participants emphasized the importance of respecting their parents and building a friendship relationship with their family. As Sarah explained:

I used to have people over all the time, making loud noise late at night, but now I don’t want to be a nuisance I just had a lot of respect for my parents, always have, and they have respect back for me. And we just became really good friends, all four of us, including my sister, we’re just very like compatible. We’re all just four peas in a pod.

In demonstrating adult behavior, participants often found that a more adult-like relationship emerged with their parents over time.

Discussion

This study revealed the communicative dilemmas participants experienced in moving home after having lived independently. This phenomenon is important for researchers to understand because the trend has continued to grow even after the recession of 2008 (Fry, 2016) and, in light of economic strain from coronavirus, shows no sign of stopping. As greater numbers of young adults are moving back home, our study illustrates how interviewees overwhelmingly worked to articulate and frame their decision to move back home as an investment in the future rather than a source of stigma. Their need for this rationalizing comes in large part in response to the lingering cultural stigma that associates moving back home with low ambition and lack of work ethic. Rather than a source of embarrassment or shame, participants indicated their decision was savvy and strategic because it represented an investment in their future. They described how moving back home freed up financial pressures and allowed them the time to find their footing, build up their savings, pay down debt, and be more selective about jobs.

This study’s findings support the normative approach’s tenets that certain behaviors or strategies should help address goals and manage multiple meanings that are relevant to the situation. Once home, participants engaged in numerous strategies: communicating clear expectations, contributing to the household, embodying adult behavior, and articulating clear timelines to help them establish responsible, mature, adult identities in the midst of this transition chapter of their lives. These strategies worked to destigmatize the decision; to demonstrate how the move home was a positive step toward their futures and in relationships with family members. In many ways, interviewee voices indicated how their identity as adults was created and re-created through their communicative and behavioral choices. Reflecting on parental co-residence as a positive experience often came from interviewees feeling that they effectively worked toward and crafted responsible, mature identities that were taking productive steps toward their futures. In doing so, participants point to the way identity was an accomplishment (Tracy, 2002) as their behavioral choices at home communicated not just a present self, but also the successful adult self they wanted to become.

For participants, living in interdependent reciprocal households was a temporary chapter on the path to upward mobility and attainment of independence. Participants did not move home as a response to parental need, though several shared their parents encouraged them to consider as they weighed options in the midst of life transitions (e.g., finishing college, searching for a job, going through a divorce). While some research suggests that living with adult children has mainly negative effects on parental mental health (Tosi, 2018) others suggest that living with adult children has positive effects for parents (Courtin, 2016). Several participants described how their parents enjoyed having them home and shared stories of reciprocal social and emotional support.

While overwhelming gender differences in how participants reflected on their experiences did not emerge, daughters more commonly shared that they bought and cooked their own food, did their own laundry, and shied away from certain social behaviors (e.g., bringing dates home, going to parties) and reported “awkwardness” of dating while living at home. This is consistent with research suggesting that daughters perform more household labor and that their social behaviors tend to be more observed and regulated (Sassler et al., 2008).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study’s goal was to elucidate a normative perspective on how individuals experience and navigate moving back home. This paper sheds light on the complexities of creating an adult identity at a transitional time and supplements understanding of the experience returning home by illustrating how adulthood takes on specific meaning in this context. From this approach, creating an adult identity is inherently challenging due to the context specific demands of being back in the parental home. As they worked to set expectations, conduct themselves in responsible ways, articulate a timeline, and prepare for their futures, participants demonstrated how effective communication is premised on satisfying multiple, potentially conflicting, identity and relationships goals (Goldsmith, 2001). It is theoretically important to conceptualize the construction of adulthood as strategic.

Arnett (2000) argued that “it is no longer normative for the late teens and early twenties to be time of entering and settling into long-term adult roles” (p. 469). The findings of the present study support this assertion and underscore the need to understand the life tasks of emerging adults. Life tasks paint a picture of needs, relational and age-related expectations, and how these might shift with the boomerang transition to the parental home. Two of the most prominent life tasks are identity formation, especially in the realm of one’s vocation, and the development of the ability for intimacy and romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2004). Additionally, with the psychological and sociocultural changes in recent decades, a central marker in the developmental process is the search for meaning in their lives,

which will overlap within the spheres of love and work (Mayseless & Keren, 2014). An extended timeline presents emerging adults with a longer chapter to acceptably shift, oscillate, and explore different possibilities of who they are and what they want professionally and romantically. Moreover, because life tasks are sociocultural as well as personal constructions, older emerging adults may find more encouragement and fewer constraints in their search for meaning as this postmodern moment continues.

