

Summer 2009

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

Michael W. Firmin
Cedarville University, firmin@cedarville.edu

Courtney B. Johnson

Stephanie Yoder Basham

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/psychology_publications

 Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Firmin, M., Johnson, C., & Yoder, S. (2009). A qualitative analysis of altered social and familial interactions by students attending college significant distances from home. *Enrollment Management Journal*, 3, 55-75.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

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

Michael W. Firmin

Cedarville University

Courtney B. Johnson

Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis

Stephanie Yoder Basham

South Carolina Association of Child and Family Services

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

in adjusting to the pressure of college life without the consistent parental influence previously experienced. While overprotective parents have been shown to exert negative effects, contact with family members and the home setting generally benefited students. Hale also found that well-adjusted males received more written letters per week compared to males who were identified as poorly adjusted. Students who experienced connected relationships with their parents also typically indicated experiencing better physical health than those individuals who did not attempt to keep contact with parents during their college years.

Overall, parental involvement seems to benefit students' productivity and facilitates their smoother transition in college adjustment. Distance does not completely hamper cyber-interaction. Trice (2002) reported that students in her sample possessing e-mailing capabilities contacted their parents an average of six times per week. The study highlighted that, particularly during times of heightened stress, students may increase their contact with home for support. Trice also found that female students generally exercised e-mailing opportunities more frequently than males.

Stanzione (2005) reported that emotional restriction, defined as evident inhibitions regarding emotional expression, among males predicted lower successful college adjustment, not only academically, but also socially and personally. On a more general level, students with high scores of interdependence on self-construal measures (i.e., identifiers selected by the participants) predicted academic success; students scoring high on independence predicted social adjustment and healthy amounts of self-esteem (Gamse, 2005). Overall, Gamse found that students rating high in both categories of interdependence and independence adjusted to college with greater ease than did cohorts that were more dependent.

Personality traits of particular students also influence the transitional process and facilitation of detachment necessary in order to carry out their "new lives" while away at college. Asendorpf (2000) found that some first-year students frequently reported shy characteristics due to reactions in unfamiliar social settings when in a new university environment. Furthermore, this shy characteristic was

exacerbated by the general university milieu, where students are evaluated based on intellectual, social, and physical attractiveness. Shy individuals gravitated toward a more gradual adaptation to college life. They also oriented toward other shy people, forming an understanding and supportive social network that lessened previous anxiety over acceptance. Asendorpf reported that students with shy tendencies may be predisposed to loneliness, even with the presence of a serious romantic relationship or strong social network. Initially, leaving home tended to elicit feelings of loneliness. However, after three months the effects of loss of the familiar generally waned and loneliness subsided.

In a similar manner, self-efficacy (i.e., the degree of confidence one has in one's ability to accomplish aims) correlated with successful college adjustment (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002). Individuals who rated high in self-efficacy generally were more apt to learn behaviors that increased their assimilation within the culture. Additionally, Hechanova-Alampay, et al. found that, to the degree where a new college culture differed from students' home culture, the more difficult the transition process was. Moreover, social support proved integral in adjustment success. Since college students often derive self-esteem from the approval of others, locating and maintaining a strong and supportive social network was crucial for assimilation success.

Given the literature reviewed, we believe that the most insightful step to better our understanding of students' adjustments to attending universities far from home was using qualitative methodology. We were unable to locate any current research that addressed this specific research question. Qualitative methods, particularly phenomenological research, tends to be apt when examining constructs that are virgin and exploratory (Willis, 2007). Moreover, a qualitative design promised to help provide more in-depth explorations of student perspectives regarding this topic than typically could be garnered via other research approaches, such as surveys (Flick, 2002). In light of the research available in the present literature, sharpening our understanding of how students came to understand their experiences seemed logically to augur a foundation on which further research studies heuristically could build. Consequently, we formulated a qualitative interview approach for the present study.

