

KIDULTS IN THE MAKING? HOW DOES THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IMPACT HOME-LEAVING DECISION: INSIGHTS FROM GRAPHICAL MODELS

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Abstract. This longitudinal analysis investigates the impact of the quality of the mother-child and father-child relationship on the home-leaving decision. Leveraging retrospective data from the 2017 Wave 7 of *SHARELIFE*, we conceived two plausible causal mechanisms for the two dyads via *Directed Acyclic Graphs* (DAGs). We applied the *Backdoor Criterion* to select control variables and employed *Discrete-Time Survival Analysis* to estimate the effect of the mother-child and father-child relationship quality on the decision to leave the parental nest for individuals aged between 15-49 years old.

Results reveal significant differences in the impact of mother-child and father-child relationship quality on the transition to independent living. Constructive mother-child relationships may not lead to delayed launching, and the probability of nest leaving increases as the relationship quality decreases. Conversely, the father-child relationship does not appear to be central in terms of effect size and significance. These results led us to hypothesise a *transition-specific impact* of the mother-child relationship on home-leaving dynamics.

1. Introduction

Within a context of growing uncertainty and tenuous institutional support, the transition to adulthood is becoming “*late, protracted, and complex*” compared to the dominant patterns observed in the 1950s and 1960s (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010). A striking feature of these evolving patterns is represented by the attainment of residential independence (Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). Current estimates highlight an increase in the age at home-leaving in 1970-1979 cohorts compared to earlier cohorts (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010) and a rise in the proportion of nesters in Europe by 0.33 percentage points yearly between 2011 and 2019 (Sompolska-Rzechuła and Kurdyś-Kujawska, 2022). These current trends have ignited the disciplinary and public debate on the societal and family burden deriving from the “*cluttered nest effect*” and “*delayed launching*” of young adults. Terms such as *bamboccioni* in Italy, *kidults*, or *boomerang kids* in the UK utterly emphasise young adults’ responsibility in the delayed launching¹. However, delayed launching may be a concrete response

¹ “Early” and “late leaving” describe moving out before or after the country’s cultural age deadlines and norms (Aassve et al., 2013).

to the protraction of educational careers, escalating economic uncertainty, and hindered access to the housing market (South and Lei, 2015; Mulder and Clark, 2002). Hence, co-residing with parents may be considered a rational investment and a safety net against poverty and substandard dwellings. On the other hand, leaving home late is associated with greater dependence on parents and generally detrimental effects on adulthood outcomes (Billari and Tabellini, 2011).

This context of protracted co-residence underscores the central role played by parents in shaping young adults' life course outcomes (King *et al.*, 2018). Constructive parent-child relationships may favour autonomy, independence, and distancing, providing young adults with a set of competencies to face the challenges of transitioning to adulthood (Gillespie *et al.*, 2020; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Thus, the parent-child relationship is expected to be associated with the decision to leave the nest (Işık Akın *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature on the impact of parent-child relationships on home-leaving remains scant and porous. Contributions are limited to the estimation of associations of the overall parent-child relationship rather than capturing differences in the relationship with the mother and the father and addressing whether causal effects could be identifiable. In this regard, this longitudinal study elucidates how early life interactions with parents shape young adults' trajectories out of the nest. By employing *Directed Acyclic Graphs* (DAGs), we identified a plausible causal mechanism and by applying the *Backdoor Criterion* and *Survival Analysis* we selected control variables and estimated the effect of the parent-child relationship on the probability of leaving the nest separately for the two dyads.

Our study highlights the importance of understanding how early life family interactions affect young adults' life outcomes, particularly in a context where parents are overburdened with providing support to emerging adults and finding an adequate balance between involvement in their children's development and their occupational careers.

2. Home-leaving determinants

Notable diversity in home-leaving patterns was observed across Europe (Iacovou, 2010). Individuals in Northern/Central Europe leave the parental home earlier than in Southern/Eastern Europe (Iacovou, 2010). Currently, despite a stable EU average exit age (26.4 years in 2024 vs. 26.5 in 2012), national differences persist: Croatia (33.4), Slovakia (30.8), Greece (30.7), Bulgaria, Spain (30.3), Malta (30.1), and Italy (30.0) show the highest averages, while Finland (21.3), Sweden (21.4), Denmark (21.7), and Estonia (22.7) have the lowest (Eurostat, 2024). These variations reflect differences in institutional, cultural, and economic factors, with familistic and weak welfare regimes countries showing delayed transitions (Iacovou, 2010).

