

The influence of economic insecurity on young adult relationship to parents: A comparison of Munich and Milan¹

Carolin Thönnissen, Sabine Walper (University of Munich), & Eugenia Scabini (University Cattolica Milano)

In recent research on early adulthood, the timing of home-leaving has received considerable attention. Data show that residential autonomy is increasingly postponed in many countries due to prolonged education and related financial restrictions as well as risks. This study focuses on links between financial risks encountered at the transition into the labor market, the quality of young adults' relationships to their family of origin, and home-leaving in Italy and Germany. Macrostatistics evidence higher youth unemployment and later home leaving in Italy than in Germany. Taking this finding to the individual level, it was expected that higher perceived economic risks among Italian young adults explain their higher rates of coresidence with parents.

As expected, young adults in Milan assessed the economic situation as significantly worse than young adults in Germany and were significantly more likely to coresidence with their parents. However, effects of economic insecurity on delayed home-leaving were less clear than hypothesized. Furthermore, the quality of parent-offspring relationships differed by country, gender and young adults' well-being. Strong culturally framed family ties in Italy might explain missing links between economic risks, home-leaving, and individuation in Italy.

Sample:

N = 849 young adults (age 20–30 years)
 • 405 Germans (47.7%) from Munich
 • 444 Italians (52.3%) from Milan

Gender:

499 young women (58.8%)
 350 young men (41.2%)
 The gender distribution is similar in both cities.

Data Assessment:

Participants answered a standardized questionnaire addressing individuation, home leaving, and economic issues (see right column). The parent-offspring relationship was tested using the Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence.

Data Analysis:

Differences between the two cities were analyzed using t-tests. In addition, correlations and binary logistic regressions were used to analyze interrelations between variables.

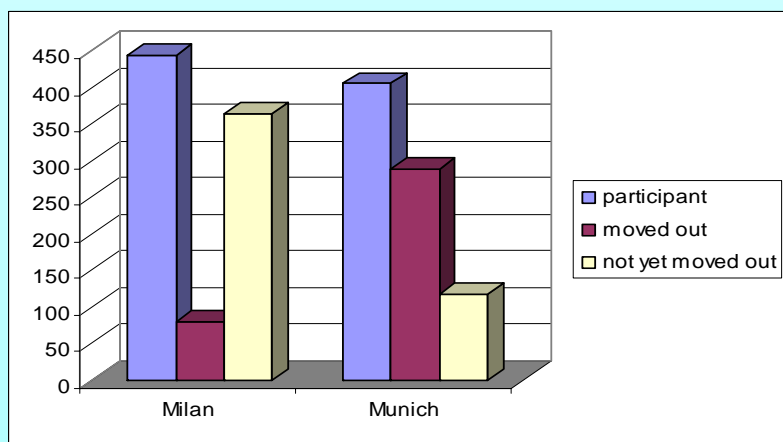
Variables:

For a comparison between Munich and Milan especially these five variables were used:

- ☞ **Assessment of economic situation** $\alpha = .73$
 (6 Items- rating scale: 1=not true; 4=really true)
Example: If you are young you may become unemployed very easily.
- ☞ **Individuation**
 - **Individuation** $\alpha(\text{mother})=.71; \alpha(\text{father})=.77; \alpha(\text{parents})=.81$
 (4 Items- rating scale: 1 = not true; 4 = really true)
Example: I like it when he/she talks to me.
 - **Engulfment Anxiety** $\alpha(\text{mother})=.85; \alpha(\text{father})=.82; \alpha(\text{parents})=.89$
 (6 Items - rating scale: 1=not true; 4=really true)
Example: I often wish he/she should be less caring and should not worry about me
- ☞ **Moving out**
Example: Who lives in your household?
 At which age did you move out?
- ☞ **Depressive Mood** $\alpha = .81$
 (8 Items – rating scale: 1=less than one day; 4=5 to 7 days)
Example: During the last week I felt lonely
- ☞ **Negative Self-esteem** $\alpha = .84$
 (7 Items – rating scale: 1=not true; 4=really true)
Example: Sometimes I feel useless