Method

The sample of students who participated in the study came from a private, selective, evangelical, comprehensive university located in the Midwest United States, enrolling slightly over 3,000 students. Roughly 80% of the students who matriculated at the university lived in on-campus, university-operated dormitories. The students in the sample were Caucasian, with ages ranging from 19 to 21, half male and half female. Students were selected at random from a criterion-based sample (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Particularly, the university Registrar's Office provided a list of all students whose home residency was in a state located 1,000 miles or further from the university. These states included Texas, Washington, Oregon, Nebraska, New Mexico, and California. A second-order criterion (Silverman, 2005) was employed in the sampling. Students were all in the first semester of their second year of college study at the university.

The reason for selecting the criterion of 1,000 miles was that it made reasonably certain that participants would not have regular face-to-face contact with individuals from their home milieu. Most students could not safely drive 16+ hours in a weekend or even drive home for brief college breaks. A combination of travel time and cost also reasonably prohibited the selected students from flying home during these occasions. We desired to capture a group of individuals (criterion sample) who were residential at the university for the entire fall and spring semesters and who had returned to the university following their freshman year.

Sampling continued, equally with male and female participants, until saturation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) was reached. That is, we continued our interviews to the point where new interviews seemingly were not providing enough new data to warrant sample additions. The law of diminishing returns came into effect, suggesting that, using models by qualitative experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Slayton and Llosa (2005), our sample size was sufficient for the intended purpose of the qualitative research.

The study was designed as a phenomenological research study (Berg, 2001). Among multiple types of qualitative research methodology, this explores a phenomenon that a sample of participants experience in a systemic manner. Researchers capture the consensus among the participants and report common

themes among most individuals in the sample. Some approaches, within the context of this model, advocate that theory should be integrated into the research design and interpretation of the findings (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). As such, the discussion section of a journal article typically examines the results through the lens or grid of a theoretical perspective (Mason, 2002). Some researchers, for example most feminist qualitative scholars (e.g., Madriz, 2003), believe that failure to integrate theory into the design and findings results in inadequate application of qualitative methodology. Other seminal qualitative researchers (e.g., Glaser, 1998), in contrast, contend that theory should play no role in either the design of a qualitative methodology or in interpreting the findings. In this model, it is the role of the reader—not the researcher—to apply theory to a qualitative research study. Any attempt by the researcher in this regard taints the cogency of the study, and bracketing all personal and theoretical notions is a key component for the successful execution and reporting of the findings through this approach to qualitative research (Raffanti, 2007).

While we respect both perspectives toward qualitative approaches and recognize that an end to the debate likely will not occur anytime soon (Bailey, 2007), philosophically we are committed to the traditional approach to qualitative research. As such, our lack of theoretical integration in the formulation of the study and also in the article's discussion section is not an oversight. Rather, it is based on a legitimate and accepted practice, embedded in a well-established paradigm of qualitative research, to inductively describe our findings—not to interpret them (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Semistructured interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with all the participants. This afforded the freedom to deviate from the particular conversant topic of the moment and digress into subjects that participants felt were important for helping to enlighten their perspectives and frames of thought. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The names used in the article for reading clarity are pseudonyms. Following the protocol established by Firmin (2006), we conducted two waves of interviews with the participants. This provided the researchers an opportunity to read, assess, and code the transcripts prior to the second round of interviews. We believe this allowed the best chance of capturing the key constructs communicated in the participants' interviews.

Maxwell's (2005) coding protocol was followed when analyzing the data. As such, we employed open coding strategies that focused on inductive analysis of the information presented by the participants, apart from preconceived notions or theoretical constructs. Constant comparison analysis (Grbick, 2007) provided the primary means of generating codes that loaded into generating our themes from the findings. NVIVO-8 software assisted with the thematic analysis, including locating text that aptly supported the constructs and themes. We followed Lewins and Silver's (2007) protocol for use of software enhancing (not generating) thematic data analysis in a qualitative study.