Economic conditions also impact home-leaving: a higher personal income facilitates earlier moves since it enables individuals to afford living expenses (Mulder and Clark, 2002). However, the increasing proportion of employed young adults living in the nest highlights the importance of family support in the act of leaving. In fact, parental resources may act both as facilitating and hindering factors. Direct resource transfers increase the likelihood of moving out (Angelini and Laferrère, 2012), while “*non-transferable resources*” like housing conditions, consumption patterns, or homeownership rights can influence the attractiveness of the parental dwelling, encouraging individuals to stay rather than leave (Gierveld *et al.*, 1991).

Family structure may also influence the decision to leave. In disrupted and stepfamilies, Aquilino (1991) argued that children may develop more rapidly an independent sense of the “*self*” separated from the family, prompting the transition to adulthood. Explanations stem from the deterioration of psycho-social well-being, reduced financial resources after dissolution, frictions deriving from the poor quality relationship with the stepfather to higher expectations of premarital residential living which are, indeed, associated with premature leaving of the nest (Aquilino, 1991).

3. Parent-child relationship quality and home-leaving

Severing co-residence with parents enables individuals to progressively engage in adult behaviours, fostering an escalating sense of responsibility (Branje *et al.*, 2021). As they navigate this critical juncture, young adults undergo processes of self-discovery, identity formation, and career exploration, laying the fundamental elements of future well-being and ultimately symbolising the attainment of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency (Branje *et al.*, 2021). In this process, parents have the complex task of balancing closeness and autonomy and parental practices must be adjusted according to the evolving needs of the child. This is achieved by the gradual relinquishment of some parental power at the cost of increased conflicts and a temporary decline in support and closeness (De Goede *et al.*, 2009). Between childhood and adolescence, however, the relationship between parents and the child gradually becomes more egalitarian; before leaving the parental nest, parents encourage autonomy, and support stabilises for males while increasing for females (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; De Goede *et al.*, 2009). Despite this, relatively less attention has been devoted to the household's psychosocial well-being and early parent-child relationship in the analysis of home-leaving determinants. In this regard, as summarised by Isik Akin *et al.* (2020), prospective studies show that growing up and developing in a constructive parent-child relationship is likely to delay the home-leaving decision (Gierveld *et al.*, 1991; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; South and Lei, 2015) while studies adopting retrospective design indicate how adults that left home earlier

where exposed to conflictual parent-child relationships during adolescence (Cherlin *et al.*, 1995). Recent findings confirm that individuals who have experienced a good relationship between childhood and adolescence, particularly by developing a strong bond with their mother, tend to be less motivated to leave the original family nucleus (South and Lei, 2015). In this vein, Gillespie (2020) has underscored how consistent interactions among family members (e.g., family activities) tend to decrease the probability of leaving the nest. However, the author has also highlighted how a good parent-child relationship leads to leaving the family nucleus earlier as an initial attempt at independence.

4. Data and Empirical Strategy

We sourced data from Wave 7 of *SHARELIFE*, a retrospective wave of the *Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe* that provides information about the life histories of individuals aged 50 or older from 26 Continental EU Member States, in addition to Switzerland and Israel.

Our initial sample included 63,228 individuals. We opted to omit individuals who declared they had not lived with the mother or the father and those who had not provided any information regarding the past relationship with both parents. Additionally, we excluded missing and implausible values reported for the year of establishment of an independent household. Our initial sample was then comprised of 62,082 individuals, with a mean age of 67.42 (SD=10.01). The dataset was then adjusted to perform a *discrete-time survival analysis*. We opted to establish a plausible risk set, ranging from 15 to 49 years old, in order to avoid implausible early and late home-leaving and mechanical age effects. This operation entails that an individual is included in the risk set until either moving out of the nest or reaching a maximum year at risk of 34 years. Subsequently, we generated a dichotomous variable *event* using a single question “*In which year did you start to live on your own or establish your household*”. Answers were recoded into two levels: 0= *never established own household*; 1= *established own household*. We then corrected the dependent variable according to the proposed risk set: if the sum of the year of birth, year at risk, and the age at entry in the risk set (15) is lower than the actual year of household establishment, then the variable takes value 0; otherwise, 1 if the sum is higher or equal to the year at home-leaving. We then dropped missing observations for the variable *event* and observations for individuals with ages lower than 15 and higher than 49. Our final dataset comprised 529,432 person-year observations corresponding to 59,466 individuals.

Regarding the covariates, the quality of the parent-child relationship was assessed separately for the two dyads through the *SHARELIFE* retrospective questions: “*How would you rate the relationship with your mother/father or the woman/man who*

raised you before 17?”. Replies were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1= Excellent, 2= Very good, 3= Good, 4 = Fair, and 5= Poor. The questions enable us to analyse the overall rate of the relationships before age 17 separately for mother and father. Table 1 provides key descriptive statistics on the self-reported relationship with parents.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics for the self-reported rate of the parent-child relationship quality at the time of the interview.

