

Far from Home: A Qualitative Analysis of Altered Social and Familial Interactions Among Students Attending College Significant Distances from Home

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Abstract

This study explored the necessary modifications for students' relationships with their home contexts (social and familial) as they acclimated to college life. We specifically targeted students living over 1,000 miles from their present school setting. Thirty undergraduate students at a private Midwest university participated in this qualitative phenomenological research study through semistructured interviews. While numerous dynamics surfaced, repeated themes included feelings of homesickness, desiring to go home, weakening of peer relationships established at home, and gradual strengthening of familial relationships.

The transition to the college life is loaded with adjustment, not only for the college student, but also for family and friends. While some college students who live relatively close to home can return for weekend gatherings of friends or family members, students who study long distances from home do not have this luxury. For these students, the interaction with their domestic environment vacillates from extremes of close contact to severing of ties, and often depends on specific circumstances at their college or home. The purpose of this study is to examine the interactive process between this subset of students and their home contexts.

The ease of college adjustment can be facilitated by the interaction of a positive attachment and a separation from parents. Magnotti (2005) found that conflicts within the inner workings of a student's family life carried over into difficulties for the student academically and socially. Research indicated that a preoccupation with attachment yielded lower grades and overall poor adjustment for freshman-year college students. Additionally, the preoccupation on parental control negatively affected social adjustment (Bernier, Larose, Boivin, & Soucy, 2004). Pace (2004) advocated for the need of additional studies examining the adjustment process of college students in this regard.

Mattanah, Hancock, and Brand (2004) reported that male and female students need continuous relationship stability during transitional periods such as entrance into college. Adolescents who believed they were ostracized from their support groups struggled emotionally and had more difficulty adjusting. While undergoing the individuation process required independence, students also demonstrated a need for the reassurance of social support. Additionally, Fisher (1989) indicated that, particularly for students in college contexts where acceptance into the university is a privilege, conflicts might arise between students' desires to experience new social and educational encounters and the extended security of home they also wish to enjoy. In short, students must weigh their desire to gain new experiences against their dependence on familiarity.

Philip (1988) listed mourning the losses of parents, family, friends, and other social support networks as one of the primary transitional aspects for college freshmen. Furthermore, the family (and the home community) is the basis for further social networking at college. The networks established in the college community, along with the student's traits and coping styles, are determinant in gaining self-appraisal and further support-seeking behavior. College students must have the foundation of family support, along with social networking in the college community, in order to bolster coping abilities.

Parental influence on college students also affects the transitional process to college life. For example, Hale (1939) found that overprotective parents caused various negative effects on male students' college transitions. Whether or not the male students desired the strong parental influence, they nevertheless struggled