Is the boomerang generation of young adults a real phenomenon? Returning home in young adulthood in the UK

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1. Introduction

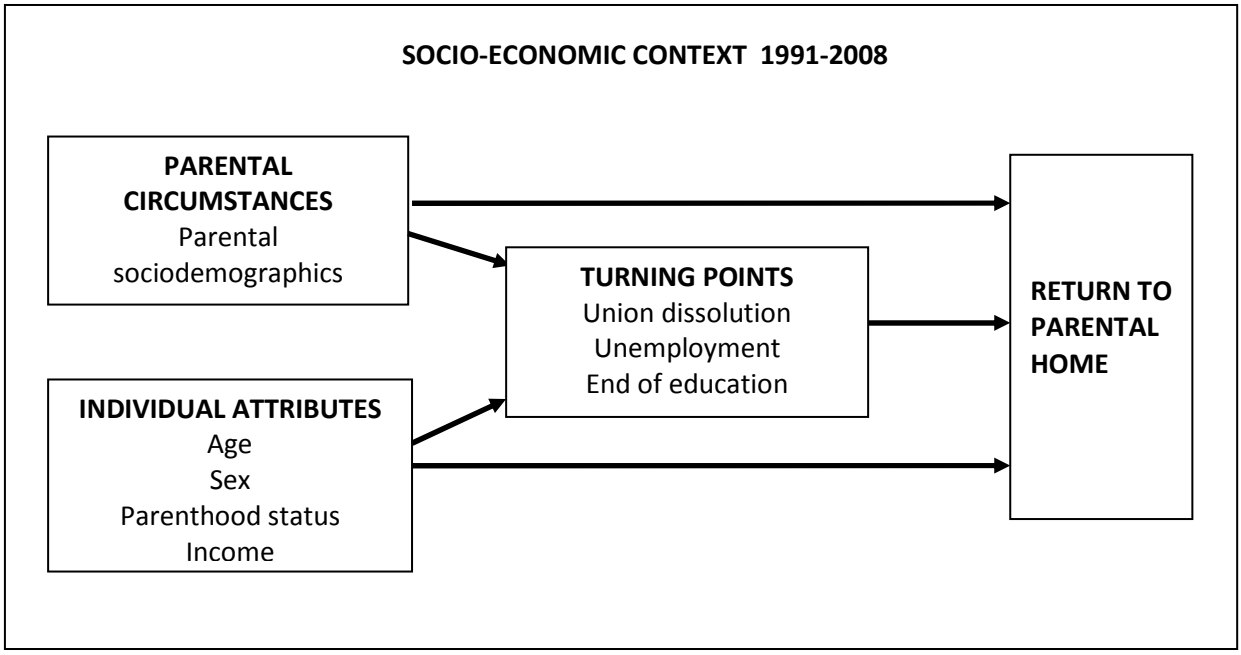
Young men and women in the UK have tended to leave home earlier than many of their European peers (Aassve et al. 2002;Billari et al. 2001) but are also more likely to return to the parental home in young adulthood (Iacovou and Parisi 2009). Research suggests that individual-level factors (including marital status and economic activity), parental-level factors (including class background) and contextual factors (such as house prices) can all affect the likelihood of returning to the parental home (Davanzo and Goldscheider 1990;Ermisch 1999;Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998). Over the past two decades the UK has seen important changes in, for example, higher education enrolment, housing affordability and the youth labour market, all of which have influenced the propensity for young adults to return to live with their parents, whether through choice or constraint (Aassve, Billari, Mazzuco, & Ongaro 2002;Coles et al. 1999;Jones 1995). Recent evidence from cross-sectional data (Stone et al. 2011) has shown a marked increase in co-residence between parents and their young adult children, particularly for women in their early twenties. It has often been assumed in discourse that this rise in co-residence is due to increased return to the parental home and there has been much discussion in the British media about of "boomerang children" (Bingham 2009;Waite 2008). In the absence of empirical research, there is currently debate over the extent to which returning home is increasing, and the extent to which any increase might relate to the expansion of higher education or the increasingly precarious situation of young adults. It has been established that the timing and reasons for leaving the parental home vary substantially by gender (Chiuri and Del Boca 2010). However, less is known about gender differences in the pathways and turning points that lead young adults to 'boomerang' back into the parental

home. In this paper, therefore, we use a large, nationally representative, panel study to examine more closely "boomerangers" Britain and focus in particular on the role of gender as a key moderator of determinants of returning to the parental home.