Variable	Overall N = 59,466	Male N = 25,426	Female N = 34,040
Relationship Mother			
<i>Excellent</i>	19,146 (32)	8,060 (32)	11,086 (33)
<i>Very Good</i>	19,666 (33)	8,721 (34)	10,945 (32)
<i>Good</i>	15,210 (26)	6,772 (27)	8,438 (25)
<i>Fair</i>	3,931 (6.5)	1,368 (5.4)	2,563 (7.6)
<i>Poor</i>	1,198 (2.0)	362 (1.4)	836 (2.5)
Relationship Father			
<i>Excellent</i>	14,574 (26)	5,687 (23)	8,887 (27)
<i>Very Good</i>	17,454 (31)	7,546 (31)	9,908 (30)
<i>Good</i>	17,245 (30)	7,849 (32)	9,396 (29)
<i>Fair</i>	5,456 (9.6)	2,419 (9.9)	3,037 (9.3)
<i>Poor</i>	2,379 (4.2)	958 (3.9)	1,421 (4.4)

The responses are shown both in absolute numbers and in parenthesis as percentages of the total in each group.

We selected a series of control variables: age, gender, cohort; country, area, and type of residence (Type) at 10 years old, importance of religion before age 17, reported physical violence before age 17; enrolled in full time-education, full-time employed, cohabiting, married and number of children as time-varying covariates. Additionally, we selected variables regarding the family structure and household size (HouseSize) at 10; family financial status before age 16, and number of books in the house at 10 as a proxy of family socio-cultural and economic background.

4.1. Empirical strategy

The analysis aimed to estimate the effect of the quality of the mother-child and father-child relationship on the decision to leave the nest. We employed *discrete-time survival analysis* to estimate how different self-reported qualities of the relationships impact the probability of leaving the nest. In order to achieve this goal, we first opted to employ *Structural Causal Models* (SCM) (Pearl, 2009) to identify the causal structure regulating the phenomenon of interest in the dataset. The SCMs

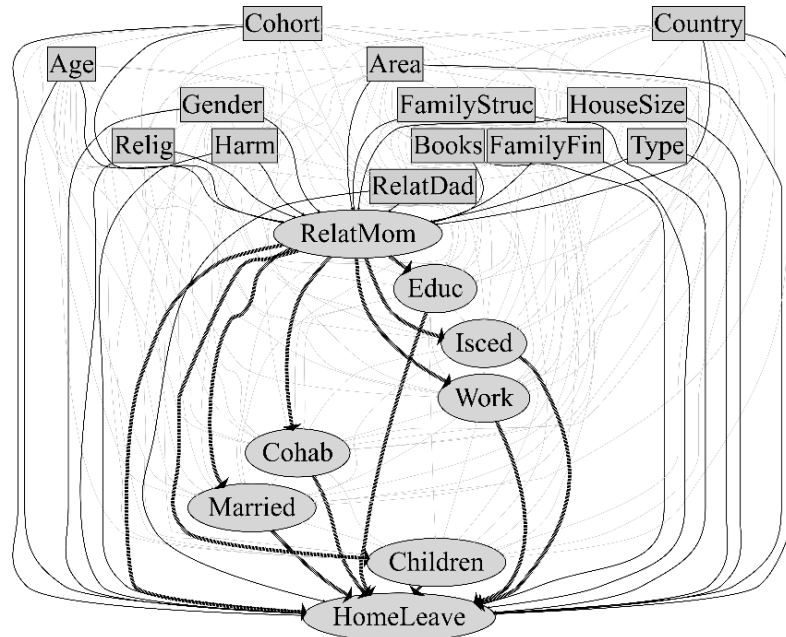
were represented through *Directed Acyclic Graphs* which consist of a set of *nodes* (*vertices/variables*) and *directed edges* (*arrows*) that reflect causal relationships. A direct edge between two variables, say *Relationship* \rightarrow *Home-Leaving* entails direct causality while a series of edges, such as in the case of a *chain*, say *Relationship* \rightarrow *Working* \rightarrow *Home-Leaving*, entail an indirect causal relation mediated via the central node of the chain (working). Two additional path structures are particularly relevant for *confounding*: *forks* and *inverted forks*. A forked path is represented by variables that share a common cause; to clarify: *Relationship* \leftarrow *Age* \rightarrow *Home-Leaving*. Inverted forks are represented by two arrowheads meeting a node: *Relationship* \rightarrow *Education* \leftarrow *Country of residence*. While forks can transmit associations; inverted forks can not, therefore they should not be controlled in the analysis.

