

LEAVING THE NEST IN TWO DIFFERENT EUROPEAN CONTEXTS. INTRODUCTION OF A RESEARCH ON HOUSING AND NEST LEAVING.

Mariana Irazoqui Solda (M.Irazoqui@frw.uva.nl)

Amsterdam study centre for the Metropolitan Environment, University of Amsterdam.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Nest leaving is the process by which young people leave the parental home, progressively acquiring the independence and autonomy associated with adulthood. This separation can be described as an expected normal step in the relationship between parents and children [1], and represented as a transition in diverse aspects of life, such as completion of studies, integration in the labour market, moving to an autonomous residence and the formation of union and an own family [2]. Since there is no need to fulfil all these transitions in order to become an adult, nest-leaving processes may be diverse, following different patterns in relation to economic, residential and familial situations.

From the demographic point of view, studying nest leaving presents a main interest. Developments in this life phase are an important part of family and household dynamics. Its study is specifically relevant for understanding recent changes in union formation, childbearing and regional variation among European families. Accordingly, several commentators have been concerned with increasing ages of home leaving observed in most European countries since the beginning of the eighties [3,4,5,6]. Only some studies explored regional differences in those trends [7,8,9] in spite of the fact that home leaving is not homogeneous across Europe. Indeed, differences arise in a simple examination of available data on young people's residential situation.

Southern European countries present the highest proportions of people living with their parents in their late twenties (40-50%). This indicates a longer period of dependence than in the rest of Western Europe, where these proportions are around 15-25%. Differences in living arrangements outside the parental home are also identified. Living alone is uncommon in the South of Europe whereas it represents between 10 and 20% of young people in most Northern and Western European countries. The same applies to unmarried cohabitation, which is highly infrequent in Southern countries [10]. In a recent comparison among young Europeans, a closer connection between living independently and marriage and family formation has been reported for these countries [3]. In the South of Europe, the formation of new households and families coincides with leaving home and is effectively delayed. Although households are formed earlier in other Western countries, leaving home is produced in a context of changing roles of cohabitation and non-family living.

To the extent that separation between residential independence and union and family formation is present in Western countries, the focus on nest leaving should

be directed to either the formation of new families and the non-family context in household formation.

2. STATE-OF-THE-ART RESEARCH ON NEST LEAVING.

Residential situations at different ages give a crude approximation of regional differences in the process of nest leaving. When these differences seem to be rooted in the past, explanations have stressed the influence of broad changes in age-norms, culture and familial values as well as in economic opportunities for young people.

2.1. *Historical context*

Historical research has suggested that not standard pattern of home leaving existed in the pre-industrial past. Departures from parents were related instead to gender, the demands of family economy and the regulation of succession between generations [11, 12]. Spending longer periods outside the parental home was common practice in areas of Northern and Central Europe [12]. Children who could not be kept and supported at home or whose labour was not profitable were sent to other households to work as domestic or productive servants. They also departed to get education, spending a training period linked to the apprenticeship system and often placed with relatives or neighbours. However, these boarding practices were not common in other European areas. They never reached important proportions in Southern Europe, where the majority of young adults remained working at the parental farm [13]. Any time lags spent outside the parental home were shorter, residential separation from parental household used to be definitive and firmly associated to marriage [14]. Additionally, children who were destined to take over the parental farm did not leave home at all in nineteenth-century rural Europe. In certain legal systems of transmission of patrimony the joint residence of a newly married couple took place within the parental home. Thus, marriage in past societies was not necessarily related to departures from the parental home.

2.2. *Socio-cultural trends*

Nest leaving processes have become more uniform over the twentieth century, as timing in life transitions became more regulated according to specific age-norms, rather than in relation to the needs of the family [15]. Nest leaving began to be closely connected to marriage and it occurred at increasingly younger ages. The closest association with marriage patterns was reached in the 1950-60s in most Western countries [16]. The majority of young people left home then in order to marry and form an independent household, soon afterwards followed by the birth of a child.

Affluence, full employment as well as higher availability of housing facilitated this process. Nevertheless, current explanations on post-war demographic and family changes tended to highlight socio-cultural development as a crucial factor in changing age norms.