2. Theoretical background

We refer to a conceptual framework (Figure 1) which sees returning home as being influenced by parental background characteristics, individual factors and turning points in individuals' lives such as the experience of partnership dissolution. We situate these young adult lives in the changing socio-economic and policy context of the period 1991 to 2008.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for returning to the parental home



2.1 Turning points

The turning point is a key concept within life course theory, referring to an event, experience or change in circumstances that significantly alters the individual's subsequent life-course trajectory (Elder 1985). Returning home is associated with turning points in individuals' lives that increase the need for intergenerational support, such as leaving full-time education, becoming unemployed, and partnership dissolution (Gee et al. 1995;Sassler et al. 2008;Wang and Morin 2009). Strictly, turning points are distinctive from 'normative'

transitions that routinely occur, such as leaving school. However, we have included the end of education as a 'turning point' in our conceptual framework as we believe that, particularly in the face of rising youth unemployment (Office for National Statistics 2011), life-course trajectories on leaving education are increasingly unpredictable. Traditionally those leaving home for education were more likely to return as compared with those who left to marry (Jones 1995). In Britain it is relatively common to return immediately upon completing education and hence among those in their early twenties, the increase in higher education participation will have increased the proportions returning. Those who do not find employment on leaving education will be particularly susceptible, given that unemployment is associated with returning to the parental home (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). In relation to higher education, the fact that enrolment in Great Britain has increased at a faster rate among women (Office for National Statistics 2009) will mean that any observed increase in returning home among women will be ameliorated when variables capturing individuals' turning points are added into the model.

Partnership dissolution is a catalyst for returning home (Davanzo & Goldscheider 1990;Feijten and van Ham 2010;Ongaro et al. 2009;Sullivan 1986). From one perspective, union breakdown is a 'role failure' (Davanzo & Goldscheider 1990) that prompts a shortage of resources, for example through the division of the marital home and/or the reversion to a single-income household, without the economies of scale provided by a co-resident union. This lack of resources in turn increases the need for parental support, which may be provided via housing. The option of returning to the parental home on divorce or separation is also likely to be dependent on the strength of the family network (Ongaro, Mazzuco, & Meggiolaro 2009).

The association between partnership dissolution and returning home is moderated by gender and parenthood, and we expect to see an interaction between partnership and parenthood that is different for men and women. Overall, men are more likely than women to return to the parental home on the breakdown of a marriage or cohabiting partnership (Ongaro, Mazzuco, & Meggiolaro 2009;Sullivan 1986). One explanation for this is that women are more likely to be responsible for any dependent children. The presence of children will tend to increase the likelihood that women will stay in the marital home (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2008), and this may be the case even if the children are no longer co-resident with their parents (Mulder and Wagner 2010). We expect therefore to

see that among women who are consistently unpartnered or who have experienced partnership dissolution, mothers will be less likely to return to the parental home than childless women.

While the presence of children increases the likelihood that women will stay in the marital home, previous research suggests the opposite is the case for men (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen 2008;Mulder & Wagner 2010;Ongaro, Mazzuco, & Meggiolaro 2009). Given that it is most often the woman who retains custody of the children, among men who become divorced or separated those with children will be more likely to need to find a new residence than those without children. Moreover, fathers will likely have more limited economic resources to fund independent living than non-fathers, as they will be required to contribute financially to their children's upbringing. Our expectation then is that the parental home is a particularly common destination for non-resident fathers following union dissolution.

3. Research Questions

We have three main research questions:

1. How have patterns of leaving and returning home among young adults in Britain changed 1991-2008?
2. How do individuals' life events such as leaving full-time education, unemployment or partnership dissolution affect the risk of returning home?
3. To what extent do these effects vary by gender and parenthood status?

4. Data and Methods

4.1 The British Household Panel Study (BHPS)

The BHPS is a nationally representative panel study of individuals from 5500 households first interviewed in 1991, with children from original households added to the sample each year when they reach the age of 16 years. Currently 18 waves of data are available, through to 2008. For further details see the BHPS User Guide (Taylor et al. 2010). Using information collected within the household grid, it is possible to identify movement out of and back into the parental home as the study progresses. Individuals co-residing with at least one natural,

adoptive or step-parent as living in the parental home are defined as living in the parental home.

