THE STUFF OF FAMILY LIFE

How Our Homes Reflect Our Lives

Michelle Janning

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FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

Stuffed Animals, Blankets, and Wall Posters

Hypothetical parent to eighteen-year-old just after high school graduation: "Okay, it's time to take out that twin bed with the rainbow unicorn bedspread on it, so we can make room for the new elliptical machine I just bought at a yard sale."

Hypothetical eighteen-year-old to parent: "But wait, Mom, I'm still living here for two more months! Don't take away my unicorn!"

BASEMENT BEDROOMS AND COLLEGE DORM ROOMS

I remember coming home from college for the first time to discover that my mom had placed folded towels carefully on my bed for me to use during my fall weekend stay. This generous gesture, though, felt uncomfortable to me. I was not prepared, at that point, to be seen as a guest in my own room. My. Own. Room. Not a guest room, not a future put-all-the-extra-crap-in-here room, not anything but the room with pink walls that surrounded me throughout my childhood. My mom, gracious soul that she is, understood my consternation, and immediately put the towels back in the hallway linen closet so I could retrieve them myself, just as I had done for the years preceding college. Just as I had done as a child living in my pink childhood room.

What to do with the stuff of childhood is a lifelong project for many families, and the stuff itself can signify different life stages, just as the items I refused to label "guest towels" did for me on that defining fall weekend in my eighteenth year. Depending on your circumstances, you may recall a conversation with a parent or guardian (or sibling) about whether they may repurpose your childhood bedroom into something else once you leave. Or you may recall deciding whether you want to take that favorite unicorn bedspread with you when you move into an apartment or college dormitory. Or you may recall moving from a childhood bedroom into a different room in the same house, perhaps in a basement or above a garage, in order to signify that you were moving out of childhood and into adulthood (even if the move was only fifteen feet away). Or you may have moved out of that bedroom for a few years and now find yourself back there, but feeling as if you really hate unicorns now that you're a grown-up. Or you may have stayed in that room this whole time, looking forward to leaving, or seeking a job, or filling out college applications, or helping with household duties as the other members of your household age. Or you may have just left to go get married and never thought this much about how a childhood bedroom could signify so many things! In all of these cases, and even if your circumstances do not fit what you think most people your age are doing, the room where you spend your time can signify what life stage you (and your parents) think you're in.

Millennials—those eighteen to thirty-four years old—have surpassed other generations as the largest generation in the United States today, comprising over seventy-five million people.[1] Around eighteen million people, most who fit into the millennial category, currently attend nearly five thousand colleges and universities in the United States.[2] While that is a lot of people, and while more people are going to college than in past decades, it is not a life path that is possible for everyone, nor is it a path that even those who can afford it may choose. Nonetheless, spaces like college dorm rooms (often referred to now as residence halls, so they sound less institutional) are important locations for understanding roles and relationships. And college residence halls are increasingly likely to intentionally contain elements that people associate with home spaces: warmth, opportunities for socializing, personalization, and emotional connection.[3] The movement of a person from a family home into a college residence hall can symbolize the transition to

adulthood and, for many, the path to forming the next generation of families. The transition into this new space is part of the process of increasing independence, separation from parents or guardians, voting rights, more control over time and space, and often intimate or sexual relationships. These things would also be present if we thought about a basement, studio apartment, new home with a partner or spouse, or even a childhood bedroom transformed into an adult space. In all of these cases, one life stage is visibly transformed to represent another, or at least the person is transformed into a different identity (which can sometimes be at odds with the space, as when an adult returns to a childhood bedroom and feels out of place amidst the unicorn bedspread, the clothes from younger years, the stuffed animals, or the posters of rock stars from one or two decades ago). Studying places where life stage transitions occur can help us understand that these transitions can vary from person to person based on where they live, where they move to, and with whom they live.