Changes in aspirations and attitudes towards family life have been detected as the basis of the standardisation and uniformity in nest leaving patterns. A trend towards self-fulfilment and independence has been recognised in a context in which the only way of expression was through marriage [17]. But since the 1970s, similar attitudes of autonomy are regarded as leading to a diversification in home leaving patterns in Northern and Western Europe. Given that leaving home appears to be progressively losing its marriage and familial connotations, the moment in life to start independence and the living arrangement after departure may be freely chosen by young adults in those countries. This outcome has allowed theoretical formulations to treat nest leaving as an individual decision, often related to other aspects of life like training, education or the taking up of employment opportunities. Nevertheless, demographic and residential trends in other European countries seem to contrast with those in Western Europe and former explanations based on individualistic values could be brought into question in the South European case [8]. In Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece marriages were also postponed after a phase of high nuptiality, lower ages at first union and early nest leaving [18], although this process started approximately one decade later than in North-western countries. In the eighties, residential departures from parental home were delayed in the South of Europe, leaving home retained a strong connection to marriage timing. Whether it is speculated with a convergence in European trends, transitions in the South do not seem to fit into a framework of individualisation, autonomy and higher propensity to live alone after leaving the nest [19, 20]. Longer residence in the parental home and marriage as main reason for departure appear to be steady patterns in Southern countries. Therefore, it is necessary to look for other explanations to understand the specificity of the family patterns in the South of Europe.

2.3. *Economic opportunities*

One can agree that material conditions to set up the 'nest' are important to explain variation in home leaving and household formation characteristics among countries. Understanding differences in Europe primarily requires comparing diverse structural determinants to the process. Economic and labour opportunities are normally considered, but one must also account for broad '*educational practices, tax laws, welfare and housing policies*' that make '*implicit and explicit statements about expected ages at independence*' [21].

Explanations of nest leaving-timing differences have emphasised the effect of changing labour markets and unemployment across Europe. Economic variables are

seen as crucial in the opportunity to achieve residential independence from parents and setting up a household. But in spite of generalised worsening economic conditions and fiscal austerity, variation in young people's situation in the labour market and employment opportunities can be regarded as a main source of differences among countries [3,22]. The possibility to rely on other sources of financial aid may also explain cross-country differences. Resources can also come from subsidies or transfers, usually obtained by young people in the form of social benefits, state grants, bursaries or parents' help. Taking a European perspective, Jones [2] has observed that a safety net for young people seems to be provided by a stronger welfare system in Northern and Western countries, whereas in the South of Europe economic support is supplied by the family. The latter regards economic collaboration and family solidarity [23], which has been theorised as a part of a broad 'strategy of installation of descendants' [24].

Besides considering macro-context elements, individual circumstances are commonly applied in order to explain variation in timing and patterns of departure within particular structures. In fact, the common theoretical framework for analysing nest leaving decisions is based on the assessment of the impact of economic factors at the individual level. In a classical micro-economic sense, they are considered to be constraints to early independent living arrangements. Instead of drawing on strict economic theory, most literature has conceptualised leaving home behaviour in a broader framework of rationality. Decisions on leaving the parental residence appear to depend on '*preferences and specific opportunities and restrictions that appear both individually and socially*' [25]. Therefore, a main interest remains in the study of the impact of economic restrictions at the individual and aggregate levels. Holdsworth [9] proposes to consider whether the impact of these economic factors is consistent across different European societies and how this interrelates with other elements of the socio-economic structure. The latter will help us to explain how employment or participation in education affect residential and family choices, taking into account other specific context elements, such as organisation of family, welfare, culture, normative expectations, labour and housing markets structure at the macro-level.