With the numbers of individuals returning home on the rise, several practical implications emerge from this study. First, parents who faced a different economic climate in their 20s and 30s may hold different assumptions and expectations about what constitutes adulthood when interacting with their adult children. Participants indicated how the comments of even well-meaning parents communicated there was something shameful or embarrassing about returning home. Because of their own generational experiences, parents may judge or be wary of allowing their adult child to return home. In interactions with their children, parents should engage in perspective-taking when communicating about the different economic realities their adult children face. In doing so, they may want to avoid “comparative lessons” that note the age at which they lived independently, bought a house, etc. Additionally, parents’ feelings and overall family well-being may be impacted by the extent to which they hold normative beliefs about leaving home (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). In other words, a more open attitude about moving home may make the experience more rewarding for all.

Second, participants indicated the importance of preparation prior to moving back home. This planning included parents and children having conversations about expectations, especially surrounding money, boundaries, and other responsibilities. While some participants paid rent, many contributed in other ways, such as helping with groceries, utilities, or other household chores. Setting expectations about how and in what ways the adult child will contribute to the household helped alleviate uncertainty during this transition period. Conversations about expectations should also include a proposed timeline for moving out, even a tentative one, so that young adults can stay on track to achieving their goals and parents can have something to enforce boundaries.

Third, findings suggest that when approached in deliberate ways, the move home can contribute to a positive family dynamic overall. Because the return of adult children is thought to lengthen dependence on parents, researchers suggest it may strain parents’ marital relationships and negatively impact family well-being (Bouchard, 2014). However, many interviewees pointed to positive relationships, more opportunity for mutual support, and closeness with their families during their time at home. While understudied, research exploring parental perspectives supports that many parents find the experience of adult children at home a positive one, perhaps because the move home was strategically negotiated.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study highlights experiences that may characterize young adults in the U.S., due to its limited size and scope, as with all qualitative research, the results are not generalizable. Further, this study only examined communication from one generation's perspective. Future research could examine the goals and dilemmas of parents and other family members, such as siblings, to understand their perceptions of the situation. It would be useful to explore how parents come to and/or adjust their expectations of their children's path to adulthood. Interviewing other family members would aid in gathering multiple perspectives on the decision-making process and the relational challenges participants voiced.

It is important to note that participants were more educated than those in the general population. Differing levels of education may create different perspectives and concerns regarding stigma or assumptions about adult status and understandings of family roles. Not only may parents feel expected to provide more financial and emotional support to students (Fingerman et al., 2009), research supports that parents with higher socioeconomic status give more support to their children (Fingerman et al., 2015). More highly-educated parents also have greater access to information and resources for their children to improve their future opportunities, making them better equipped to invest in the fostering of their children's social and cultural capital (Swartz et al., 2011) and helping to increase the chances of financial success.

Additionally, middle and upper-middle-class emerging adults may expect non-hierarchical relations with their parents because of the cultural differences in the childrearing styles in their homes. For example, many middle-class parents engage in a process of *concerted cultivation* (Lareau, 2011) where they work to develop and foster their children's talents in a concerted fashion (e.g., through organized activities and purposeful experiences). These class differences mean some children have greater experiences with adults and power structures and may potentially have a greater sense of entitlement in relationships with their parents.

Further, Western society's description of moving home as "delayed" or a "failure" reflects cultural bias within researchers' and laypeople's perceptions of the transition to adulthood. In other cultures, intergenerational co-residing is more common. For example, over half of 18–33-year-olds live with their parents in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain (Van Winkle, 2018). In addition, within the U.S., researchers sample heavily from White, middle class populations (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). The launching experience is unique to cultural and ethnic background (Arnett, 2003) and the timing, decisions, and variability in moving out are shaped by cultural expectations and economic forces. For example, "failure to launch" reflects a research bias that can be largely attributed to the heavy focus on white and middle-class individuals in addition to generational differences. Researchers have illustrated that racial tension, external judgment, and lack of support heavily influenced the launching experience for African

American youth (Wilson et al., 2017). Future research could address how decisions to move back home are influenced by race and class.

Appendix: Interview Guide

Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. What state do you live in?
6. What is your line of work?
7. Do you have any siblings?
8. What is your relationship status?
9. Do you have any children?
10. How financially independent are you?