In this chapter, while a lot of the discussion of research will relate to college dorm rooms, consider those references to represent any space that someone occupies as he or she is thinking about whether and how to launch into adulthood. It could be a childhood bedroom with an adult body occupying it after returning home. It could be a different room in a home that is redecorated in such a way that the mementos of childhood are rendered less visible. It could be a four-hundred-square-foot micro-apartment in a big city or a house rented with five other people in a small town. It could be any kind of space that signifies the transition between childhood and adulthood—one that, if all the accoutrements of childhood were visible, would somehow feel strange or unrepresentative of the life stage that the room's occupier wishes to feel he or she is in.

TODAY'S CHILDHOOD-TO-ADULTHOOD TRANSITIONS

What ingredients are necessary for someone to be labeled an adult? As with any recipe, the ingredients can change depending on available time, resources, and individual desires. But as sociologists (and chefs) are inclined to say, despite different ingredients in any recipe, we can still notice some intriguing patterns that result from how we mix those

ingredients. In this section, I describe three topics that help us understand what's going on today with the transition between childhood and adulthood: first, I discuss how the life stage that we know as *adulthood* is itself a social construction; second, I describe what is going on in contemporary housing and living arrangements that illustrates the importance of money in the transition between childhood and adulthood; and third, I uncover the importance of future ideals about finding a partner and having children as people become adults.

The Transition to Adulthood Is Socially Constructed

Family life is full of transitions. In textbooks these are often labeled *paths to family formation*, with the presumption that the end point is to create a family of some sort. But the thing is, the paths can be winding, intertwining, forward, backward, and sometimes straight as a line. That makes talking about transitions into family life and adulthood a little challenging. But let's try anyway. For the sake of convenience, let's say that our aim is to figure out how people go from being in one family (often called a *family of orientation*) into another that they create later (often called a *family of procreation*, even if children do not end up in the picture). In contemporary U.S. society, this often means that one goes from being young to not-so-young, from being dependent on people who are older within your household to becoming those older people upon whom others might rely. This transition can involve greater independence (economic and otherwise), sexual maturity, and geographic movement away from the family of orientation (at least eventually). It often involves either a change in home space or at least a change in views about one's childhood space.

Sociologists are likely to be *social constructionists*—people who believe that things in our lives that we think are real are defined that way because we collectively decide so. That's going to keep coming up in this book. For example, as I discuss more in chapter 4, even though children are defined as different from adults, especially when we try to understand parent-child relations, the boundary between the stages of childhood and adulthood can change depending on historical era or geographic location, or even depending on a given person's circumstances. For centuries, the transitional time between childhood and adulthood has been in flux, and the age that people have thought

marked the end of adolescence has varied. In addition, the popularity of the terms used to refer to that transition has changed. Specifically and perhaps surprisingly, the terms *adolescent* and *teen* have been used for centuries to refer to young people nearing adulthood, though the word *teenager* gained popularity in the 1940s. The concept of *preteen* emerged in the 1920s, and *tween* first appeared in the 1940s but has become popular in the last two decades.[4] Since words are important, and since these words refer to specific life stages, knowing that the words have changed over time means that we also know that the definitions of childhood and adulthood have changed, too. So keep that in mind as you read further; the way this chapter talks about childhood needs to be situated in a particular time and place.

Geographer Gill Valentine, in the inaugural issue of the academic journal *Children's Geographies*, talked about how defining childhood and adulthood, and the boundary between them, is elusive. The liminal, or in-between, period of time when young people are less "circumscribed by parents, teachers, or other adults" happens differently for different people.[5] Sometimes people mature early and take on adult-like tasks like paying bills when they're very young. And sometimes people who are in their thirties or older have never had a credit card. Despite these variations, there are some commonalities among young people today who leave home and move into a place separate from their childhood home, or who leave to attend a residential college or university for a few years. They are all venturing into spaces that allow for identity formation and distance from parental control, and they have been classified as "incompletely launched young adults."[6] Not quite ready for take-off, but nearing the launching pad.