3. RESEARCHING NEST LEAVING IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT.

The research project *Nest leaving and housing. A comparison between the Netherlands and Spain*¹ departs from a macro comparison of demographic and household trends at the European level. Overview of basic indicators suggests structural differences and allows exploring two regional models in nest leaving

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timing and household formation patterns. To present these models, I draw on historically oriented explanations of family relationships, which consider the European geography of the family as divided in regional systems² [14]. My assumption is that international comparison on nest leaving timing and patterns may illustrate differences in assets at the disposal of young people starting independent living. As referred above, differences in assets at the aggregate, regional level appear related to context elements such as education, employment, housing structures, culture, religion, family organisation and welfare regimes. Among those relevant elements, I propose to focus on the study of housing. This is an original subject, relatively less investigated in spite of the immediate connection between leaving the parental home and first housing attainment³. Since major attention has been given to labour market and education, I intend to explore housing as an interest field to explain cross-country variation in ages and patterns of home leaving.

3.1. Housing contexts

In the project, the exploration of the role of housing is divided in two parts. First, I develop a theoretical background that builds on the relationship between housing, population development and household processes (based on Myers, [26]). Among different approaches, nest leaving is specifically studied by using insights of the housing career approach. Housing attainment is seen as a dynamic residential process in which the divide between renting and ownership appears to be a particular point of interest. Secondly, I consider that differences in nest leaving and household formation processes at the European level are connected with regional housing market characteristics. These are in turn related to the role of social policies as well as family housing strategies. Incidence of tenure type helps to roughly sketch the relation between European family models and distinctive housing markets patterns. To illustrate this point, one may consider regional differences in housing stock by ranking countries according to the importance of their own-ownership structures [27].

Spain and the Netherlands are placed at the extremes of the ranking. In the research project, these two countries are chosen to assess regional differences and to explore the existence of two European residential models. Spain has a proportionally large owner-occupier sector, extended during the dictatorship period at expenses of rental units. Following the conversion to democracy, policies were introduced for the deregulation of a tightly controlled market, stimulating

the private building initiative and encouraging speculation [28]. This resulted in an unprecedented housing growth that culminated in a crisis by the middle 1980s. The access to the housing market was then increasingly complicated due to the high costs involved and the scarcity of rental supply. For the sake of contrast, the Netherlands' study area is characterised by a controlled urban development that largely influenced housing markets since post war. An important Dutch rental sector was facilitated by an active role of non-profit landlords who promoted moderate rents and encouraged the access to housing of low-income households.

These settings may be strongly correlated to differences in young people's nest leaving processes, as related mainly to the housing accessibility and possibilities for establishing an independent residence. Not surprisingly, most Spanish young people are found living in a residence they own or which was provided rent-free by their families once they could leave parental home. In the Netherlands, the existence of advantageous conditions for starters may be linked to the importance of rental sectors, the majority of young leavers being tenants in their first residence⁴. Leaving home timing and household formation patterns (involving marriage in Spain but a variety of living arrangements in the Netherlands) can be connected with specific housing options. Married Spanish and Dutch couples enter ownership, whereas renting is much of an option for early nest leavers who are single or cohabiting.

3.2. Methodology and data sources

A comparative approach is taken in order to understand nest leaving processes and its multiple relation with housing. The comparative methodology implies examination of trends in two countries with different housing contexts. Information derived is empirical and the analysis is carried out in two steps, first *by comparison of similarities and differences in nest leaving processes and relevant context elements* and, secondly, *by identification of the relationships between processes and those elements*.

In the research project, two main data sources combining retrospective information on residential mobility, household dynamics and housing context have been selected. The first is the (ESD) Spanish *Socio-Demographic Survey*, a large-scale, retrospective survey taken in the fourth trimester of 1991 by the Spanish Statistics Institute (INE). Dutch data is derived from the (WBO) *Housing Demand Survey's* waves of 1981, 1985/1986 and 1989/1990. Despite the cross-sectional nature of this large-scale database, the survey taking in different waves and the existence of

² According to this approach, the spatial pattern results from a simplification of the traditional division of Europe between marriage regimes, demographic structures and family systems.

³ It has been said that the access to housing appears then as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition to nest leaving, since an autonomous dwelling unit attainment is a pre-condition for residential independence.

⁴ By own calculation of ESD data, I estimate that in Spain, 62% and 8% of people who left home in the later eighties, entered ownership or went to live in a house provided by the family in their first residence, respectively. In the Dutch case, estimations based on the WBO 1989 for the same period showed that 70% of leavers started in a rental unit.

retrospective questions allows a longitudinal approach to home leaving processes.

