

SCOTT S. HALL AND EVA ZYGMUNT *Ball State University*

Dislocated College Students and the Pandemic: Back Home Under Extraordinary Circumstances

Objective: *This research examines college students' experiences of dislocation during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Background: *Due to governmental stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, families with "dislocated" (compelled to return home) college students would likely encounter unique stressors while also being limited in their normal ways of coping.*

Methods: *Using an online survey, the current study sought to discover how diverse individual characteristics and family living situations of 323 dislocated students associated with varying homelife experiences (e.g., intrusive parenting, students making an extra effort to spend time with family), and how such experiences associated with relationship changes during the quarantine.*

Results: *Analyses detected some differences in the students' homelife experiences based on background and living situations, especially related to being a first-year student, having been excited about returning home, and feeling accepted by parents about being home. Negative family relationship quality during the quarantine was most predicted by negative attitudes from students and parents about students being home, the student feeling less adultlike (based on treatment and own identity conception), and having low autonomy.*

Conclusion: *Returning home for quarantine was challenging for most students, and circumstances and attitudes appeared to contribute to how such challenges associated with family relationship changes.*

Implications: *Implications for practitioners and universities are discussed in regard to preparing college students and their families for similar conditions.*

In March 2020, universities and colleges across the United States began closing their campuses in response to a growing, worldwide pandemic (The Entangled Group, 2020). Imposed stay-at-home orders—commonly referred to as a quarantine—restricted individuals' abilities to leave their homes for work and recreation. These measures were implemented to slow the spread of a novel coronavirus referred to as SARS-CoV-2 that causes an illness called COVID-19. Consequently, a wave of college students were dislocated from their chosen habitation on or near college campuses. Undoubtedly, many would return to live with parents under extraordinary circumstances with relatively little time to prepare for the change.

From a life-cycle perspective (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980), traditional college-age students are part of a launching stage in which parents send their young adult children toward independent living. It is not unusual for young adults to live with parents, particularly in times of economic downturns (Sandberg-Thoma et al., 2015) and as part of a gradual elongation of an emerging adulthood process (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Some

Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies, TC 605, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306 (sshall@bsu.edu).

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adult children return home—sometimes referenced with the term *boomerang* (Mitchell, 1998; Vogl-Bauer, 2009)—often due to job loss or relationship dissolution (Arundel & Lennartz, 2017; Kleinpieper et al., 2017).

The mass return home due to the pandemic is a boomerang developmentally, and the return home possibly created home and family dynamics unprecedented in this country. Some families were likely impacted in unique ways due to their individual and family characteristics and circumstances (e.g., economic security, racial diversity). How family relationships were ultimately affected by the quarantine likely varied based on how they coped with and adjusted to the disruption of their more typical family processes (Boss, 2001, 2012).

The current study sought to investigate the homelife experiences of “dislocated college students” who, due to campus closure, returned to live with at least one parent during regional stay-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 outbreak. To dislocate means to be “put out of place” and “force a change in the usual status, relationship, or order” (Miriam-Webster, 2021), which captures important elements of the population of interest—students who underwent a transition away from a chosen location, a change that was imposed on them and their families. Analyses focused on identifying individual characteristics and family living situations (e.g., gender, race, social class, first-year student) that associated with differing homelife experiences (e.g., intrusive parenting, whether students took extra effort to spend time with family), and analyzing associations of such experiences with the nature of family relationship changes during the quarantine. The current study was grounded in family stress theory and in various bodies of literature related to developmental and family dynamics of emerging adulthood.

UNUSUAL, STRESSFUL CIRCUMSTANCES

Times of stress put pressure on families to adapt to their circumstances. Family stress theories typically focus on the nature of, family perceptions of, and resources that can be applied to respond to a stressor (Boss, 2001, 2012; Hill, 1958). The nature of each stressor affects how challenging it might be for a family. For example, Boss (2001) noted that contextual stressors outside of the family prove especially distressing because families have little

control over them. Similarly, random or unexpected stressors and those with a sudden onset are challenging because families are unable to predict and prepare for them. Finally, stressors with an ambiguous nature—the facts are unclear or the end is unknown—are often considered the most challenging due to a lack of needed clarity that helps families make decisions.

The pandemic and quarantine produce stressors that arguably share characteristics related to families’ external contexts, resulting in the potential for high levels of pressure on families. Family processes often shift in attempt to adjust to new pressures, and a lack of adequate relational and cognitive adjustment and coping can damage family relationships (Boss, 2001, 2012). Unfamiliar pressures from a pandemic, a sudden dislocation, and a quarantine would thus likely prompt uncommon family interaction in the home.

A quarantine also can be conducive to creating family dynamics that are especially difficult to manage, such as a loss of privacy, autonomy, personal space, and opportunities to get a break from family members. Shared space in a home affects the psychological and emotional states of family members (Graham et al., 2015), and a lack of control over regulating privacy and space can lead to family conflict (Hawk et al., 2009). Scholarship on overcrowded homes has indicated that problems for families in such homes arise from excessive interaction, stimulation, and demands from each other, as well as from diminished intimacy and alone time (Goux & Maurin, 2005).

A family quarantined together with less opportunity for escaping members’ attention and influence likely experiences these types of challenges and would be at risk for excessive tension. The current study thus is based on the premise that stress due to a pandemic, rapid dislocation, and a quarantine has strong potential to impact family patterns and processes that ultimately influence family relationship outcomes. Furthermore, individuals who perceive the quarantine as more disruptive to their plans are expected to report greater challenges at home because the excessive disruption would put more pressure on the family to adapt (Henry et al., 2015).