4.2 Analytical approach

We use a paired years approach investigating the likelihood that young adults living outside the parental home at a given annual panel wave (t0), return to live with their parents one year later (t1). Using this dataset and a discrete time hazards model we can thus look at the impact of covariates on the log-odds of returning home. In order to identify differences by gender we run the analyses separately for men and women. Our sample consists of individuals who provide valid data from at least two consecutive waves, who are living away from their parents in the first of these waves (t0), and in our target age range of 20-34 years at t0. We then track individuals through the subsequent, consecutive waves until they return to the parental home, are lost to follow-up or the survey reaches its final wave. This sub-sample includes 2,342 men with 10,522 person-years of data and 2,928 women with 14,706 person-years. Time-varying covariates e.g. income are measured at the start of each one-year period during which returning home can occur. We use wave (period) as the discrete unit of time in the hazard model.

Calculating attrition rates for this sample is not entirely straightforward as the follow-up period is not fixed and there are various reasons for censorship – for example respondents move out of scope if they move above the upper age limit. To give an indication of the extent of attrition we calculate the five-year follow-up rates for those who reach the target age of 20 years before 2003 (and therefore can potentially be followed up for five years). In this group, 78% of men and 79% of women were followed up for at least five years. Sample attrition is probably greater for those who remain outside the parental home than for those who return, potentially inflating the estimates for returning. However, we have no reason to believe that this bias will inconsistent over time, nor that it will be concentrated within particular sub-groups of young adults, so do not anticipate that it will affect our results markedly. Furthermore, earlier research by Ermisch using the same dataset found that such bias was likely to be small (Ermisch 1999).

4.3 Constructing the turning points

Following Davanzo and Goldscheider (1990) we construct change variables that denote a change in circumstances between two annual waves. Based on the change in economic

activity (employed; unemployed or inactive; full-time student) between two consecutive waves, we constructed an eight-category variable: 1. Student to employed; 2. Student to unemployed/inactive; 3. Unemployed/inactive to employed; 4. Employed to unemployed/inactive; 5. New student; 6. Stable student; 7. Stable employed; 8. Stable unemployed/inactive.

We include three categories of partnership dynamics: 1. New or stable partnership; 2. Consistently unpartnered; 3. Partnership dissolution. We do not include newly partnered as a separate category in our models as none of the sample members following this pattern returned to the parental home. In order to test whether the impact of partnership dissolution differs according to parenthood status we include a two-way interaction between parenthood status at t0 and the partnership dynamic variable.

4.4 Control variables

Parenthood status identifies whether the individual was a parent at t0. Being a parent is defined based on the relationship grid, with those living in the same household as a natural or adopted child defined as parents. We recognise that this potentially excludes a small proportion of sample members (primarily men) who were non-resident parents at t0.

Individual income is based upon total reported income in the month prior to interview and is time-varying. Income is coded in age-specific quartiles at each wave, with quartile 1 representing the lowest individual income.