3.3. Changing patterns of leaving home in the Netherlands and Spain

In the following paragraphs some results of the analysis are presented, mainly those regarding comparison on demographic aspects of leaving home in the countries of study that can be further connected with specific housing contexts.

In the first part of the research, historical changes in timing and patterns of nest leaving are described. With this aim, the perspective chosen is the cohort-analysis based on a life-table methodology. Analysis is performed in selected generations (1915-64) for which nest leaving process has been practically completed. A major problem comes from the fact that only survivors can be interviewed. In addition, the retrospective design of home leaving questions bring associated recall and memory problems, relatively more present in members of older generations. Therefore, those born before 1915 have been left out of the analysis. However, the analysis considers the majority of respondents who reported to have *left home*⁵ in the Spanish and Dutch surveys (85% and 88%, respectively). Respectively, a total of 83.700 and 40.400 cases are considered and, in order to improve representativity of results, data in both surveys has been weighted.

For all cohorts, nest leaving starts between the 16 and 19 years. Percentages of people left under age 16 over the total who left home on selected cohorts were 5% in the Netherlands and 1% in Spain. In both countries, the oldest cohorts followed a similar pattern. Among first pre-war cohorts, the half of their members left home before age 26. Whereas this same proportion was reached before age 25 in the following Dutch cohorts, the Spanish generation of 1930-34 continued to be attached to the previous pattern. The secular process of reduction in age at home leaving has been more acute in the Netherlands, especially in cohorts born immediately previous to the world war, which experienced home leaving transitions in the decade of the fifties. In Spain, the same trend starts to show among those who left home in the late sixties. Nevertheless, at age 24 only 50% of Spaniards were living out of the parental home, in front of 70% of Dutch people in the cohort 1940-1944. Differences become bigger when examining the youngest cohorts suggesting the effect of two differentiate transition models.

In order to get an approximation of nest-leaving timing, the evolution in median ages and quartiles (ages

at which the 25% and 75% of leavers in a birth cohort are found having left home) is displayed in figure 1. They indicate the same process of decline in ages at leaving home in both countries. Median ages have been reduced continually in the Netherlands (in special from the 1930-1934 cohorts on), while they increased for the cohorts who left home after the civil war in Spain. In the following Spanish generations, median ages continued to decrease, especially for those born between 1935-1955 and who fulfilled their transition during post-war economic growth. The examination of timing indicators by cohorts also indicates how advancements of leaving home have been produced by means of an important decrease in upper limits to this process (ages at which the process can be considered practically completed) in both countries. Additionally, the lower limit of registered departures in younger Dutch cohorts has been further reduced, indicating that the process increasingly encompassed younger people, around ages 19 to 20. Across Spanish cohorts, first quartiles remained stable while third quartiles strongly decreased, resulting in a concentration of the process in the 22-26 age span.

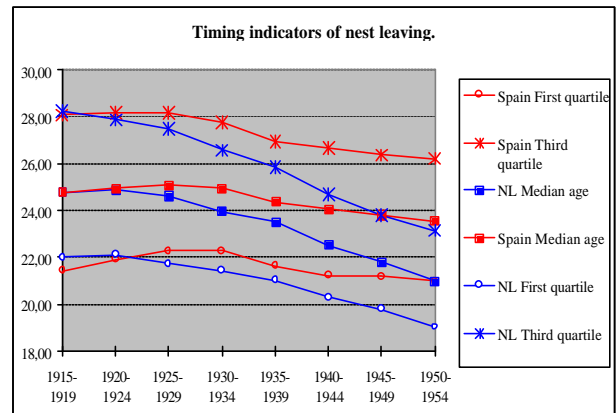


Figure 1.

On the other hand, trends in home leaving timing highly parallel observed changes in ages at first marriage. The effective connection between both events can be observed by looking at the evolution of union situations after leaving the parental home. Here simple proportions of union situation are presented⁶. They refer to marriage, non-marital cohabitation and *non-union* situations, in which the respondent went to live alone or with other non-relatives after departure from parental home.

