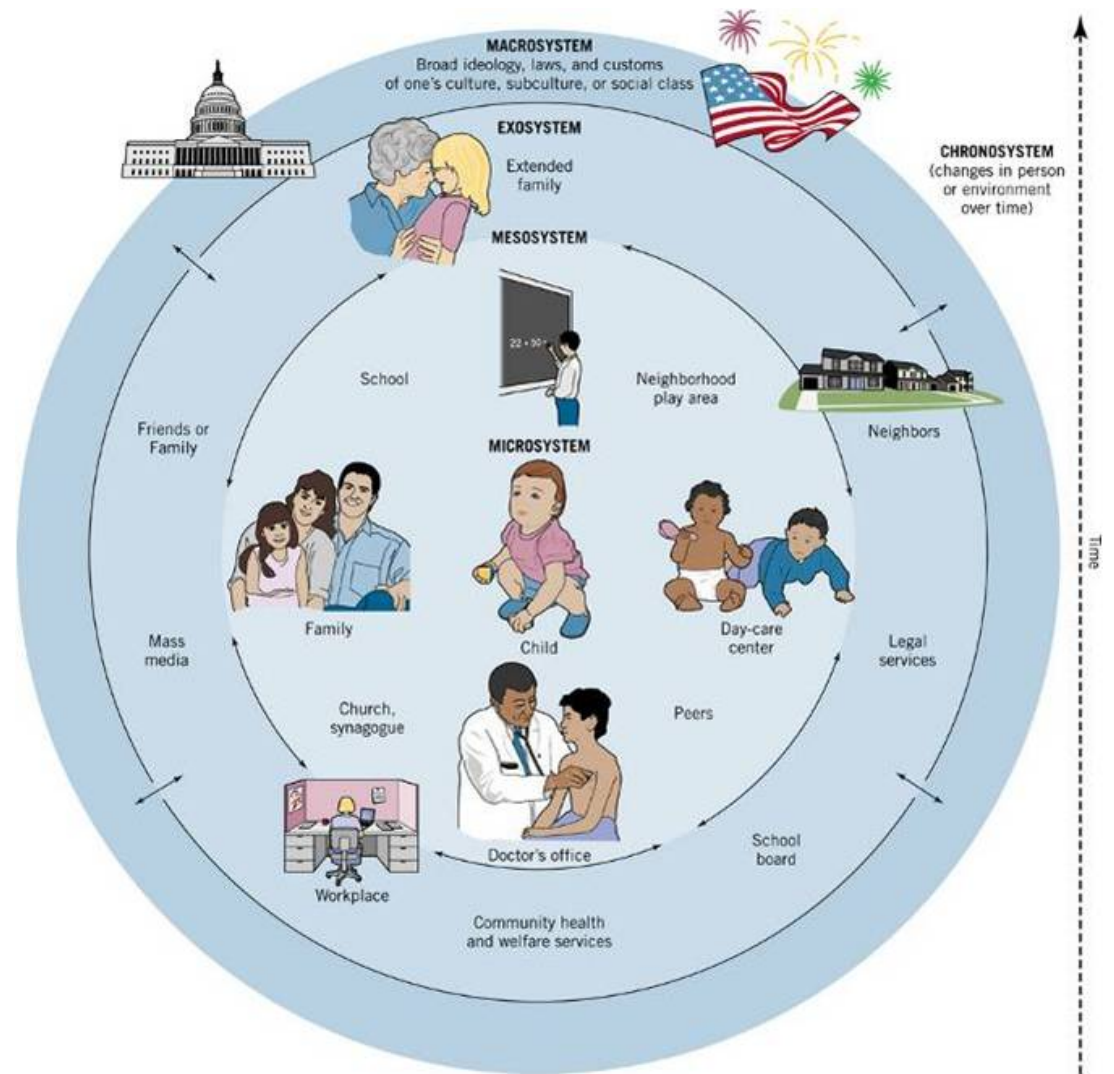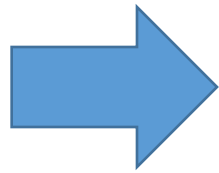# Culture, meaning, and social change:

The status of home-leaving discourses in Canada from a critical-hermeneutic perspective