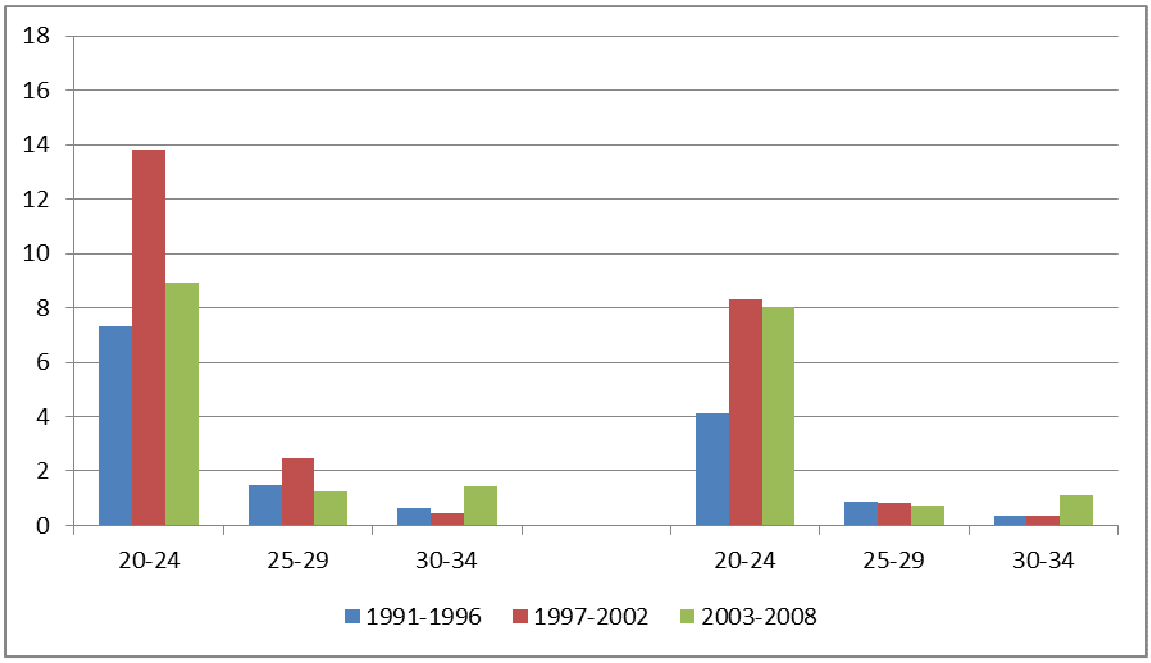
Parental occupational class is coded as a fixed covariate using the three-category version of the Goldthorpe class schema (Goldthorpe et al. 1987), which defines occupations as service, intermediate or working class. We use the ‘conventional’ approach (Goldthorpe 1983) to classification within households, with parental class based on the father’s occupation if this information is available and otherwise on the mother’s occupational class. 'Unemployed or inactive' is included as a separate category, coded using current economic activity. Any remaining missing values are coded in a fifth category of ‘unknown’.

5. Results

5.1 Changing dynamics of returning home

Figure 2 shows the annual percentage of young adults who returned to the parental home in each of three time periods, 1991-96, 1997-2002, 2003-08. The percentage returning decreases with age in both men and women. Men are more likely to return home than women. We see little evidence of an increase in returning over time for younger men and among women in their late twenties. However, women in their early twenties have become more likely to return since the early 1990s.

Figure 2: Change over time in annual percentage returning to the parental home, by age group and sex, weighted using cross-sectional weight at t0.



5.2 Determinants of returning home

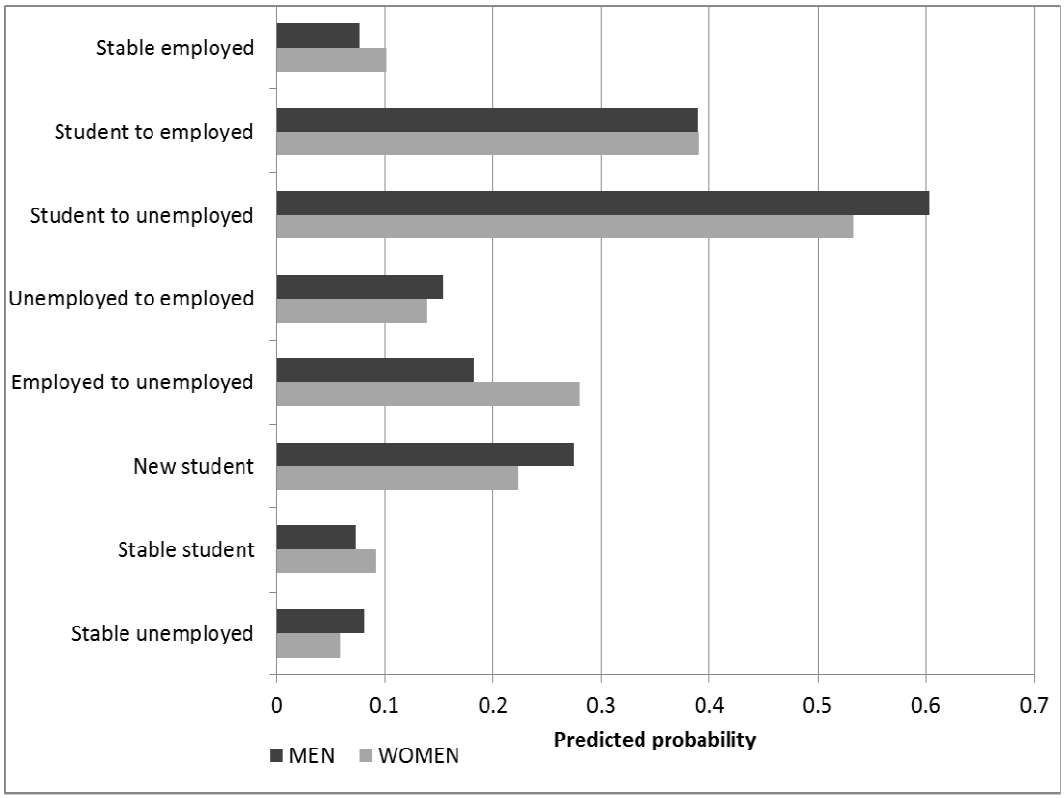
Table 1 shows results from a discrete time hazards model of returning home for men and women separately. Model 1 includes only period (historical time) and age. As expected from the descriptive statistics, the likelihood of returning declines with age and men are significantly more likely to return than women. When the turning points are included into the discrete time hazards model (model 2), period is no longer statistically significant. In other words, changes in the turning points statistically explain the historical increase in returning home for young women.