Moreover, regular meetings among the research team allowed for comparisons among developing codes, and themes were derived about which all the researchers agreed on their prominence in the data. In the end, findings were established where they reflected the consensus of all or the vast majority of the participants in the study. Internal validity was enhanced via the use of member checks (Merriam, 2002) and consultations with independent researchers (Silverman, 2006). As such, we found confirmation for our findings both by participants in the study and by individuals outside of the study's regular data analysis loop. Finally, the internal validity of the study was enhanced by generating a data trail (Daytner, 2006) from the reported themes to the tape recorded transcripts. This enables future researchers to check the validity of our reported findings as well as assists future qualitative researchers who may later wish to replicate the present study.

Results

Although all students undergo some degree of acclamation to their new environment following college enrollment, students in our research sample who traveled considerable distances faced particular challenging factors unique to their situations. The college selection process itself involved strong parental involvement and encouragement for the majority of our distance students. Themes from the data also surfaced that related to students feeling homesick, the morphing of the quality and intensity of home relationships, and students adjusting the level of communication they experienced with their home connections. For this subset of the college population, adjustment occurred not only with their new environment on campus, but also with their comfort zone of the familiarity of home.

Institutional Selection

How students initially described the selection of their distant institution was integral to their college adjustment approaches. For each of the students, family involvement—coupled with the reputation of the university they attended—affected their deliberation in the college selection. Melissa’s statement exemplified the dual relationship of these factors.

[I heard about the university] through my aunt. She’s a graduate here. She graduated in ’86. So, um, I was looking at schools in California and I’m a nursing major and it was pretty much impossible to get into any of those schools [because] . . . there’s a two year waiting list and I didn’t want to wait two years, so I knew I had to go out-of-state. And I also knew I wanted to go to a Christian school, and [the university] was the first school that said, yeah, you can get right into the nursing program as long as you have a good GPA.

Numerous students learned of the university through their family members’ or acquaintances’ previous attendance. These individuals encouraged further inquiry into the university as they were satisfied with their respective experiences. Participants often shared stories similar to Melissa’s in which they heard of the college via a family member. Daniel stated,

My parents are alumni, so all growing up they would tell me stories . . . and, almost all of my relatives have also attended the university. So, I heard stories and wanted to come ever since I was very little.

In addition to knowing someone who had graduated from the university, the perceived quality of the education was evident to students through college visits and the attestation of alumni who influenced students to attend. Emily mentioned the importance of sound Biblical doctrine in her selection process: “It just seemed like the university was the most authentic when it came to teaching the Bible.” Similarly, David indicated that he chose the university because of “the environment in the campus as well as the academics.” As reflected through their statements, students did not select a university far from home randomly or for the mere sake of distance. Rather, they gave weight to aspects of the university that they believed probably were not equally attainable in other institutional settings.

Repeatedly, family support for finalizing the decision to study significant distances from home was indicated as a requirement for most students. Angela, for example, shared the following about her parents' involvement.

They were very much involved. They wanted me to be happy where I was going, but they also wanted it to be a good Christian [school] with a good solid Bible-believing background and then, of course, I wanted to be a nurse, so they had to have a good nursing program and be accredited . . . but they were very much involved because they were helping me pay for it so, so they were happy.

While the majority of individuals indicated the ultimate choice of where to attend college was theirs, all said they desired parental support in order to validate their final decision. Their reasoning included desires for approval by family members and often, the financial assistance from their parents for undergraduate studies.

Homesickness

Like most first-year students, participants reported several factors affecting successful assimilation into their new context. Students faced the added challenge of not having access to home friends and family that students living closer did. A salient theme evidenced through the students' reflections of their present school experiences was homesickness. Stephen, like a few of the students, when asked if he ever struggled with homesickness, currently or upon first coming to school, affirmed his strong independent spirit: "I really liked the whole being on my own; this is my, you know, making my own life." Most participants, however, related that they frequently struggled with feeling homesick. They found themselves experiencing bouts of melancholy due to the felt loss of connections with family members and friends from back home. Joshua shared his homesickness experience by underscoring its reduced intensity the longer he remained at the university:

Last year as a freshman, I definitely did [feel homesick], but this year, coming back, it felt more comfortable here and I felt better about it. But seeing my friends that did stay closer to home and just went to the local university, they just stayed in their cliques and that kind of thing. So it was good as far as it goes to growing up, to experience, to get 13 hours from home and you can't just drive home on the weekend and it causes you to break from your habits, whether good or bad I suppose, and from your parents.