Some scholars have labeled this stage of life as *emerging adulthood*, which often occurs after moving out of a childhood home and before permanently settling down as an adult in a different home, but that increasingly can include people who are still living with parents or guardians (which is now the most common living arrangement for young adults, a recent trend I discuss further below).[7] The circumstances surrounding people who are poised to launch into adulthood vary tremendously, and scholars don't all agree about what constitutes this launching or emerging (or even if these are the right words to use). But in many cases the experiences include the interplay between "independence and dependence, autonomy and reliance on others, distance and

closeness, [and] change and stability."[8] And the experiences also often include *rites of passage*—relatively public displays of the transition between life stages that symbolize one's changing identity and status. They are ritual traditions that publicly mark the different stages through someone's life course, signifying a transformation of some kind, as happens with bar mitzvahs, confirmations, *quinceañeras*, graduations, weddings, and funerals. Today in the United States, rites of passage that signify a transition between childhood and adulthood often involve entry into some kind of housing market, whether it's paying parents rent, getting a job to save up money for future independent living, seeking an apartment, or buying a home. Today, there are many ways that young people find their way into the housing market: sometimes they intend to leave their childhood home but can't and start paying rent to a parent, sometimes they have no choice, sometimes they do so with economic constraints, and sometimes they leave because they have been accepted into college and are going to live near or on the campus where they'll take classes.

The transition to adulthood varies across people, but there are enough patterns in place that help us to see how differences between childhood and adulthood have implications for how we live and how we think about people's roles and responsibilities. Movement from one type of home space into another can be part of a transitional process that highlights, and even complicates, these patterns.

Where People Live as They Transition into Adulthood Depends on Money

One of my favorite slogans of all time is from a furniture store in my childhood home town. It was, and still is, plastered across a huge sign above the entrance saying, "Feather your nest with a little down!" Today the slogan is also plastered across the store's website at larsonfurniture.com. Now that I know what it means to make a down payment on something expensive, I find this slogan to be particularly clever. As a child, I didn't yet understand the concept of a down payment for those who wanted to buy furniture by paying for it in installments, because I did not make it a habit of buying couches before junior high (and I don't think the $14 of birthday money I had saved would have gone far to get me a decent couch). But I did understand that a nest represented

a home and that down was something that came from birds and was sometimes used inside blankets.

A bird's nest is an oft-cited metaphor for a home, in furniture store slogans and in academic research. Social scientists dabble in studying birds, or at least their metaphorical practices, when they research nest-leaving, the empty nest, and labels like "feathered nests" that refer to affluent homes.[9] Whether it's making a down payment or buying an expensive down comforter, money matters in how people experience life stage transitions in different "nests."

People are taking longer to "leave the nest" and establish themselves as adults.[10] For the first time since the late 1800s, eighteen- to thirty-five-year-olds in the U.S. are most likely to live with their parents, as compared to other living situations such as living alone or living with a married or cohabiting partner.[11] This living situation is far from new, and the proportion of people doing this is not necessarily higher than in the past. But it is now the most common living situation relative to others, due in part to people delaying the age at which they settle down with a long-term partner, to a downward trajectory in men's wages, and to a greater likelihood of people to go to college (and then sometimes return home after graduating, though this group is less likely than their non-college peers to live with parents).[12] This shift in housing patterns is huge news, not just because it has never happened before, but because it makes us consider whether living independently will be included in the ingredient list for someone to be labeled as an adult in the coming years.

Clara Mulder, a population researcher in the Netherlands, notes that leaving a parental home is one of the few family events that always requires relocating to a different residence. She also says that whether people leave the nest depends to a great extent on economics.[13] Kids who go to college, for example, are more likely than those who do not go to college to have parents or guardians who own their homes. If the parental home is rented rather than owned or on the way to being owned via a mortgage, children are not as likely to stay as they enter adulthood. We know that a high-quality and spacious living space looks attractive to children as they enter adulthood. We also know that how much money parents have affects where people live in their transition to adulthood. All of this is to say that there are inequalities in people's ability to attain this kind of adult space.