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Acultural, universalist views of development (e.g., Piaget)

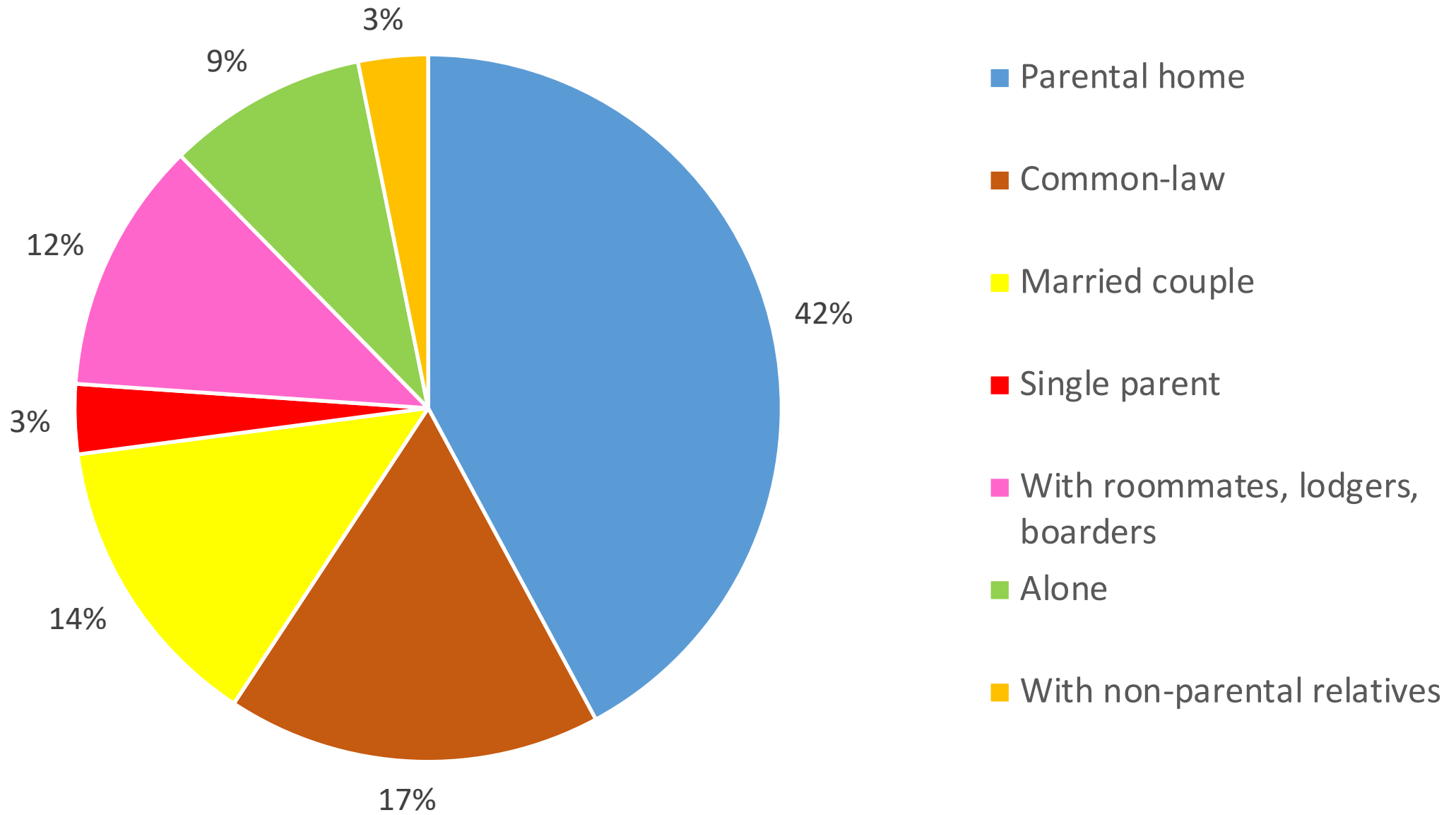Cultural, contextual views of development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner)

Focus: Moving out

- Personhood in the West: Bounded, unique, autonomous
- Transition to full personhood in the West:
    - Individuation from parents
- Moving out as key milestone
- Topic: **how coresidence and moving out *have been* and *could be* studied as cultural phenomena**

What are the objectives and implications of this research?