Brittany mentioned that seeing others who can have what she cannot have compounded the difficulty for her as she discussed her inability to go home just for the weekend: “Sometimes I’ll be, like when everybody goes home for the weekend, I’ll be like, uh, I wish I could go home and I wish it was closer.” Clint elaborated on Brittany’s perspective when he described his homesick experience.

Because things will remind me of it [home] or if I’m talking to them, and I’m like, oh I wish I was closer to home. It usually happens on the weekend because everyone will be like, I’m going home this weekend and I’m like, O.K., it’s been forever since I’ve been home.

In a similar vein, Brent shared his occasional desire to be closer to home so that he could help bridge his two worlds of home and higher education: “The reason I would like to be closer to home is to take my friends back and, you know, hang out at my house.” William added the component that homesickness can be related to particular triggers. Sometimes these are events and, on other occasions, friendship dynamics. Note how circumstances can be influential cues for homesickness.

Yeah, I guess it depends on what’s going on at the time. Like, if classes are hard, or if something’s going on with friends or whatever out here, then I’ll wish I was at home. But when things are good, I guess it’s just whenever things are good I want to stay out here and when they’re bad I want to go home.

As responses differed in intensity and duration of homesickness for each of the participants, William’s mention of triggering current events that affect homesickness illustrated the conclusions of most of the students in our study.

Desire to Go Home

The desire to travel home whenever possible was a construct evident in the majority of student responses. The ability to go home counts as a luxury not taken lightly and highly valued when available. Amber shared, “I love to go home. I love my family first of all. . . . I also really love Texas and San Antonio . . . So, I look forward to going back.” The rarity of home visits due to distance and travel expenses served as a constant reminder of the unique context these students faced. Michael indicated he traveled home only a few times each year:

“I really do like going home. And I only go home a couple times a year, for Christmas and for summer and that’s it so, it’s always good to go home.” Kate elaborated on Michael’s sentiment, providing insight on reasons why home visits were rare. She stated,

I want to [go home]. I do not go home until Christmas. Christmas and summer, that’s it. Because it is such a long flight and the tickets are pretty expensive, you know, three hundred, four hundred dollars, so I wish I could go home more. That’s probably one of the hardest things of living far away is like this fall break I really want to go home, but I can’t. That’s tough. So that, and Thanksgiving, because I am used to Thanksgiving at my house and I can’t go.

Even if students desired to go home more frequently or for shorter breaks, often they were unable. Financial factors, along with time spent traveling, inhibited potential trips home for shorter breaks or for weekends. Operating from this limited interaction with home, students were forced to adjust accordingly to the change in their domestic relationships and cope with the resultant frustrations.

Changes in Social Relationships

A decreasing dependency on friendships established in their home settings became essentially inevitable, no matter the attempts of students to preserve and maintain those relationships. With the increased distance and inaccessibility to interaction, students were forced to reevaluate the sources of their social ties. Laura shared how her group of friends from high school was extremely close-knit, with everyone invited to every party thrown. She expressed the shift in the relationship dynamics.

After coming to school, the separation, the distance . . . we’re still friends, but it’s just not the same because our lives aren’t in the same circles anymore. When we talk about stuff, we can’t relate because the other person wasn’t there. So you’re just listening, and you can come back with your own story, but no memories that were shared anymore. And because of time spent on other things, you don’t have time to talk as much online anymore. So you kind of lose communication. It’s actually pretty sad; you just fall away from them.