The student pathway is, in many cases in the United States, a privileged one when it comes to housing, mostly because students can access housing via college or university resources (e.g., a housing office for both on- and off-campus residences).[14] College students, then, even though they may be in debt or feel as if they are not in an economically independent situation, are able to access home spaces that are often unavailable to others, perhaps making their interpretation of home a bit different from someone who has to find an apartment and get a job at the age of eighteen. Rites of passage that launch people into housing markets, then, vary depending on a person's goals and resources, which includes whether they go to college.

Unless they have a large inheritance, young adults who are not attending college, or who have graduated, feel economic constraints when it comes to finding a home. Certainly individual economic circumstances may lead someone toward or away from leaving a parental home. But there are larger societal-level economic conditions that matter, too. If we want to understand why and whether young adults leave home and move into their own places, we should look at any pressing housing crises or economic downturns that may affect these people's housing choices. Case in point: the economic recession from nearly a decade ago, along with changing job market prospects and troublingly high student loan debt, has rendered some housing and rental markets untenable for young adults to enter. In Manhattan, for example, developers are creating apartment buildings with micro-units that resemble dormitories—small private sleeping spaces with shared spaces for other tasks such as cooking and eating—because rent prices in this urban area are too high for most to be able to afford.[15] They are personalizable, but small. They are private, but communal. They are designed for adults, but do not contain all of the elements of a private adult home space. They are more affordable than private rental properties, and yet the mortgage lies upward of a half a million dollars for four hundred square feet.

What about college students? For them, a dorm room is often the first home space where they live after a parental home, yet it can seem impersonal, institutionalized, and less likely to connote adult status than a Manhattan micro-apartment. And yet, we know that college students actively seek ways to gain adult status, often using their living spaces to do so.[16] The ideal of adult status consists of control over space and

belongings and the ability to personalize a space, so college students spend time and money trying to make their dorm room into a more adult home-like space, even if it includes spending ten dollars on a used couch with a questionable past. This desire to move into adulthood even among those who live in institutionalized settings such as college residence halls is called forth by companies such as Dormify, a business that sells dorm-room-type furniture and accessories to students and others who want to personalize their space.[17] Of course, the ability to purchase these items depends on a student's financial standing. The transition into adulthood requires money. Financial considerations, whether it's income, job prospects, college costs, securing rental insurance or a mortgage, or expenses associated with furnishing a space, must be part of any discussion of how space matters in this transition.

Aspirations about Couplehood and Kids

While the next chapter delves more deeply into couple relationships, the idea of pairing up to venture into adulthood, at least as an ideal, is relevant in a discussion about the transition away from a childhood home. Not everyone who turns eighteen is involved in a romantic relationship, let alone married. In fact, fewer people are entering long-term relationships at this age than in the past, because partnering is not as necessary as it used to be to find housing, feel economically secure, take part in sexual relationships, or consider yourself to be an adult. There are increasing numbers of single people, greater numbers of college attendees, and a decreasing desire to marry at a young age (or marry at all) than in the past. These patterns affect where and how young adults live. For example, as Clara Mulder found out in her review of research on leaving the parental home and housing choices, increasing numbers of single people want to maintain flexibility so they can move without high costs. This desire among singles may be an economic necessity, but it is also about seeing singlehood as a potentially temporary life stage. This is why they are more likely to rent, often in spaces shared with other single renters. Buying a house, whether single or partnered, is a commitment to a long-term stay in one place. While this may still be a symbol of adulthood for many, it is not the only ingredient, it may be lessening in importance, and it is not always possible.[18]

All of this points to the idea that young people who are not in a long-term partnership are more likely to live in temporary rental housing. That may seem obvious, but what may be less obvious in our everyday thoughts is this: how people play out family relationships is deeply connected to our housing patterns—what's built, what's popular, what's available, what's not. While marriage and cohabitation are looking increasingly similar in U.S. society, and while people are much more likely to live together without marrying than in the past, even when adding children to the mix, both marriage and home ownership are still normally known as part of the transition into responsible adulthood. Even if a couple buys a home without being married, their chances of marrying go up a lot. And it is still the case that people who want to have children are also more likely to desire home ownership over renting. Agreeing to partner with someone for a lifetime and buying a house are both visible symbols of commitment to a larger collaborative (and economic) adult project. On the other hand, with increasing numbers of people remaining single into adulthood, we also see lots of home buying among individuals who are not in a long-term partnership.