Table 1: Parameter estimates from discrete time hazard regression of returning home at ages 20-34 years.

	Men		Women	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Period (ref 1991-1996)				
1997-2002	0.029	0.007	0.303**	0.054
2003-2008	-0.006	-0.004	0.545***	0.190
Age group (ref. 20-24)				
25-29	-1.816***	-1.009***	-2.030***	-1.275***
30-34	-2.773***	-1.812***	-2.835***	-1.659***
Individual income (ref quartile 1, lowest)				
Quartile 2		0.042		-0.264
Quartile 3		-0.095		0.212
Quartile 4 (highest)		-0.375		-0.461†
Parental occ. class (ref service)				
Intermediate class		0.169		-0.044
Working class		0.572***		0.004
Unemployed/inactive		0.271		0.053
Not known		0.204		0.541*
Change in economic activity (ref stable employed)				
Student to employed		2.039***		1.713***
Student to unemployed or inactive		2.909***		2.312***
Unemployed or inactive to employed		0.785**		0.359
Employed to unemployed or inactive		0.988***		1.238***
New student		1.518***		0.927**
Stable student		-0.044		-0.116
Stable unemployed or inactive		0.064		-0.580
Change in partnership status (ref consistently unpartnered)				
New or stable partnership		-3.432***		-2.877***
Dissolution		1.660***		1.530***
Whether a parent (ref non-parent)				
Parent		-0.060		-1.670***
Partner x parent				
Stable.unpartnered X parent		0.596		1.44***
Dissolution X parent		0.870		-0.118
Constant	-2.274	-2.492	-2.931	-2.178
Person years	10522	10522	14706	14706
Pseudo R2	0.13	0.42	0.14	0.38