- *Identifying* variation
- *Explaining* trends
- *Weighing in* on debate
- *Identifying* emergent issues
- *Informing the development of* services and programs

Living Arrangements of Canadians 20 to 29 (Statistics Canada, 2011)

- Parental home — 42%
- Common-law — 17%
- Married couple — 14%
- Single parent — 3%
- With roommates, lodgers, boarders — 12%
- Alone — 9%
- With non-parental relatives — 3%

Percentage of Canadian Young Adults Living at Home
(Statistics Canada, 2011)

Legend: 1981 | 1986 | 1991 | 1996 | 2001 | 2006 | 2011
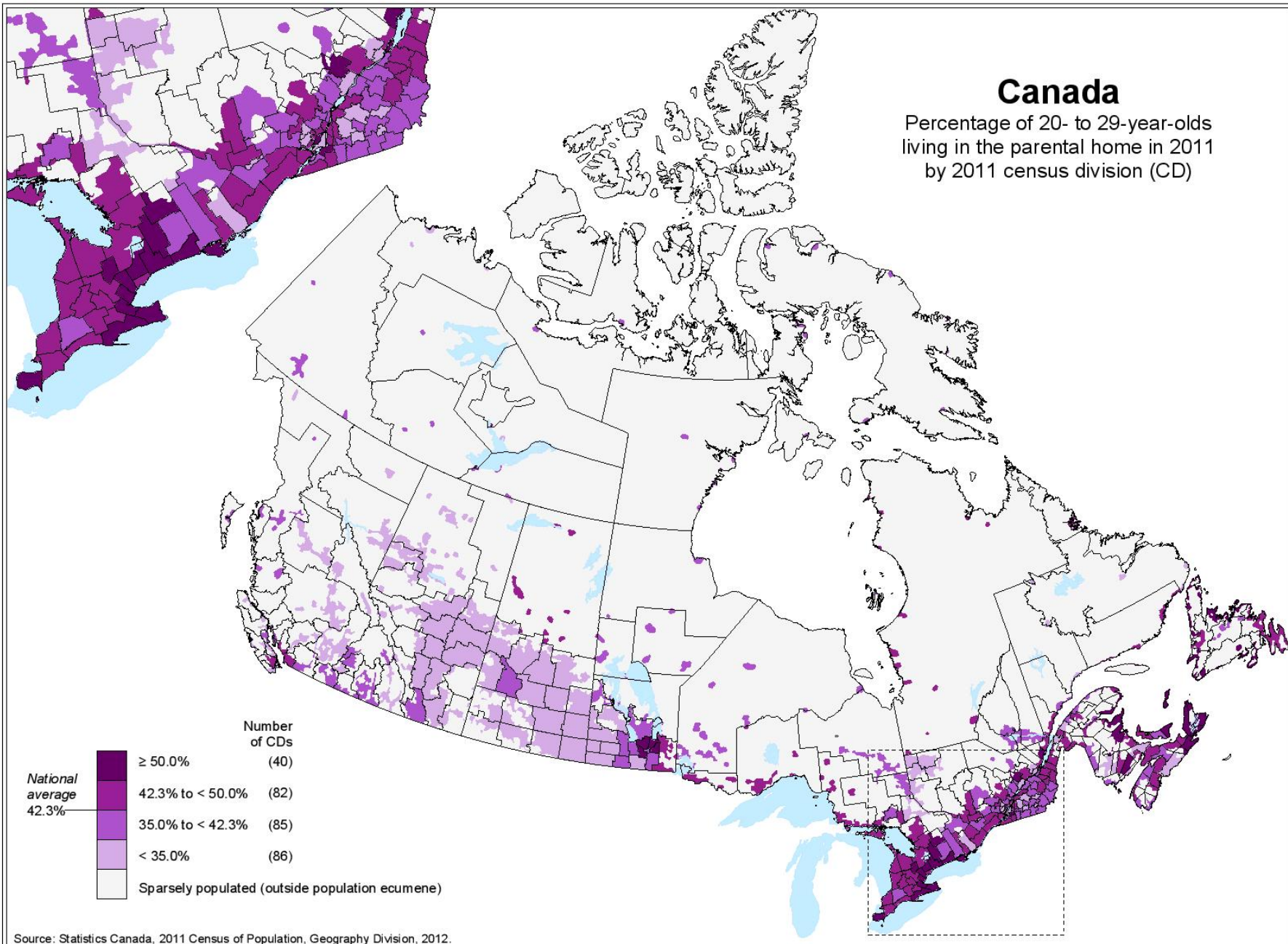
Categories: 20 to 24 years | 25 to 29 years
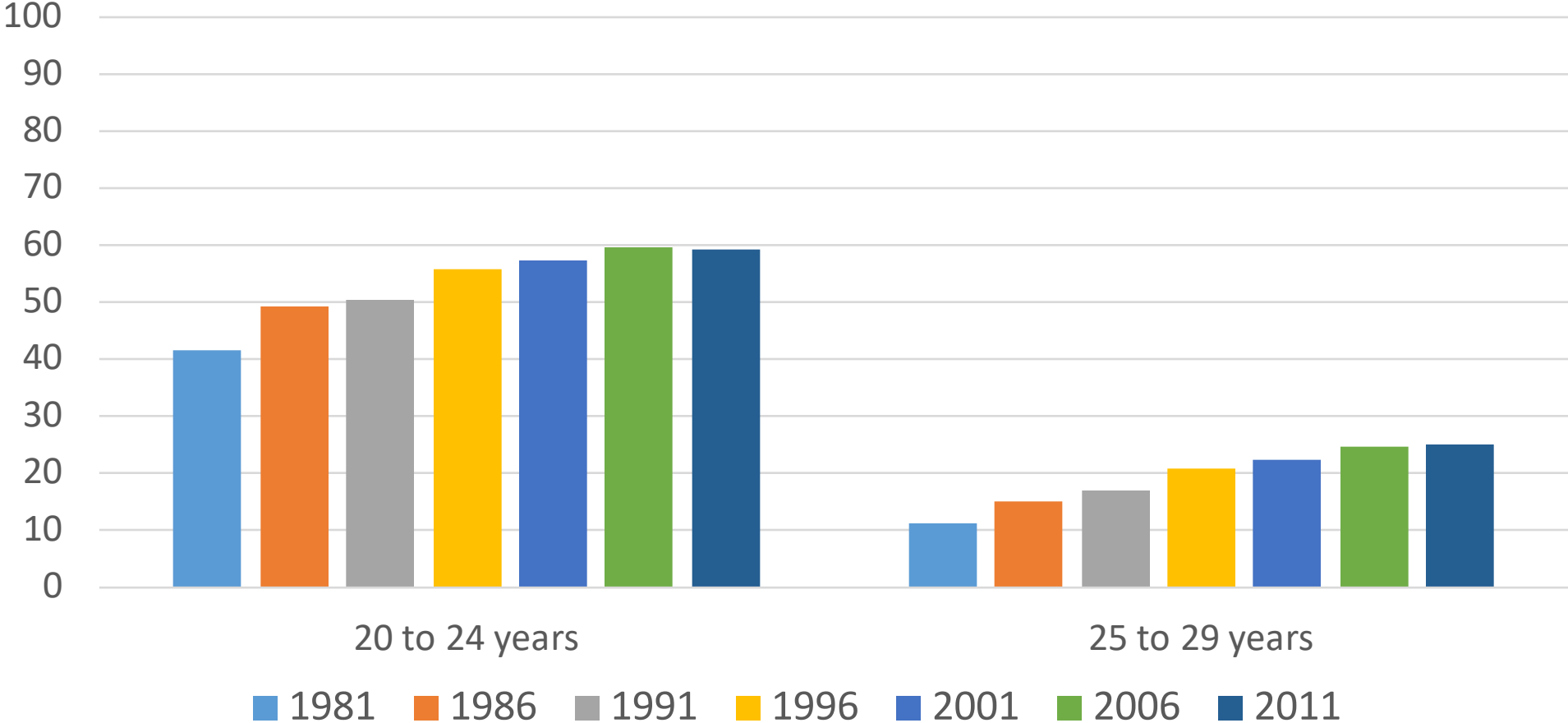
Median Age of Home-leaving in Canada (Ravanera et al., 1995)
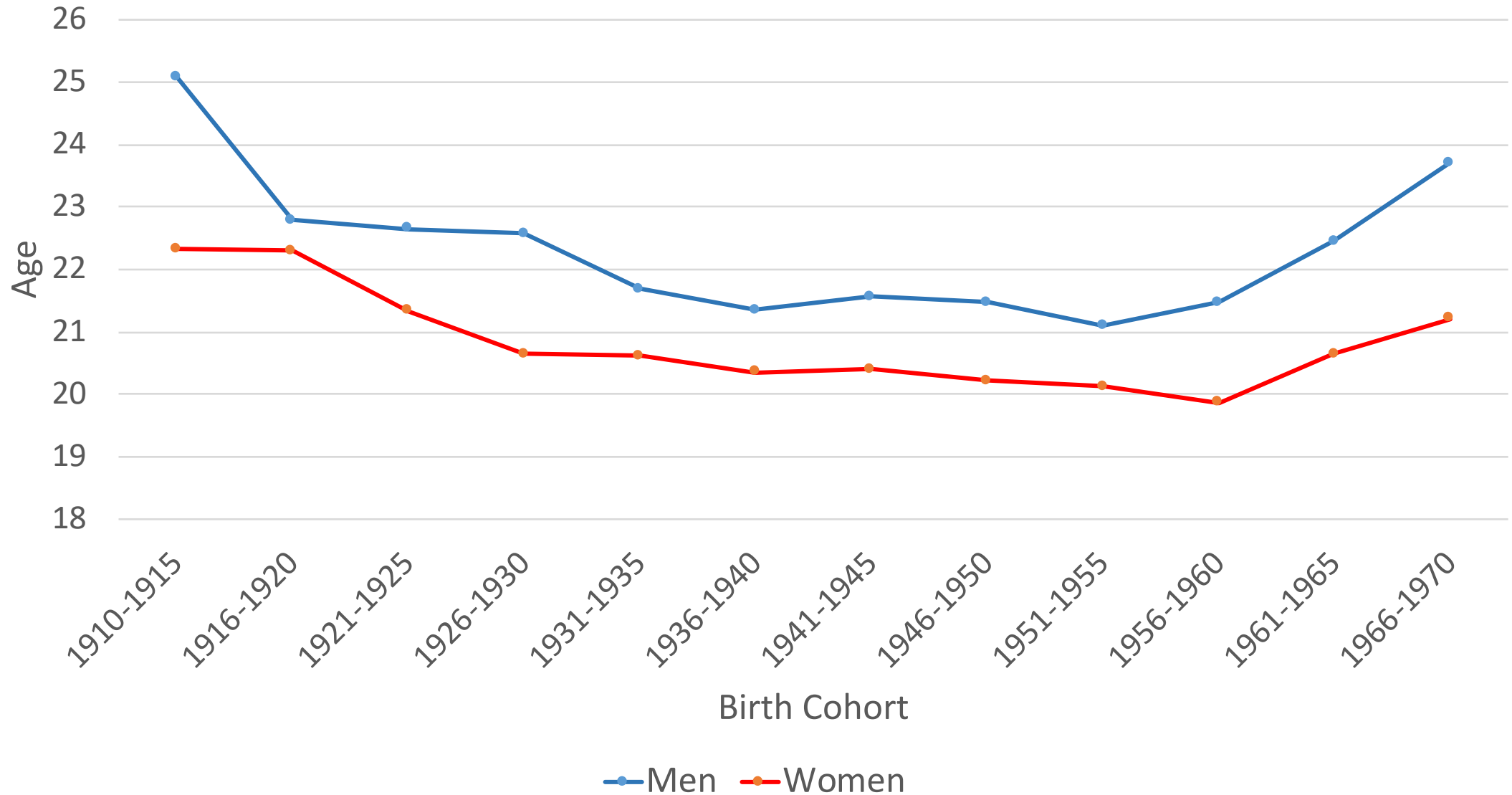
Canada