Leaving a childhood bedroom with an eye toward a larger space to start a new adult life stage is not just about the relationships that may change or be affirmed. It is also about the spaces and objects that are part of that transition, which include those spaces' availability and the preferences of the space's occupants to define it as temporary or permanent. These spaces and objects signify new roles and relationships that are less about being a child and more about being an adult.

STUFFED ANIMALS AND BLANKETS

Bringing an object from a childhood bedroom into an adult space can symbolize the transition into adulthood. Cherished possessions can be lifelong reminders of our memories and our shifting identities and statuses as we age. Psychologists Jane Kroger and Vivienne Adair remind us of this in their research on valued personal objects in late adulthood.[19] As people move out of their homes and into places such as assisted living facilities or retirement communities, they, like young adults leaving a childhood home, need to decide which items to keep and which ones to toss. This deliberation is not always easy, because, as I discuss in

chapter 8, to get rid of a valued possession can feel as if you're getting rid of part of your identity. The objects people wish to retain and leave behind as they transition between life stages tell us a rich story of both the lived experience of moving into a new life stage, as well as the larger ideas we have as a society about what it means to be in a particular life stage. This is as true for aging adults as it is for young people moving into adulthood.

For young adults who are considering whether they can or should leave their childhood home, researchers have uncovered the importance of objects that can symbolize, and sometimes assist with, wrestling with the strange period of time when leaving a childhood identity doesn't feel quite right, but entering a full-fledged adult role doesn't either. Sociologist Ira Silver's work highlights how objects brought from a childhood home into a college dorm room (such as clothing, photographs, and pieces of technology) can anchor a person to childhood identity at the same time as they mark new identities for someone entering college.[20] Pediatricians who have studied young adult transitions say that about a quarter of young women bring things like teddy bears and blankets to college with them (young men do, too, but at lower rates because there's a stigma attached to stuffed animals for men). These *transitional objects*, a term coined by British psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott in 1953, lessen the challenges of separation from a childhood home and family.[21]

Silver's work highlights how objects brought to college can signify attachment to a childhood home (which he calls *anchors*) and those that signify the transition into adulthood (transitional objects). The decision to bring something from home can require a strategic choice on the part of the college student to either retain a childhood identity or connection or to form a new college identity. Sometimes bringing things such as stuffed animals can be risky, since they carry a stigma of being too childlike. As Silver noted, "Regardless of how close incoming students felt toward their parents, they carefully considered how much of their biographies they wanted to leave behind in the settings where they had lived most of their lives."[22] The work of media and youth culture scholar Siân Lincoln echoes this idea, noting that the more public nature of college dorm rooms (as opposed to childhood bedrooms) means college students are in between staying connected to their childhoods (as displaying a stuffed animal may symbolize) and crafting new adult

identities among new friends (as hiding that same stuffed animal may symbolize).[23]

Unless it has a unicorn on it, a blanket from a childhood bedroom brought to college is less likely to be stigmatized as too childlike as compared to a stuffed animal. But this doesn't mean that an item as seemingly benign as a blanket or bedspread does not connote identities that matter in our social world. In research on lower-income students' college experience, psychologist Elizabeth Aries and sociologist Maynard Seider found that dorm room objects such as blankets and bedspreads can affect whether students feel as if they belong.[24] Surely the presence of wealth can be seen among students who bring expensive electronic equipment, cars, and designer clothes, but even the display of designer bedding—an object that is both intimate and publicly displayed—can engender feelings of inferiority among college students who do not come from affluent households. Sometimes scholars who study class differences reference something that famed social theorist Pierre Bourdieu named *cultural capital*—the set of information, knowledge, skills, and resources someone from a wealthier background has that can perpetuate his or her class standing and showcase certain tastes (e.g., access to a good education, art museums, books, and technological expertise). I would make the case that even knowledge about thread count in sheets or a desire to buy sheets that are all cotton counts as cultural capital, and can be a location for someone to feel that she or he has a certain status among a new group of peers like college residence hall mates.