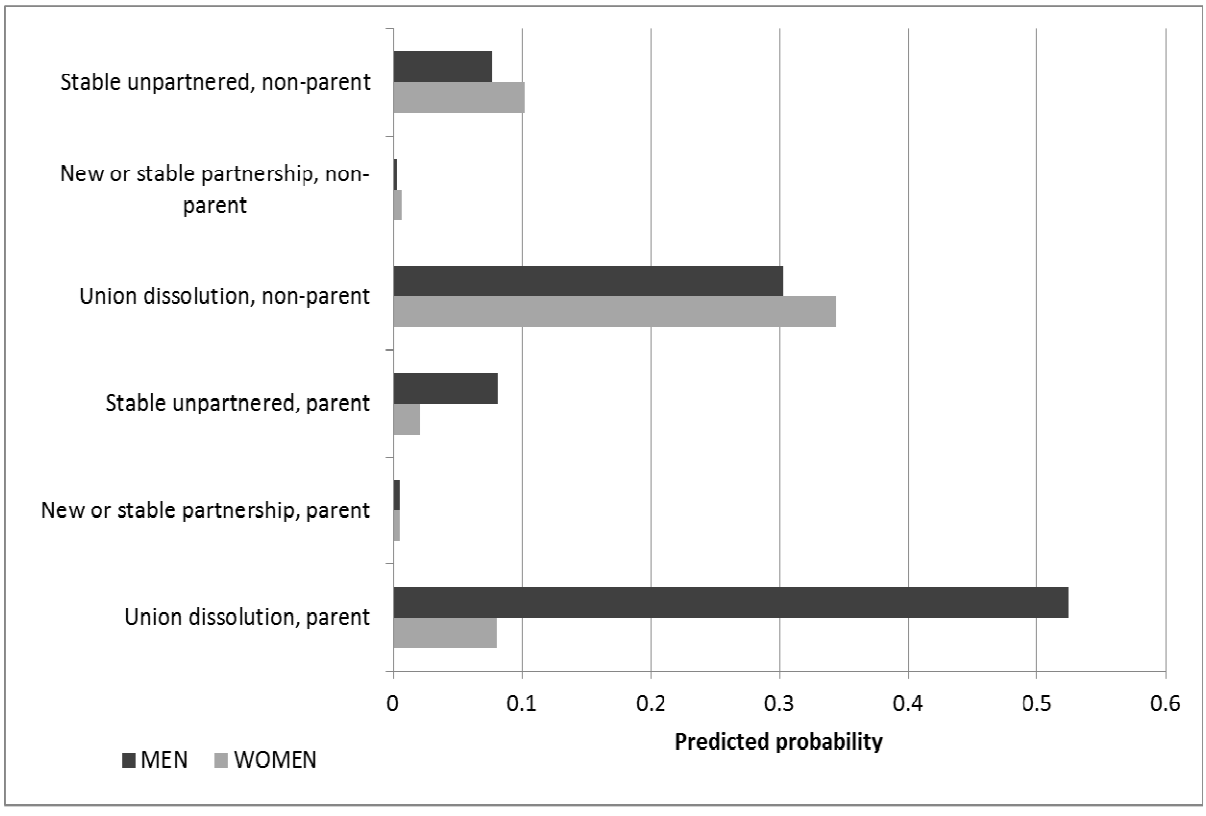
Further investigations found that it was the inclusion of the economic activity turning points variable which had most effect. For the change in economic activity, we see large coefficients for both men and women. Compared to those who remain employed at both time-points, those who move out of student status are very likely to return home, particularly if they move into unemployment or become economically inactive. Moving from being employed to being unemployed or economically inactive is also associated with an increased propensity to return. Overall, any change in status appears to increase the propensity to return; new students are also more likely to return than those in employment, particularly among men. In contrast, those with a stable economic activity status show a similar propensity to return, regardless of the nature of this status. Figure 3 shows the predicted annual probabilities of returning home by change in economic activity for men and women, based model 2, with all other covariates held constant at the baseline category. This clearly shows the higher propensity to return among those moving out of student status, with the highest probability (0.6) among men moving from education to unemployment.

Figure 3: Predicted annual probabilities of returning home by change in economic activity for men and women.



Partnership dissolution is very strongly associated with returning home. We see large, positive, and highly significant coefficients, especially for men. Compared with those in a new or stable partnership, men and women who are unpartnered at both time-points are also much more likely to return, although the coefficients are not so large as those for dissolution. A significant interaction is found between partnership and parenthood for women but not for men . Being a parent significantly reduces the likelihood that women who are unpartnered or who experience a union dissolution will return to the parental home. Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities of returning home according to partnership and parenthood experience. Women who experience a union dissolution are the most likely to return home among both female parents and non-parents, but those who experience a union dissolution and have no co-resident children have a predicted probability of returning of 0.33, compared with just 0.07 among mothers who experience a union dissolution. In contrast, parenthood has little impact on returning for women in a new or stable partnership, with predicted probabilities close to zero.

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of returning home according to partnership and parenthood experience for men and women.