Andrew similarly shared several important facets of his shifting relationships from home. He mentioned how he attended a small school and he remained in contact with the majority of his peers. He admitted, “we’ll communicate like, not a whole lot, but then we’ll get back and we’ll just be like, hey, how you doing, just reconnect really fast, and then everyone leaves again, so, I don’t know how long that goes on.” Andrew also offered a glimpse into the mental aspect of his home friendships, “Yeah, it’s kind of like, you almost forget about them almost, but then it’s like you see them, and it’s like oh yeah, and you reconnect, but yeah, they’re not the same.” When queried about how he felt regarding his altered friendships, Andrew responded, “I’m O.K. with the fact that, you know, people move on, things change, so, but you can always reconnect at some point.” For students limited to seeing their friends only minimally throughout the academic year, adjusting to less communication is challenging but a necessary cost of attending college far from home.

Growing accustomed to less communication with home is not a simple process. Alicia admitted, “It’s hard. It bothers me a lot.” While the process may be painful for some students, Cindy shared that domestic connections can be brief, but meaningful.

I think it’s kind of understood that it’s O.K. . . . And we still say, love ya, you know, and write e-mails every once in a while and postcards, and mail and birthday gifts, so, it’s understood that we go our separate ways and then we come back. It’s healthy I think.

As students closer to home have the option of maintaining friendships from home more readily through periodic visits throughout the school year, students far from home must address the changing dynamic of their friendships. This requires deliberate effort and marked attention. However, the loss of connection with home friends is not all negative. Jason pointed out what he felt set him apart the most from his local peers.

My friends who live close always run home if they need something or they’ll visit home randomly if something interesting happens. So it’s kind of a bummer, but at least I can go with them if I need a home-cooked meal or something . . . it’s kind of depressing to see them go home.

Because of limited access to home and its amenities, participants indicated that they believed themselves to be more academically focused in college. Diane related:

I think it's harder for me than it is for them. I think they are helped by being able to go home and see their families. It encourages them more. But in some ways it's easier for me because I don't feel guilty if I don't go home a certain weekend that I have a lot of homework. I'm not torn between my responsibilities here and trying to go home as often as I can. And I think it's easier for them to keep up with their friends back home and that's much harder for me to do, but again it's also not as distracting.

Another perceived benefit in attending a distant college, related by our participants, involved novel experiences. Particularly, students reported benefiting significantly from new experiences and broadened horizons. Experiencing life from a different milieu resulted in students feeling as though they were less narrow. Thomas provided an example.

If I was at college closer to home, a lot of my friends would share the similar stuff with me, like a lot of people don't know where I come from, like with Oregon. They're like . . . you've never heard of Big Boy, you've never heard of like Bob Evans? No, this is totally new for me, so I think if I was back home at a school it, people would know what I'm talking about. . . . People are like, is Oregon the one above California here, so I think in that sense people would just know where I'm coming from a lot more, like people here don't really know that, but that's kind of fun.

In sum, attending school far from home has some potential psychosocial benefits of which participants were generally cognizant. Reminding themselves of these benefits facilitated coping with the homesickness and perceived losses experienced in being estranged from home.

Changes in Familial Relationships

Beyond alterations in their friendships, students also addressed the shifting dynamics within their familial connections. A common construct related to the strength of family relationships in most students. Consistently, they offered statements similar to Jamie's when asked to describe their relationship with their family: "We have a big emotional connection, like that's just the way my family is, like, I think that's the way a lot of families are here." Elizabeth presented the inner workings of her family with the comment, "I love being with my parents

and my siblings and just my parents give me so much advice. I go to them for everything; I respect them, their opinions, their decisions on so much.” Amy shared that for her, “I have three other siblings, we grew up together, ate dinner [together] every night after school . . . and my dad would come home from work and we’d all sit down as a family and eat together every single night.” Attending a college a thousand miles or more from home impacted the tight emotional bonds the majority of these students attested to sharing with their families.

Most of the students also indicated a strengthening of their relationships with their parents and siblings because of the college distance factor. For example, Chad admitted having increased respect for his parents because of the separation from them.

I think I respect my parents a lot more. I look at how they raised me and, I think that’d be an area that I’ve matured in is I, I can see, you know, look back on how they raised me and how my parents are and I can appreciate what they’ve done. I’m a lot more thankful for them and my whole family than I was when I was a senior in high school.