Despite bedding and blankets serving as visual symbols of class inequalities, these items can indeed serve as anchors and transitional objects for college students from all backgrounds. In 2016 Maya Volk and I conducted survey research on how college students conceptualize home.[25] We asked students a question about the ways their first-semester residence hall room was the same as, or different from, their precollege room, which yielded fascinating results. Respondents (229 of them, all from a U.S. residential four-year college) were prompted to discuss both the physical and emotional aspects of the rooms. Most mentioned objects or decoration that connected them to their childhood bedroom. Sometimes this included bringing the actual objects from one place to the other, and sometimes it meant decorating the dorm room with similar colors or items that could be found in the pre-college room. And guess what? They talked about stuffed animals and blankets.

Aside from pictures and art pieces, one of the most commonly mentioned items brought from home was a blanket (and sometimes respondents mentioned a stuffed animal alongside reference to bedding). Student survey responses included sentiments about comfort (the blanket from home was "so comforting"), or home-like personalized space ("I have the same bedding. It feels homey and like my space."). But some answers were a little more complex, such as, "I had the same quilt on my bed that I had had on my bed at home. I also had my favorite stuff[ed] animal on my bed, a childhood teddy bear that I still sleep with to this day. These two things made the rooms feel similar but for the most part everything else felt different."

Bringing a blanket from home is a necessity for any student whose family cannot afford to shop for a new designer cover from Dormify.com. But sometimes the meaning attached to the bedding is also about the transition between childhood and adulthood. A blanket (and sometimes stuffed animals snuggled into it) serves as an anchor to a childhood identity, but also as an item that is situated in a room where "everything else felt different." The rest of the room is about a new adult identity, and perhaps the activities under the blankets look different from those found in a childhood bedroom. But leaving that childhood blanket (and that stuffed animal hidden in the dorm room drawer) behind may have made the transition too abrupt.

A WALL POSTER

When I was twelve I had a huge poster of Michael Jackson hanging on my wall. To hang it up I used tape that contained an adhesive so weak that the poster was constantly falling down, and yet so strong that when I took it down for good, a large patch of paint came with it. In college, I opted not to bring my cherished Michael Jackson poster, but instead hung a Pink Floyd "The Wall" poster to show that my music taste had become different, given my assumptions about the new peers with whom I was associating. While nobody can deny the talent of Mr. Jackson, Pink Floyd was somehow defined in my eighteen-year-old brain as more sophisticated. Or deep. Or good to listen to while trying to act

deep and sophisticated with cheap beer. What was not sophisticated was my use of chewing gum to serve as adhesive on my dorm room wall for a poster about "The Wall."

Wall art and posters were as common as blankets in the responses to Maya's and my survey question asking college students how childhood and dorm rooms were similar. A poster or wall display was often described as bridging childhood and college identities, as this quote illustrates: "One of the walls of my bedroom at home I call the 'wall of stuff,' and it was covered in pictures and posters . . . that either were meaningful to me or just looked cool. . . . I made a new 'wall of stuff' [at college] with a combination of things from home and new things I gathered." For this student, the display of items on a wall became a visual symbol of a transitioning identity from child to adult.