The acyclicity represents a fundamental assumption in a DAG: a variable cannot causally affect itself either directly or via feedback loops. This assumption was particularly hard to meet in our case due to the cycle present between Mother-Child and Father-Child relationships: *Rel-Mother* \rightarrow *Rel-Father* \rightarrow *Rel-Mother*. One possible solution was represented by creating a new variable that describes the overall rate of the relationship with parents at the cost of not distinguishing between the two relationships. We did not consider this approach feasible, so we opted to conceive two distinct DAGs for the Mother-Child and Father-Child relationships. In Figure 1, a plausible DAG for the mother-child relationship is represented, where the father-child relationship is shown as a *confounder*. Due to space constraints, we do not represent the specific DAG for the father-child relationship, which differs only in the direction of the edge with the variable Rate Relationship Mother-Child. Consequently, we estimated two distinct models in which one of the two relationships represents the exposure and home-leaving the outcome.

As a second step of the analysis, we identified the backdoor paths in both DAGs. A *backdoor path* is represented by a series of arrows that start with an edge pointing to the independent variable and end with an edge pointing to the dependent one. This indicates a shared cause, or confounder, that affects both the treatment and the outcome. When the paths are opened, non-causal associations are transmitted. In order to estimate the effect of interest in an observational setting, holding the assumption that our DAGs capture the correct causal web, we must block all backdoor paths. When the criterion's conditions are satisfied, then the causal effect is identifiable.

For the effect of the relationship with the mother and home-leaving, we identified the following adjustment set: Age, Area, Books, Cohort, Country, FamilyFin, FamilyStruc, Gender, HouseSize, Harm, RelatDad, Relig, Type. For the relationship with the father, the only difference is represented by the confounder RelatMom, which was included in the adjustment set instead of RelatDad.

Figure 1 – Plausible Directed Acyclic Graph for the Mother-Child Relationship.



Confounding variables and paths are represented with boxes and solid black (main biasing paths) and grey lines, respectively; Mediating variables and causal paths in ellipses and bold dashed black lines, respectively.

Data were first analysed using life tables with actuarial adjustment to correct the downward bias in the estimation of the hazard, assuming that the event or censoring occurred at the mid-time point in each interval.

The baseline hazard was then estimated and a series of period dummies were included in a piecewise-constant fashion. Finally, we estimated the total causal effect via the following logit model in which we included the covariates of the adjustment set:

$$\log \left[\frac{p_{ti}}{1-p_{ti}} \right] = \alpha d_{ti} + \beta x_{ti} \tag{1}$$

p_{ti} represents the probability of an event during interval t , d_{ti} is a vector of functions of the cumulative duration by interval t with coefficients α and x_{ti} is a vector of covariates with coefficients β .

5. Results

Descriptive results from the life table estimation show that half of the sample of interest experience the transition to independent living at 22/23 years old, corresponding to the median age at home-leaving. Women tend to leave the nest earlier than men, the median age at the transition is indeed 21 years for the former and 24 years for the latter group. Survival curves for the relationship with the mother show that individuals with a poor relationship tend to complete the transition earlier; the same applies to the relationship with the father. Results from the baseline hazard model indicate that the odds ratios increase rapidly in the first years at risk, reaching a peak at the 10th year (25 years old) and then decreasing as age increases. Covariates included in the adjustment set were progressively controlled in the model to estimate the effect of interest. Table 2 reports the results of the multivariate discrete-time final model for the quality of the relationship with the mother. Estimates indicate that as the relationship with the mother worsens, an increased probability of departure from the parental home is observed. Particularly surprising for their significance and magnitude of effects are the estimates for negative relationships.

Table 2 – Estimate of the causal effect of Mother-Child Relationship quality on home-leaving.

Coeff.	Odds ratios	SE	z	Pr(> z)
RelatMom				
<i>Very Good</i>	1.033252	.0143722	2.35	0.019
<i>Good</i>	1.063641	.0163363	4.02	0.000
<i>Fair</i>	1.173831	.0273379	6.88	0.000
<i>Poor</i>	1.326193	.0535378	6.99	0.000
<i>_cons</i>	.0138734	.0006088	-97.48	0.000

Control variables: RelatDad, Age, Area, Books, Cohort, Country, FamilyFin, FamilyStruc, Gender, HouseSize, Harm, Relig, Type(residence).

