Family Cultures:
Residential Independence and Family Ties of University Students in Italy and Germany

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Abstract

European societies differ in the role that family relations have in the life of their members, for example, in the provision of care, in work relationships and in living arrangements. While southern European societies can be described as family-centred or familialistic, northern Europeans are regarded as rather individualistic. This study shows that the departure of young people from the parental home is a key element in explaining these differences.

Young southern Europeans usually (not only since the recent economic crisis) leave the parental home later than their northern European peers. A thorough examination of the literature on this topic, including studies in sociology, geography, history, economics, anthropology, and psychology, reveals that this behavioural difference is not merely the result of favourable or unfavourable economic conditions. From open-ended interviews with university students and their parents in Italy and Germany (N=43), it was possible to reconstruct different social norms and opposed patterns of interpreting reality that support either the early residential independence of young people or their coresidence with parents. These socially shared patterns of interpretation concern various aspects of the transition to adulthood, such as the role of parents as advisors of their children; the preparation of young people for their future lives; and the expectations regarding meritocracy in the labour market. The interviews, furthermore, illustrate how these norms and meanings are transmitted from one generation to the next in the socialisation process.

Having their roots in the period before the Industrial Revolution, the different patterns of leaving home have considerably shaped northern and southern European societies over time. The study points out that residential independence during education and early career can be a source for innovation and social change as well as a triggering factor for economic growth and for the development of public welfare institutions.
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**Bio:** Therese Lützelberger was born in Germany. During a high school year in Mexico she began to be interested in the questions that later became the topic of her doctoral dissertation. She holds a Master of Arts in Cultural Sciences and Hispanic Studies from the University of Leipzig and a Master of Research in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute; she further specialised in Sociology at the University of Manchester and at the University of Chile. She worked at the Pablo Neruda Museum in Santiago de Chile and at the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies in Hamburg and is currently employed by a Catalan company in her hometown, Brandenburg. During the fieldwork for her PhD thesis, she was based in Bonn and Florence. Her research interests include the empirical investigation of culture, the evolution of institutions, and the role of family in society.