Percentage of 20- to 29-year-olds
living in the parental home in 2011
by 2011 census division (CD)

		Number of CDs
	≥ 50.0%	(40)
National average 42.3%	42.3% to < 50.0%	(82)
	35.0% to < 42.3%	(85)
	< 35.0%	(86)
	Sparsely populated (outside population ecumene)	

Source: Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population, Geography Division, 2012.

Statistics Canada

Statistique Canada

Canada

Research: Regional, linguistic, ethnic variability

- Cohabitation
  - ↑ Non-English or French mother tongue
  - ↑ Immigrant families, especially non-European
  - ↑ Southern European, Asian, Jewish, Caribbean, Latin/South Americans
  - ↓ Aboriginal ethnic background (lowest proportion across ethnic groups)
  - ↓ European or "Canadian" ethnic background
  - ↓ Saskatchewan and ↓ Alberta (lowest provincial rates)
- Age of moving out
  - ↑ Immigrants, especially non-European
  - ↑ French-speakers (relative to English-speakers)
  - Youngest: British-Canadians, followed by Southern-European Canadians, Chinese-Canadians, and Indo-Canadians
- "Boomeranging" back home
  - ↑ English-speakers
  - ↑ Children of Canadian or European-born mothers

Media: This sucks/it's not their fault/it's fine

- "It's the home-game grudge match of the 21st century: the baby boomers versus the boomerang kids. And the kids, it seems, are winning." (CBC News, 2012)

- "Adult kids living at home? It is going to cost you" (Financial Post, 2011)

- "Young adults still living at home a growing trend - Stigma Disappears: Growing challenges for today's twentysomethings" (Edmonton Journal, 2014)

- "But just because they're living at home doesn't mean they're playing video games all day. Roughly the same number do paid work (47 per cent) as the Boomers did in 1986 (51 per cent)." (Macleans, 2011)

- "new TV shows like "How to live with your parents (for the rest of your life)" are beginning to capitalize on the malaise people can feel when they move back into the parental home. But it's an astonishingly common problem." (Canada.com, 2013)

- "Poor parents. Just when they thought they had completed the hands-on parenting phase of life, back home come their adult kids to blow up their finances." (Globe and Mail, 2012)

- "But what if we're looking at it the wrong way? What if the kids still living at home aren't parasites, and their parents aren't hapless hosts, leaking cash and car keys? What if, in fact, everyone gets something nice out of the deal?" (Globe and Mail, 2014)

The clash of approaches and interpretations

What the research (generally) does well:
- ✓ Identify variation (woohoo!)
- ❑ Explain trends
- ❑ Identify emergent issues
- ❑ Weigh in on debate
- ❑ Inform the development of services and programs

What the media does (generally) does well:
- ✓ Stimulate debate
- ✓ Identify emergent issues
- ❑ Study social life in rigorous or systematic ways

What no one is doing well:
- ❑ Studying this phenomena rigorously as a meaningful moral and ethical phenomena

    (in a way that could lead to locally **valid** explanations, **informed** public and intellectual debates, **grounded** assessment, and **improved** service provision, *should it* – upon assessment – be warranted)

How can we systematically study this topic as a meaningful ethical and moral phenomenon?

- My view (shared by others): good research begins with a good theoretical framework
- We need a theoretical framework that positions this phenomena (young adults living with their parents) as MEANINGFUL
  - Culture as a publically enacted and negotiated meaning system
  - Ritual as a vehicle of cultural transmission
  - The conflict between the ethical aim and the moral norm

Culture (D'Andrade, 1984; Geertz, 1973; Kleinman, 1995; Shweder, 1991; Wolf, 1999)

Features

- A system of
  - Each sign process includes 1) a sign, 2) an interpreter, 3) a message conveyed to the interpreter by the sign
- Provide us with a basis for our
  - Representations
  - Constructions
  - Moral obligations/actions
  - Feelings
- Learned, enacted, negotiated in everyday practices and interactions
  - Presence of internal tensions and contradictions

Questions raised

- What are the signs, interpreters, and messages related to the sign (living at home)?
  - What are the key messages about the self, family, home, privacy, love, work, and the good life that make this sign intelligible?
  - Is the sign itself – "living at home" meaningful to participants in the same way it is to the researchers or the media?
  - Who are the key communicators with whom they negotiate meanings?
  - Who determines or regulates the significance, use, and relevance of this sign?