Putting things on the walls of a dorm room or rental space carries with it the ability of its owner to convey their interests and identities to anyone who enters the space. Personalization is something that students in residence halls and residents in rentals prefer.[26] However, unlike in a home that is owned, this personalization usually needs to be done with impermanent changes so as not to damage the walls, as a hammer and nails would do when hanging a picture or wall paint would do (unless you're really good at painting over that exquisite painted headboard that I may or may not have added to my husband's and my first apartment bedroom wall because we couldn't afford a real headboard).[27] Hanging a poster on a dorm room or bedroom wall can also connote territoriality. It's a kind of personalization that connotes control over space, even if the borders of a poster do not extend literally into the room space and the space is divided into territories with imaginary lines.[28] If that weren't the case, my Pink Floyd poster would have hung over my first-year roommate's bed, and her Bob Mould album cover would have been on my desk.

During the transition to adulthood, peers become very important as *reference groups*—people with whom someone feels a connection and finds to be similar and can offer social support. The transition to college carries with it a lot of uncertainty in terms of social roles and acceptance from peers. Objects hung by new students in dorm rooms can serve as ways for the students to introduce themselves to peer groups and networks of people whose opinion may matter. These tell newcomers about the owner's identity, interests, and ability to balance fitting in

with an expression of individuality. As college students said in Silver's study about college transition objects, "The Beatles poster . . . well, I've seen lots of posters of the Beatles, but this one is so original. You don't see it in a lot of music stores," and, "I was going to get the James Dean poster, but everyone else has it."[29] Of course, these posters that are used to signify uniqueness among peers still follow genre and style conventions that are common among college student décor choices. I may have thought I was unique in displaying Pink Floyd instead of Michael Jackson, but likely the dozens of other students doing the same thing (and who probably bought a poster at a poster sale on campus like I did) would have had the same thought.

In addition to children transitioning into adulthood, parents undergo a transition when their children leave the family home, evidenced by one of Silver's interviewees describing how his mother cried when he rolled up his childhood bedroom posters to bring them to his college dorm room. He said, "In fact, she went out and bought a new poster for my room. They keep my room exactly as it was. It's like in the movies when a daughter or son dies and the parents retain the room. . . . I think they would mind if I took everything out of my room. I think they still want to keep pieces of me there. These things are reminders that I am still around."[30] What all of this research tells us is that something as mundane as a wall poster carries with it important meaning about the person's identity during the transition into adulthood. Parents may wish to have their children remain young, but if we are lucky we all grow up. While we're doing this, the people with whom we associate and the things we put on our walls illustrate the changes in our identities.

REFLECTING ON OUR STUFF

Homes show how the boundary between public and private matters for families. The definition of *adulthood* has changed over time, and it can vary across geographic space and in different people's experiences. Life stage transitions are a fascinating place to delve into the importance of public and private boundaries, often because they contain rituals and rites of passage relating to private family moments that are made quite public (e.g., hauling a box full of posters and blankets to a new place). Even the display of a blanket in a college dorm room signifies the

transition between a private conception of one's childhood experiences and a more public, and socially accessible, version of the self that is meant to be accepted by a new set of peers. Designers of college residence halls, and even the new "dorms" for young adults in expensive urban areas, must take into consideration a balance between privacy and access to public and communal space. And those of us who have people in our lives undergoing a transition into adulthood would be wise to remember that the "stuff of childhood" may actually be one of the most important things to examine when people work on establishing a new adult identity. While this kind of understanding is important to consider for all life stage transitions, it is in the shift between childhood and adulthood—where one goes from being taken care of in private spaces to visibly (and sometimes publicly) enacting adultlike rituals like moving into a new home—that the public-private boundary is particularly salient.

Homes tell us about individual families, but also about broader social issues. What is expected as an adult is not uniform across groups in society. Sociologists know that access to information, resources (including warm blankets), and experiences that help shape one's desire and ability to own a home must be situated in that person's economic standing, along with his or her racial, gender, and sexual identities. What an adult is supposed to do, or can do, depends on others' expectations for that person. And expectations affect how we go from childhood to adulthood in terms of our identities. If that weren't the case, we wouldn't still be impacted by societal expectations about men's and women's roles, racial residential segregation, and the legal and social approval of someone's right to partner, marry, and sign a mortgage. What this tells us is that, as we read news articles about housing availability, or read college marketing materials over the shoulder of a college-bound high school student, we always have to remember that not everyone has equal access to affording certain kinds of spaces, let alone items that can symbolize adulthood. Even though this chapter focused primarily on economic status, it is important to remember that feathered nests and safe spaces, just like down blankets, are not available to everyone, due in part to inequalities that stem from more than just access to money.