Results:

Figure 1: Residential status by city

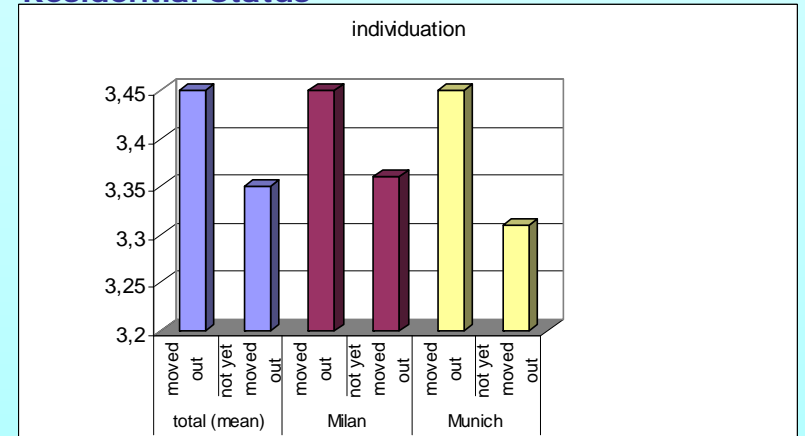


Within our sample, **368** participants (43.3%) had already moved out while **481** (56.7%) still coresided with their parents.

As expected, home-leaving was more prevalent in Munich than in Milan.

It was possible to show a connection between moving out and individuation. Individuation was tested with two different items – one named **individuation**, the other **engulfment anxiety**.

Figure 2: Differences in Individuation by Residential Status



As can be seen in figure 2 (above) the total sample demonstrates **significant differences in individuation dependent on residential status** ($t=2.904; df=776; p<.01$): In Munich as well as Milan, self-reported individuation is higher among those who moved out. However, this difference reaches significance only for the Munich sample ($t=2.264; df=366; p<.05$), not for Milan ($t=1.526; df=408; p>.05$).

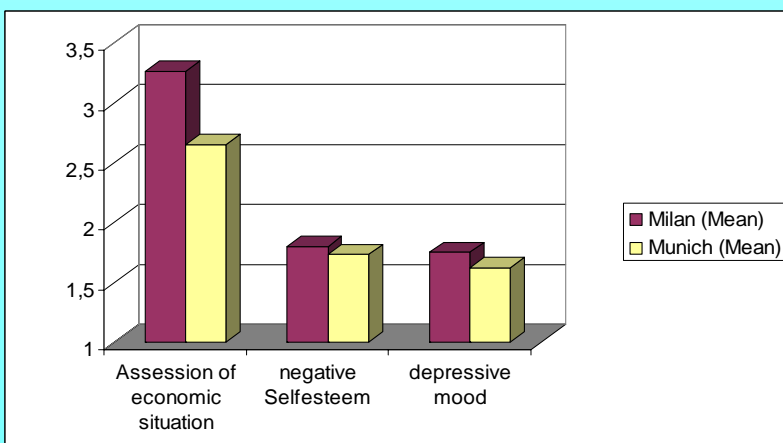
Regarding links between **residential status and Engulfment Anxiety** findings are more consistent. Young adults who still reside with their parents report higher engulfment anxiety in relation to their parents ($M=2.11$) than young people who already moved out ($M=1.80$) ($t=-7.580; df=775; p<.01$). This holds for both subsamples in Milan ($t=-3.365; df=408; p<.01$) and Munich ($t=-4.099; df=365; p<.01$).

In **Milan** only 18% of the young adults ($N=80$) had already moved out while 82% ($N=364$) were still living with their parents. In comparison, 71.1% of the **Munich sample** ($N=288$) had moved out while 28.9% ($N=117$) lived at their parents' house.