Ritual (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1982)

Features

- A critical vehicle of cultural transmission
- Rite de passage:
  - An initiation
  - A means of **self**-development *and* **social** reproduction
    - Individual process of self-growth, reflexivity, transition
    - Social process of imparting cultural knowledge and values to the neophyte
  - 3 phases: 1) separation, 2) liminality, 3) re-aggregation

Questions raised

- Is home-leaving experienced or understood as a rite of passage?
- If so, what social values or personal characteristics does it impart (e.g., autonomy)?
- Is living at home a disruption or disintegration of a valuable rite of passage?
- If so, do people interpret this disruption or discontinuity as positive or negative? As jeopardizing or liberating?
- If not, have alternative rites of passage superseded the significance of moving out?

Morality and Ethics (Ricoeur 1990/1992)

Features

- The ethical: "the aim of an accomplished life"
  - Action always aims at some good: living the good life (Aristotle)
- Morality: "the articulation of this aim in norms characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint"
  - Institutionalized norms regarded as obligatory
- Every actual aim has to go through the "sieve of the norm"
- But there are **conflicts** when we go from the institutionalized rule (the norm) to moral judgment in situation
  - E.g., do we respect the universal law or the alterity of the person?
- When these conflicts occur, we resort to "practical wisdom"
  - "inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception that solicitude requires by breaking the rule to the smallest extent possible"

Questions raised

- Do young adults living with their parents feel that they respect their parents despite continuing to depend on them?

- How do young adults (and their parents) reconcile the abstract principle of autonomy and this (apparently) dependent lifestyle?

Conclusion

- What we have: broad-stroke understandings

- What we need: nuanced understandings

- One way to do it: robust concepts
    - Culture
    - Ritual
    - Morality and ethics

Research: Cultural explanations? (Gee et al., 2003)

- Reason to cohabit
  - European (British and South-European) Canadians: financial reasons, schooling
  - Chinese-Canadians: financial reasons, schooling
  - Indo-Canadians: tradition/family closeness, financial reasons
- Reason for moving out
  - European-Canadians: independence, schooling
  - Chinese-Canadians: schooling
  - Indo-Canadian males: work, schooling
  - Indo-Canadian females: marry, schooling
- Reason for returning home
  - European-Canadians: financial reasons, "transitional" reasons
  - Chinese-Canadians: schooling, "transitional" reasons, "other" reasons
  - Indo-Canadians: "transitional" reasons, "other" reasons

Limits of the implicit conception of "culture"

- Concept: a shared context of norms and values that determines the shape, nature, and experience of home-leaving
  - "A shared context"
    - Method: taking language, region, nationality, or ethnic heritage as an index of culture
    - Limitation: homogenizing groups
  - Interpreting "norms and values"
    - Method: post-hoc selecting specific essences that explain associations
    - Limitation: authorizing the view of the researcher, reducing the validity of explanations
    - Limitation: fragmentary and abstract understanding of meaning systems
  - "that determines"
    - Method: conflating correlation with causation
    - Limitation: neglecting the interpretations, feelings, and actions – in effect, the culturally-informed psychological processes – of the individual

Research: Regional, linguistic, ethnic variability

Behavior

- Cohabitation
  - ↑ Non-English or French mother tongue
  - ↑ Immigrant families, especially from non-European countries
  - ↑ Southern European, Asian, Jewish, Caribbean, Latin/South Americans
  - ↓ Aboriginal ethnic background (lowest proportion across ethnic groups)
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Motivation

- For cohabiting
  - All groups: financial reasons and schooling
  - Indo-Canadians: tradition/family closeness
- For moving out
  - Chinese and European-Canadians: schooling
  - European-Canadians: independence
  - Indo-Canadian males: work
  - Indo-Canadian females: marry
- For returning home
  - All groups: "transitional" reasons
  - Indian and Chinese Canadians: "other reasons"
  - European-Canadians: financial reasons
  - Chinese-Canadians: schooling