Joe shared a response similar to Chad’s: “Actually, I think I share more now just because I feel more like it’s my decision, like I’m more on my own.” The increased sense of independence seemingly allowed students the freedom to maintain and, in some cases, enhance the emotional connections with their homes in a healthy manner. Even with siblings, relationships often were reported to have improved, as Katelyn illustrated when speaking of the relationship she shares with her brother: “I’d say my relationship with my brother is a little better because we are distanced from each other, and so he kind of, now he misses me, which is nice.”

While the home friend relationships of participants declined in strength, overall, family relationships remained consistent, if not improved in some aspects. Students also generally believed their visits home were highly rewarding. Mark exemplified the sentiments of most when stating, “I miss them [family] a lot more because I can’t go see them every two seconds, or whatever and it makes my trips home so much more edifying.”

Since students felt strong, emotional connections to home, the maintenance of this emotional bond warranted follow-up attention in our second-wave interviews with the research participants. Half of the students said they spoke to family members once per week or every two weeks, while the other half spoke to their parents more than once a week. Peter illustrated how this connection occurred, “I e-mail about every day. I call once a week on Sundays. My mom made me promise her that I would call her once a week.” Debbie’s contact generally was less frequent, although could intensify when feeling stressed: “At least twice a week; if I’m having a bad week, like every day. My mom usually calls me like once a week, but I just call when I want to call.” Thomas laughed as he shared, “Usually, they [his parents] get on the intercom and [start] talking. They all get really excited during soccer season to hear about the scores and everything.” Worth noting is that, without exception, all students had established systems for continual and regular communication with their parents.

Another marked facet of students’ home communication was the degree to which parents were aware of their children’s everyday activities. Some students, such as Joshua, shared that his parents “know pretty much everything,” while others, like Andrew, shared, “They definitely don’t know as much as if I was back home, but they know who my friends are in general, like little aspects, but nothing specific.” Generally, intimate knowledge of daily activities was associated with frequent communication. That is, the more regular communication parents had with their children, the more they exercised access to direct or indirect knowledge of daily activities. Emily, for example, noted that her parents found connections challenging due to not seeing the surroundings that Emily regularly experienced.

It’s a lot harder to communicate what is going on campus and what’s happening in your life and what college life is like if they can’t come visit and see it for themselves occasionally. And uh, so that’s a huge challenge because I’ve had to try and communicate it’s not like college 30 years ago . . . so that’s a little challenging, I mean all I dreamed about first semester was for them to just kind of experience two days with me, one of each day and just see what life is like, and then it’d be a whole lot easier to communicate with them. But um, yeah, that’s a really hard thing is just communicating what’s going on.

The psychology of this dynamic works both ways. That is, parents cannot see students’ worlds, and the home worlds of distance students change without their

conscious awareness. Parents try to express these life modifications at home, but since students are not physically there, sometimes full awareness is lost. Alicia reflected the sentiments of most in this regard:

You come back home and a lot of stuff has changed. . . . I'm like, since when do we do this . . . when did this happen, or my brother will have had like five dates or has a car and . . . I just would figure that I would know that stuff but I don't. . . . It does bother me a lot. Like, I wish I could know that stuff. Like, I just figure, like I'm talking to them and they'll bring it up or I'll just be asking what's going on and I'll just figure that they'll tell me.

In sum, distance students are affected by lost communication, both from what they are unable to see and hear about home and how those at home cannot fully enter their college worlds.

Discussion

As evident through their interviews, students attending a college a considerable distance from home faced challenges related to their friends. For individuals in our sample, the strong emotional connection to home bolstered the confidence for them to consider attending a college so far from home. In many cases, knowing someone who was satisfied with the institution from personal experience also supported the decision of these students to attend. Parental support for leaving home tended to counterbalance the pull they experienced from friends to stay closer to home. Supporting the findings of Magnotti (2005), participants in our sample demonstrated the positive influences of appropriate parental involvement. No participants in the sample felt their parents were overly intrusive in their affairs, but instead, appreciated parental support. Perhaps the transitioning of family life tensions into academic life reported by Magnotti was mitigated due to the distance between student and home.