⁵ Only those respondents who left home and did so between ages 16-39 have been considered, given that: 1) we do not have information on those who remain at home in the Dutch survey and 2) this age-span is regarded as the adequate to examine first nest-leaving transition, since it comprises those ages at which the majority of individuals traditionally initiate and complete residential transitions. (Few) abnormal cases, such as early leaves, possible returns and co-residence of old parents with adults are, therefore, excluded.

⁶ In the project hazard rates are further calculated in order to examine the probability of leaving home by cohort and age, including differences by sex and union situation after leaving.

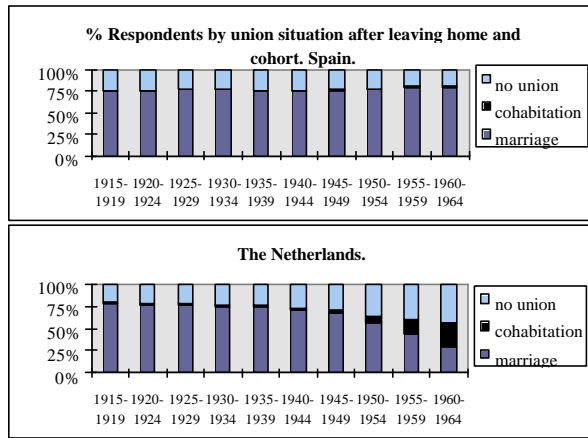


Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows the major importance of marriage in both countries as a traditional form of leaving parental home. In Spain, we also observe a rise in marriage option after home leaving in cohorts born after the 1950s. This fits with the higher intensity and early marriages produced during the seventies in this country. For the sake of contrast, marriage evolution presents a clear diverged pattern in the Netherlands. Whereas this was the common union situation for those leaving home until the late sixties, marriage alternatives were strongly reduced in recent cohorts, being only partially compensated by increases in cohabitation. Proportions of leavers living alone and with others have grown, a fact that clearly points to a change in the character of first departures in the Netherlands.

The second part of the research project examines recent changes in home leaving, which are analysed using a period approach. Residential transitions in the study-countries are compared for the decade of the eighties, when household formation processes became much more complex relative to the uniform patterns experienced during the 1960s. The crisis context add interest in concentrating specifically on a period for which extended education, higher unemployment and difficulties in housing markets have been documented. From all observations, those corresponding to individuals who left home during 1981-1989 at ages between 18 and 39 have been selected. This resulted in a total of 22.000 cases for Spain and 8.300 for the Netherlands. Probabilities of leaving parental home in a determinate year were calculated taken into account people who left home over those who either left or remained home up to this year, for specific age groups.

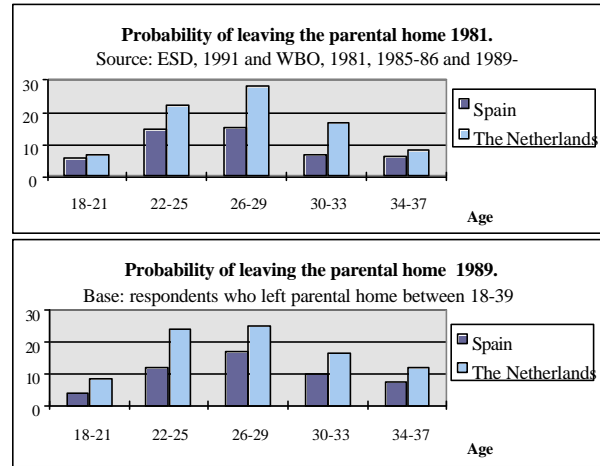


Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows a different evolution of period-probabilities in both countries. In Spain, it appears that the chance of leaving the nest is lower at all ages, but there has been a slightly increase in the probability to leave in older age groups. On the contrary, chances of departure at any age have increased in the Netherlands (especially since 1986), except for people older than 25. Consequently, the crisis in the first half of the decade may have only affected relative older Dutch leavers whereas it affected younger transitions during all the period in the Spanish case.