Comparing the age of (past or planned) moving out, findings show that young adults in Milan move out later from the parental home than young adults in Munich.

Logistic analyses revealed independent effects of **age** ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.446; p<.01$), **country** ($\text{Exp}(B)=26.505; p<.01$), and **gender** ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.624; p<.01$) on the likelihood of having **moving out**. Residential autonomy is higher for older, female and German young adults.

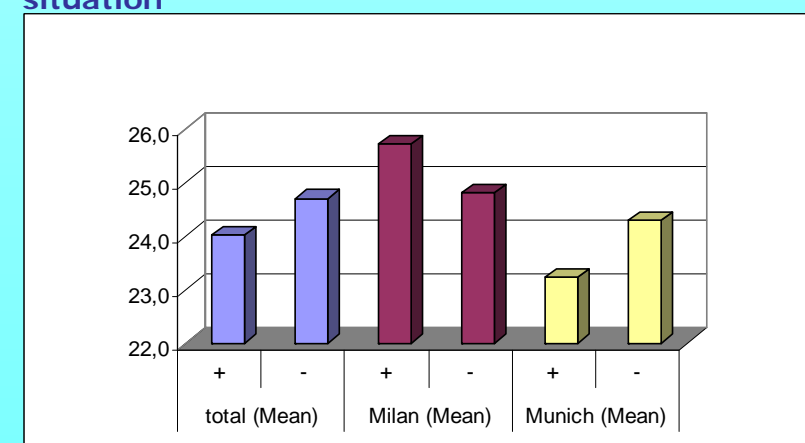
Figure 3: Mean differences between Milan and Munich regarding the perceived economic situation and well-being



Perceived economic conditions as well as young adults' well-being differs for both cities (see figure 3 to the left).

The hypothesis that young adults with higher economic insecurity move out later from their parental home was not consistently supported by the data:

Figure 4: Age of moving out as dependent on positive/ negative (+/-) rating of the economic situation



Perceived economic situation: Young adults in Milan assess the economic situation significantly worse than in Munich ($t=19.552; df=842; p<.01$)

Negative Self Esteem: Young adults in Milan score higher on negative self esteem than those in Munich ($t=2.115; df=846; p<.05$)

Depressive mood: The Milan sample reports higher depressive mood than young people in Munich ($t=3.746; df=847; p<.01$)

For the **total sample**, age of moving out was indeed significantly higher among those who perceive the economic situation as negative ($t=-2.241; df=807; p<.05$).

This clearly holds for the **Munich subsample** ($t=-2.412; df=383; p<.05$).

For the **Milan sample**, however, findings are **insignificant and even point to opposite difference** ($t=1.894; df=422; p=.059$) with somewhat later home leaving among those who perceive the economic situation as favourable.

Discussion:

As expected from national statistics, young people in Milan move out at later age than young adults in Munich. However, the quality of parent-offspring relationships does not differ between both cities. Furthermore, in Munich as well as Milan, residing with parents relates to less successful individuation in relation to parents and to higher engulfment anxiety, suggesting that coresidence with parents is not based on a better quality of the relationship but rather comes at a cost.

Further analyses confirm that young adults in Milan perceive the overall economic situation as worse – and particularly more risky in this period of life – than young adults in Munich. However, the links between perceived economic situation and home-leaving are not similar in both cities. While economic risks seem to predict later home-leaving in Munich, results for young adults in Milan differ from our expectations.

Strong culturally framed family ties in Italy might explain missing links between economic risks and home-leaving. While findings for Munich, Germany fit the assumptions of rational choice in minimizing economic risks, Italian young adults seem to prefer to stay longer in the "familia lunga" – and for other reasons. Nonetheless, outcomes of coresidence for the quality of relationships differs less than initially expected. Further analyses shall explore the social context of home-leaving in Germany and Italy.