For the students in our sample, relationships with home friends tended to diminish after being away at college, and familial connections generally were strengthened. Students were willing to create new social networks within their present college context and succeeded socially in this new environment because they were able to successfully create a new home away from home. Consistent with Mattanah, Hancock, and Brand (2004), our students assimilated, in

part, due to the supportive home base from which they left. Also aligning with the work of Fisher (1989), students in our sample experienced the toggling psychological dilemma between accepting their new, stimulating environment and remaining “loyal” to home. Most students in our sample found homesickness to be most acute during their first semester at the university. According to Philip (1988), in order for students to appropriately shift into their new context, such a period of mourning over cutting ties with former social support networks is imperative for college freshmen. In time, our sample developed the needed social connections that helped make the long distance away from home less difficult. Participants, overall, described themselves as having adjusted relatively well.

Whether innate or learned through necessity, distance students in our sample demonstrated maturity in how they emotionally handled the transition from home life to college life away from the unfamiliar. This finding is consistent with the work of Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, and Van Horn (2002); students with high self-efficacy tend to describe the greatest ease of transitioning into their new environments. As well, Gamse’s (2005) theory showed support: students exhibiting a balance between interdependence and independence were fully capable of such a dramatic shift in environment, social network, and daily routine. Worth noting, individuals in the sample not only were able to establish new relationships, but these individuals also described themselves as exhibiting independence from their domestic milieus.

With their willingness to let go of the past, the students were able to focus on the benefits they received from new experiences—rather than dwelling on what they lost from home. When at home for breaks, the students described themselves as being able to “pick up where they left off” with previous friends, all with the underlying understanding that this phenomenon was healthy and necessary. Students did mention their frustrations and desire to be closer to their friends, but most realized that the connections they once had while living at home were unobtainable, at least in the same measure as they enjoyed previously. Relinquishing the old and embracing the new was their coping mantra.

While previous friendships subsided in frequency of communication and perceived depth of connections, students felt that relationships with their parents

and siblings improved. Perhaps due to the increased independence, students were willing to share more with their parents and desired to go home during breaks or whenever opportunities arose. It is important to note that for the most part, students reported a healthy relationship with their family household prior to college departure. Not all students will demonstrate this phenomenon, particularly students who did not already hold satisfactory relationship with home connections. Also, students in our sample showed similar behaviors to those showed by individuals studied by Trice (2002). Particularly, frequency of communication with home increased during stressful times for the students. While moving on from home was necessary, relying on the security in the preestablished relationships served as a healthy coping mechanism and transitional tool. Students described themselves as frequently seeking out the advice of their parents. They missed social events, such as Thanksgiving and musical recitals of siblings, which were described as cogent losses. Students realized that distance prevented the option of traveling home often and they described themselves as adapting aptly to their limited physical interactions. Frequent phone calls and the use of e-mail or instant messaging provided students with outlets to maintain their perceived strong emotional ties to home.

Most students realized that the connections they once had while living at home were unobtainable. Relinquishing the old and embracing the new was their coping mantra.

Limitations and Future Research

All participants in our study were Caucasian. Additionally, most of the participants were from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. This reflects the overall demographic of the university from which the sample was drawn. Namely, only 6% of the student body was minority and few students enrolled at the institution typically identify themselves as being from working-class homes. Further research should give targeted attention to minority students who attend college significant distances from home. Comparing these results with findings from the present research may provide an interesting integration. Since various ethnic groups often place different values on family life, such cross comparison with the present study may be of particular value.