For men, the interaction between partnership and parenthood is in the predicted direction but does not reach statistical significance (Table 1). Figure 4 shows that, among men who have experienced a union dissolution the predicted probability of returning is 0.54 for fathers, compared with 0.34 for non-fathers. As for women, parenthood has no impact on the probability of returning for men in a new or stable partnership, with predicted probabilities close to zero for fathers and non-fathers, respectively.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has provided new evidence on the dynamics of returning home in young adulthood in Great Britain. Overall, returning home is a relatively rare event, but among some subgroups of the population returning home is the norm if preceded by particular turning-points in the life course. While boomeranging is a normative event for those in their early twenties, particularly for young adults competing higher education, the incidence of returning drops rapidly with age. Contrary to media speculation, our empirical evidence suggests that there has been only a small increase in the rate of returning home in Great Britain. The increase is largely confined to women in their early twenties. By taking advantage of the longitudinal design of the BHPS and using a conceptual framework that situates returning home in the context of other transitions in the life course we demonstrate that this increase is mainly due to a rise in the number of young women attending higher education. Young women have become increasingly likely to leave home to attend higher education rather than to form a partnership, and hence are more likely to return home in their early- to mid-twenties. These findings highlight the importance of gender, as the relationship between higher education and period changes in returning to the parental home is clearly linked to the feminisation of higher education in Great Britain, with females now outnumbering male undergraduates (Office for National Statistics 2009).

In past decades, there was an expectation that on completion of higher education, young adults would move into graduate employment. However, the increasingly volatile youth labour market in Great Britain represents a barrier to young adults making the 'normative' transition from education into the labour market and those who do make this transition may often be overeducated (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). Our analysis of turning points clearly shows that this is has a knock-on effect in terms of residential independence.

Young men and women who moved from being a student to being unemployed were the group most likely to return to the parental home, particularly men in their late teens and early twenties. Despite this, we did not see any pronounced increase over time in the proportions of young men returning to the parental home. However, this is likely because our data, which cover the period 1991-2008, largely predate the recent recession in Great Britain. At the same time, moving from student status to employment also showed a strong association with returning, and it appeared that it was the end of student status rather than subsequent economic activity status that was the most important predictor of returning. This suggests that returning to the parental home on completion of higher education might be considered a 'normative' transition rather than a turning point.

Moving from employment to unemployment or inactivity was also positively associated with returning to the parental home, but less so than ending education. Again, it appeared to be the change in economic activity status that was associated with returning rather than the qualitative nature of this change, with moving from unemployment or inactivity into employment also showing a positive association with returning. Although this seems counter-intuitive, we must bear in mind that moving into low-paid employment may not necessarily help young adults to gain residential independence since by having a wage they will reduce their entitlement to social assistance such as housing benefit (Lewis 1997;Smith 2005).

While previous research has highlighted gender differences in patterns of leaving and returning to the parental home e.g. (Gee et al. 2003;Iannelli and Smyth 2008;Widmer and Ritschard 2009), less attention has been paid, particularly in the North American literature, to the ways in which gender can moderate the effects of other determinants of co-residence with parents. In the present paper, we have addressed this by analysing men and women separately and by, for example, investigating how the moderating impact of parenthood differs for men and women. We have shown how union dissolution is a key determinant of returning home. For childless men and women, the impact of dissolution is similar. However, for mothers, union dissolution has little impact on the propensity to return to the parental home. Conversely, non-resident fathers are even more likely than non-fathers to return to the parental home following a union dissolution. This supports previous European research indicating while there is little gender difference in who remains in the marital home following dissolution among non-parents, among parents the female

partner will more commonly remain in the marital home (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2008, Mulder and Wagner 2010, Ongaro et al. 2009).

In conclusion, our findings highlight the need to consider the interconnections between transitions and turning points in different domains across life course. In particular, we have shown that union dissolution – a key 'turning point' in the family domain – is an important predictor of returning home in young adulthood. However, this association is highly dependent on both gender and parenthood. After union dissolution, mothers and fathers may find support from different sources, with young, lone mothers more reliant on the welfare state and single, non-resident fathers requiring greater support from their parents. It is also important to consider pathways out of the parental home as a predictor of returning. Over the past two decades the postponement of partnership formation and increasing uptake of higher education have meant that women have become more similar to men in their reasons for leaving the parental home. Completion of education continues to be an important catalyst for returning to the parental home. This is particularly salient in the UK context of recession and planned increases in tuition fees.

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