An outstanding example is the relationship classified as 'poor', which shows a 32.6% increase in the probability of home leaving compared to those with an excellent relationship. This could imply an abrupt departure from the family nucleus, driven by poor relational well-being between childhood and adolescence. Instead, for “very good”, “good”, and “fair”, the probability of leaving is increased by 3.3%, 6.3% and 17.4% compared to the reference category, respectively.

Moving to the father-child relationship, the step-by-step inclusion of covariates highlighted how the addition of the 'relationship with mother' covariate drastically reduces the effect size and significance of the relationship with the father. This could confirm the confounding effect of the mother-child relationship between the

exposure and the outcome. Surprisingly enough, estimates reported in Table 3 indicate that different levels of relationship quality do not show significant differences in the probability of family nucleus abandonment compared to the reference category. Only a 'very good' relationship shows a slight probability increase (2.8%), but the result is not significant. Similarly, for worse self-reported relationship quality, there is no evidence of a significant effect on the probability of parental nest leave.

Table 3 – Estimate of the causal effect of Father-Child Relationship quality on home-leaving

Coeff.	Odds ratios	SE	z	Pr(> z)
RelatDad				
<i>Very Good</i>	1.028165	.0154001	1.85	0.064
<i>Good</i>	1.007986	.015906	0.50	0.614
<i>Fair</i>	.9817236	.0205893	-0.88	0.379
<i>Poor</i>	1.037681	.0306867	1.25	0.211
<i>_cons</i>	.0138734	.0006088	-97.48	0.000

Control variables: *RelatDad*, *Age*, *Area*, *Books*, *Cohort*, *Country*, *FamilyFin*, *FamilyStruc*, *Gender*, *HouseSize*, *Harm*, *RelatMom*, *Relig*, *Type(residence)*

In summary, the results suggest that the quality of the relationship with the mother has a significant impact on the probability of leaving the parental nest, with less positive relationships significantly increasing this probability. Conversely, father-child relationship quality does not have a significant impact on the home-leaving decision. We may hypothesise a “*transition-specific effect*” of the relationship with the mother on the home-leaving decision. This points in the direction of the predominance of mother-child interaction quality between childhood and adolescence on the decision to leave the nest.

6. Conclusions

In this study, we elucidated how early-life parent-child interactions impact young adults' trajectories to independent living. Unlike previous studies, we distinguished between the two dyads using a retrospective overall assessment for each relationship and *Structural Causal Models* to test the causal mechanism regulating the phenomenon, unveiling a *maternal transition-specific impact*.

Our estimates show that a positive relationship with the mother has a moderate effect on the decision to leave the nest. This result aligns with recent studies by Gillespie et al. (2020) and Seiffge-Krenke (2006), which confirm that a strong bond with the maternal figure tends to equip young adults with a set of emotional and behavioural competencies that facilitate the transition to autonomy. Contrary to the idea that positive relationships encourage remaining in the family home, as shown

by Isik Akin et al. (2020) and South and Lei (2015), our estimates indicate that the quality of the maternal relationship does not necessarily result in prolonged residence in the parental home. Similarly, strained maternal relationships significantly increase the probability of leaving the family home. This result is consistent with previous studies (Cherlin et al., 1995) that show how young adults leave the home as a coping strategy to escape conflictual and stressful cohabitation. However, this partially diverges from Isik Akin et al. (2020), who found no clear link between conflict and home-leaving, except in father-child relationships.

The estimates regarding the paternal relationship are the most surprising. Our analysis found no significant impact on home-leaving at different quality levels once the maternal relationship was controlled for. This result contrasts with the findings of Isik Akin et al. (2020) and Gillespie et al. (2020), who demonstrated that parental warmth, closeness, and attentiveness are associated with premature departure from the family home. One explanation could be derived by considering the phenomenon from a mother-father-child triangular point of view: mother-father relationship quality may impact how fathers interact with the child. In this respect, Pekel-Uludağlı (2023) highlights that mothers may exert *maternal gate-closing*, limiting fathers' parental involvement without them viewing this behaviour as negative. This dynamic may have been more common in earlier cohorts, such as those born before 1953, as they compose the majority in our sample, compared to more recent cohorts where father-child interactions could play a more significant role (Pekel-Uludağlı, 2023).

Our approach has certain limitations. The measurement of relationships is time-invariant and spans a 17 years-period, making it challenging to capture how relationships evolve from childhood to adolescence. Additionally, assessing relationships later in life may introduce recall bias.

In summary, this study offers new insights into how family relationships influence the transition to adulthood, raising important questions about how early dysfunctional parent-child interactions can shape the path toward residential independence and adulthood.

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