A comparison study between students who decide to remain at colleges that are far distances from home with students who choose to transfer to colleges closer to home for the duration of their schooling may reveal potentially insightful outcomes. The hardiness factor may prove particularly salient among the student groups. A longitudinal study following students throughout their entire college experience also may help assess whether home friendships continue to deteriorate and if family relationships continue to remain solidified in the same general trajectory we found in the present research. Undoubtedly, admissions offices of universities would benefit from any research focusing on the overall dynamics experienced and the successful assimilation of students who attend institutions that are considerable distances from home, in hopes of increasing retention rates.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Michael Firmin is professor and chair of the Department of Psychology at Cedarville University, Cedarville, OH.

Courtney Johnson is a doctoral student at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN.

Stephanie Yoder Basham is the coordinator of the South Carolina Association of Child and Family Services

Address correspondence to: Michael Firmin, Cedarville University, 251 N. Main Street, Cedarville, OH 45314, firmin@cedarville.edu

References

- Asendorpf, J. B. (2000). Shyness and adaptation to the social world of university. In W. Crozier (Ed.), *Shyness: Development, consolidation and change* (pp. 103–120). New York: Routledge.
- Bailey, C. A. (2007). *A guide to qualitative field research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berg, B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bernier, A., Larose, S., Boivin, M., & Soucy, N. (2004). Attachment state of mind: Implications for adjustment to college. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*, 783–806.
- Daytner, K. (2006, June). *Validity in qualitative research: Application of safeguards*. Paper presented at the 18th annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research in Education conference, Cedarville, OH.
- Firmin, M. (2006). Using interview waves in phenomenological qualitative research. In P. Brewer & M. Firmin (Eds.), *Ethnographic & qualitative research in education* (pp. 175–181). New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Fisher, S. (1989). *Homesickness, cognition, and health*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Flick, U. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gamse, S. S. (2005). Independence/interdependence, social anxiety, and adjustment to college: A longitudinal analysis. *ProQuest Digital Dissertations database*. (Publication No. AAT 3154397)
- Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Grbick, C. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guest, B., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*, 59–82.
- Hale, L. B. (1939). *From school to college: A study of the transition experience*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hechanova-Alampay, R., Beehr, T. A., Christiansen, N. D., & Van Horn, R. K. (2002). Adjustment and strain among domestic and international student sojourners: A longitudinal study. *School Psychology International, 23*, 458–474.
- Hesse-Biber, S., & Leavy, P. (2006). *The practice of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kincheloe, J., & McLaren, P. (2005). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. (3rd ed.). (pp. 303–342). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

- Madriz, E. (2003). Focus groups in feminist research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 363–388). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Magnotti, M. A. (2005). The effects of separation from parents, attachment to parents, triangulation in marital conflict, and parental social support on college adjustment. *ProQuest Digital Dissertations database*. (Publication No. AAT 3140900)
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mattanah, J. F., Hancock, G. R., & Brand, B. L. (2004). Parental attachment, separation individuation, and college student adjustment: A structural equation analysis of meditational effects. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51, 213–225.
- Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative research design* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. (2002). Assessing and evaluating qualitative research. In S. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice* (pp. 18–33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pace, S. R. (2004) Surviving the freshman year of college: What psychosocial factors contribute to an easy versus difficult postsecondary transition to college? *ProQuest Digital Dissertations database*. (Publication No. AAT 3112986)
- Philip, A. F. (1988). Parents, sons and daughters: Growth and transition during the college years. In L. Whitaker (Ed.), *Parental concerns in college student mental health* (pp. 17–31). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Raffanti, M. (2007, June). *Phenomenological bracketing as a pedagogical tool in grounded theory*. Paper presented at the 19th annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research in Education conference, Cedarville, OH.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting qualitative data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Slayton, J., & Llosa, L. (2005). The use of qualitative methods in large-scale evaluation: Improving the quality of the evaluation and the meaningfulness of the findings. *Teachers College Record*, 107, 2543–2565.
- Stanzione, D. (2005). Male gender role strain, coping, and college adjustment. *ProQuest Digital Dissertations database*. (Publication No. AAT 3171005)
- Trice, A. D. (2002). First semester college students' e-mail to parents: Frequency and content related to parenting style. *College Student Journal*, 36, 327–334.
- Willis, J. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.