General Moving Back Home Scenario Questions

1. You are participating in this interview because you moved back home after moving out. Can you walk us through or give us a timeline since moving out the first time?
2. Are you currently living at home with your family? **If yes:** Who are you living with?
3. **[If yes]** please tell me how long you have lived with them? How old were you when you first moved back home? Where had you been living? How long had you been living on your own? What prompted the move back home? How did you get the idea? Did you move out and then back in at all during that time? Tell me about that. When do you expect to move out for good, do you know?
4. **[If no]** How long did you live with them, and what did that family consist of at the time (for example, mom, dad, brothers, sisters, grandparents also living at home) What prompted the move? How did you get the idea? Where had you been living? How long had you been living on your own? How old were you when you moved in and out? What prompted you to move out? How long have you been living on your own now? Describe your living arrangements when you moved back home? Separation between you and your parents? How was it different or similar to when you were a kid?
5. Was moving back home always your plan? Why or why not? Did you have any other options? Please explain.
6. Did you or your family set a time frame for how long you would live with them? Why or why not?
7. **[If no]** How open were you with your parent(s) about your reasons for moving back in? Why? What did you tell them? If you weren't completely forthright, why was this?

Relationship Questions

1. Moving back home, how would you describe your relationship with your family? [Some people who move home have more of an adult-adult and others have more of a parent-child relationship or something else? Why?]

2. How much autonomy and independence did you feel you had at home? Why?
3. How did your independence and freedom change from before you moved back home to moving back home?
4. To what extent was your whole family on board with you moving back in? Who was more or less receptive? Why?
5. How do you think living at home affected your friendships or ability to make new friends?
6. How was your dating life affected?
3. Did you feel any stigma or experience stigma from moving back home? If so, in what way?
4. How did you deal with any stigma?
5. If you left home, to what extent do you still feel any stigma or shame that you moved back? Why or why not?
6. The media sometimes claim that you have to live independently from your family to be a real adult? What do you think marks achieving “adulthood”?
7. To what extent would you be open to moving back home again?

Rules Questions

1. What, if any, rules/boundaries were put into place once you moved back in and who initiated setting the rules? [for example, rules about paying rent, curfew, doing chores, having friends or romantic partners sleep over, etc]
2. How did you feel about the rules?
3. What rules/boundaries do you wish had or had not been put into place? Why?
4. What expectations did your parents have for you in terms of living with them? What were your expectations?
5. In what ways, if any, did your family members expect you to contribute when you were living at home (pay rent, cook, buy groceries, babysit, drive, clean, do chores, run errands, support them emotionally, etc). Did they explicitly ask you to do these things? How did you feel about that arrangement?
6. What other support—beyond giving you a place to live—do/did you receive from your family when you were living with them (for example, emotional, financial, advice-giving)?
7. What support do you still receive from your parents (they pay car insurance, health insurance, cell phone)?

Uncertainty Questions

1. What were you uncertain about before you moved in with your parents?
2. How did you deal with that?
3. What were/are you unsure about once you were living with them? How did/how are you dealing with it?

Conflict Questions

1. Have you had any disagreements or conflict while you were living at home? If so, what were they about?
2. How did you handle this conflict?
3. What was the biggest disagreement you had at home about, if any? How did it end? Did it change your relationship with your family members?
4. [If you had no disagreements or conflict]. why is that, do you think?

Acceptability Questions

1. How do you think moving back home is viewed in your social world? Among your friend group and/or culture, how common is moving back home?
2. To what extent are/were you open with others about living at home? Why or why not?

Advice & Reflection/Forward Thinking Questions

1. What have been the pros and cons of living with family? In other words, what were the best and worst parts of moving back home?
2. What surprised you most about living at home?
3. Do you have any regrets from moving back home? If so, what are they?
4. What advice do you have for others who are deciding whether to move back home?
5. What advice do you have for families who are about to receive children moving back home?
6. If you plan to have children, how would you feel about them moving back in with you in the future? Why?
7. How would you feel if your parent(s) wanted to move in with you in the future? Why?
8. What would your ideal living situation look like with your parents? How would your life have been different if you hadn't moved home?
9. What ultimately influenced your decision to move back out (or do you think would influence your decision to move back out)?
10. What questions should I have asked but didn't?

Author Contributions

Abetz J. S. and Romo, L. K. contributed to conception and design, contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation, drafted manuscript, critically revised manuscript, gave final approval, agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.


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Open Practices

The analysis code and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. The raw data contained in this manuscript are not openly available due to privacy restrictions set forth by the institutional ethics board, but

can be obtained from the corresponding author following the completion of a privacy and fair use agreement. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

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