Homes are not only symbolic, but also shape our lives. Heaven forbid that a unicorn or a stuffed animal or a "wall of stuff" comes alive. But

maybe, if we take a step back, we can see that these items, and the spaces that contain them, act upon their owners in interesting ways. Homes can symbolize and shape the life stages of childhood and adulthood. When a college student walks into her dorm room to see the new wall poster hung above her childhood quilt, she may not even know that she is seeing herself differently. Not quite ready to give up childhood, but not quite ready for a mortgage. A poster is more than just a poster; it is a tool used in the transition into adult identity.

Not only are life stages socially constructed, the concept of home is, too. If homes are now taking shape as multifaceted, not uniform, and varied, then the notion that a transition to adulthood including a particular life path that includes single-family home ownership is outdated. Home is not a fixed place. Perhaps, just as we examine the transformations in identity and status as children move into adulthood, we also need to consider homes as important players in this transition. As architecture scholar Judith Thomsen says, people's increasing geographic mobility, changing family patterns, and altered workplaces (including virtual ones), mean that we can no longer think of homes as fixed or uniform. If homes are "stages on the housing pathway" for young adults, she notes, then "the home is in practice not that stable anymore and . . . the differences between temporary homes and permanent (fixed) homes are less clear than implied by these terms."[31] And yet, despite homes not being as fixed as they used to be, the built environment around us may shape our behaviors and identities. The college dorm room walls that are not supposed to contain nail holes reinforce a transitional identity from childhood to adulthood.

If decorating a home is how we communicate our identity to others, and if identity transformation via housing and home decoration increasingly matters for young people in a world with a diverse set of pathways toward adulthood, and if home spaces and paths to family formation are decreasingly fixed concepts, then it is especially important to wrestle with the ever-changing conceptions of home for people as we label them adults. And to wrestle with the label of "adult" itself. To be sure, scholars note that the paths to family formation are changing. What I'd like to add is that the locations where the paths are paved, the signs along the way, the road debris, and the ultimate destinations are also changing.

How exciting. Seems to me that all of our posters ought to be hung with chewing gum from now on—really strong chewing gum that can either last forever or be easily removed.

3

COUPLEHOOD

Love Letters and Beds

OWNER'S (MASTER) SUITES

When my husband and I signed our names on the mortgage for our home nearly two decades ago, we had just finished graduate school. We had lived for years in rentals that had their fair share of cockroaches and rusty cabinet hinges. It was the first time we were looking at living spaces that had more than one bedroom, and we were excited about the possibility of home ownership and a bedroom that was not also used as an office. On our tour of the house, we noticed that the large bedroom at the back of the house had an interior door frame with a chain lock on it, like you would see at a Motel 6. I vividly remember us noticing it, glancing at each other with a smirk, and hoping the real estate agent didn't see us have a little moment of "I know what that's for. Hee hee."

When we turn on our televisions and stumble upon (or intentionally binge watch) episodes of *House Hunters* or *Property Brothers* on HGTV, two things are clear: first, for episodes with a pair of adults who are in a long-term relationship with each other, a separate and private sleeping space is required for the implied purpose of intimacy and escape; and second, regardless of whether there is a couple involved, the biggest sleeping space is often referred to as the master bedroom or suite (or more recently, as I discuss next, the "owner's suite").[1]

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3. COUPLEHOOD

1. In this chapter about couples I try to use language that can refer to any type of romantically involved couple, regardless of sexual orientation or marital status. So, while a lot of research is done on heterosexual married couples, the ideas presented here are not meant to be limited to that kind of relationship.

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