Differences in union situation after leaving home have also become more acute. In the 1980s, leaving home for marriage was predominant in Spain, and was only slightly reduced from 1985 on. Cohabitation increased since the first half of the decade, although continued to be marginal. In contrast, union formation after leaving the nest became increasingly uncommon among young Dutch leavers. Since 1986, the data also allows to distinguish between marriage and cohabitation in the Netherlands. It can be establish that marriage remained stable, at lower proportions. Further recuperation in union formation among Dutch leavers was induced by increases in cohabitation. The examination of union situation after leaving the nest in the eighties confirms the high contrast and the divergent evolution of nest leaving and household formation patterns in both study-countries.

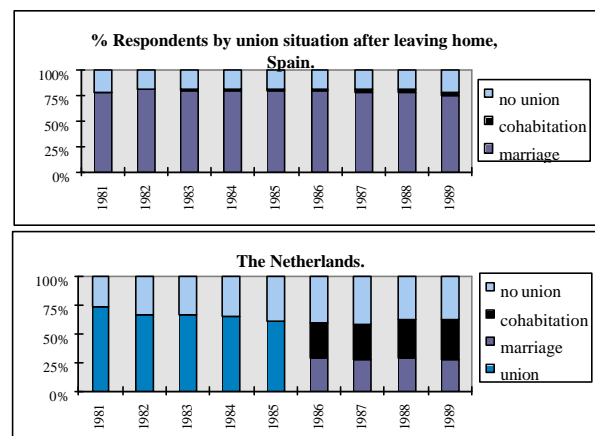


Figure 4.

Additionally, the relation between age and union situation after leaving home has been taken into account. In the period 1986-1989 and considering those who left home between 18-39 years of age, a significant effect of age on household position can be found in both countries. The contingency between age at departure and union situation after leaving home has been considered by testing the independence between age categories and the three union situations. The results of chi-square statistics, with 10 degrees of freedom are significant. These are 328.45 for the Netherlands and 394.34 in Spain. In the frequency tables, only one cell out of 18 (5,6%) was expected to count less than 5 in each country.

Hence, in the Netherlands, non-union situations are more common among those leaving home at early ages (18-21), whereas it is somehow characteristic of people aged 22-25 in Spain. This difference could be explained by later average ages at home leaving in Spain, suggesting that even if less people enter non-union situations, those who do it tend to have left home earlier. Marriage and cohabitation situations followed a similar age pattern in both countries during the period, being usually produced at ages 22-25, with marriage slightly prolonged to the next age group in the Dutch case.

4. CONCLUSION.

The interest, theoretical backgrounds and basic assumptions in the research project '*Nest Leaving and Housing. A comparison between the Netherlands and Spain*' are introduced by this article. Results of demographic analysis on historical and present differences in nest leaving timing and patterns are presented for the study-countries.

Both, Spain and the Netherlands have been increasingly reducing the ages at which individuals traditionally left the parental home, confirming the trends suggested by previous research in other European countries. The analysis of historical cohorts shows that reductions have been more acute in the Netherlands, whilst in the Spanish case they were strongly related to changes in marriage timing. In Spain, marriage continued to be the dominant situation after departure in the 1980s and this conventional relation between union formation and nest-leaving timing strongly suggests the existence of a differentiate transition pattern. Yet, changes assumed by theories on individualisation and autonomy can also be brought into question for the Spanish case.

Recent home leaving patterns are strikingly different in the Netherlands, with higher probabilities to leave home at younger ages and to experience non-marital and non-union living arrangements in first independent residences. These (inter-related) flexible situations are experienced by the majority of leavers in the Netherlands, reflecting the existence of many possibilities for establishing an independent residence, e.g., in order to attend education or to for autonomy reasons. Availability of cheap and easily accessible accommodation can be assumed to play an important

role in those cases. The relationships that link home leaving characteristics and housing context are further discussed in the research project by focusing on similarities in early residential trajectories of nest-leavers in each study-country during the 1980s. Special attention is given to changes of conditions in Dutch and Spanish housing markets and their effects on home leaving behaviour in this period. Additionally, exploration of the interaction between nest leaving and housing market context is extended to the historical analysis to illustrate the effect of context on individual transitions.

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