EXTERNAL FAMILY CONTEXTS AND QUARANTINED HOME LIFE

Some families may be especially vulnerable to challenges associated with the quarantine due

to factors out of their control—or the external family context, such as culture, gender, and developmental stages (Boss, 2002, 2012). In relation to family or community culture, it is well documented that COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting Black families, Brown families, and low-income communities due to circumstances such as access to health care, underlying health conditions, and a necessity to work and experience continued potential exposure (Garsd, 2020). Gender influences how families organize their roles and expectations for certain family members (e.g., domestic tasks, emotional work); indeed, it appears that women have experienced more distress during the pandemic (Hamel & Salganicoff, 2020). Because going to college can be a profound developmental rite of passage in which young adults explore emerging identities and experiment with sensation-seeking behaviors (Ashenhurst et al., 2015), families with first-year students likely have some unique experiences compared with those with more experienced students who have had more time to solidify their identities, establish academic routines, and reshape boundaries in their relationships with their parents. Thus, it was anticipated that families would differ in how they adapted to and managed stress in quarantine—or their homelife experiences—based on race, gender, social class indicators, and whether they had a first-year college student.

INTERNAL FAMILY CONTEXT AND QUARANTINED HOMELIFE

Boss's (2001, 2012) contextual approach to family stress theory posits that internal contexts of a family (i.e., structural, psychological, and philosophical) influence how families are affected by stress. Thus, distinct household characteristics should account for different homelife experiences during the quarantine. For example, students returning to an empty nest in which parents have become used to additional privacy, autonomy, and control could be particularly disruptive to family relationships (Casares & White, 2018; Tosi & Grundy, 2018). Even reintroducing an adult child to a home that includes other children requires a shift of roles, rules, and boundaries (Bowen, 1993; Casares & White, 2018).

Who the parental figures are in the home also could influence homelife experiences and relationship outcomes, in that relationships with a stepparent or with a single parent have different

histories, connections, and number of dyadic relationship combinations that influence family functioning (Bowen, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Kalmijn, 2013). However, how often the adult child and parents are actually in the home also could be a factor in the homelife experience (as noted earlier regarding space and privacy). Family systems theorists have long argued that excessive closeness and social isolation can contribute to unhealthy family functioning (Bowen, 1993; Minuchin, 1974). Consequently, students or parents who work outside of the home may benefit from the break away from home that eases the potential tension of too much togetherness brought on by the quarantine. Thus, it was expected that structural elements in the home related to who was in the home (identity of the parents, empty nest, number of siblings) and the extent to which members worked outside the home would correspond to homelife experiences during the quarantine.

Although stressful events and circumstances push families to adjust or risk experiencing distress, the meanings people assign to stressors act to mediate their actual impact on individuals and families (Boss, 2001, 2012). Thus, it is important to study perceptions and attitudes that potentially explain variation in family resiliency (Henry et al., 2015). One such attitude could include what dislocated college students feel about returning home unexpectedly. Such an attitude influences both perceptions of the belief holder and the behavior of the target of the beliefs, making the expected outcomes more likely to occur, sometimes referred to as a *self-fulfilling prophecy* (Jussim & Eccles, 1995; Lemay & Wolf, 2016; Mollborn & Everett, 2010). Being unhappy about returning home could taint the experience from the beginning for both students and parents, contributing to relationship patterns such as avoidant or strained communication. Likewise, parents' attitudes about having the child back home could have a similar impact. Thus, it was expected that more positive attitudes about being home together during the quarantine would correspond to generally more positive homelife experiences.

ADULT IDENTITY, PARENTING APPROACH, AND COPING

The launching stage of the family life-cycle is a time in which parents finalize years of

teaching their children responsibility and independence in preparing for adulthood (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Some adult children return home due to changes in their financial situation or to the dissolution of an adult relationship, such as a divorce (Arundel & Lennartz, 2017; Kleinepier et al., 2017). Sometimes referenced with the boomerang analogy, returning home usually requires particular adjustments for parents and children who had become used to the adult child living away from home (Vogl-Bauer, 2009), and this process can threaten the relationship satisfaction of married parents (Tosi, 2020; Tosi & Grundy, 2018).

Dislocated college students could arguably be a specific type of a boomerang—characterized as premature and ambiguous. Although it may be common for college students to return home on a temporary basis between semesters, the nature of the pandemic and quarantine created an unusual context for families. For example, unlike an extended holiday or summer break, students were still completing their course work, possibly competing for space, privacy, and bandwidth with siblings and even parents who were dislocated from work outside the home.

To complicate matters, dislocated college students are typically in an elongated process in which their adult identities slowly emerge (Arnett, 2000). By living at home, such students lack some self-sufficiency, independence, and responsibility, three key markers of adulthood recognized by emerging adults and the broader population (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). At the same time, they are prone to resent being talked down to and attempts to limit their autonomy (Arnett, 2000; Burn & Szoeki, 2016). This transitional stage can create ambiguity for both parents and college students, neither knowing exactly what to expect from one another (Berlin et al., 2010), increasing the risk for distress (Boss, 2001, 2012).

While seeking to find a balance between responsibility and autonomy, coresidential adult children and parents typically negotiate expectations about the adult child coming and going, the financial contribution the child would make to the family, privacy for family members, and who the adult child might bring into the home (Casares & White, 2018; Vogl-Bauer, 2009). In the case of the quarantine, the adult children also had the expectation of being a successful student and possibly to assist with managing

family members' physical health. Parents differ from one family to another in the degree to which they insert themselves into or intrude upon their grown children's lifestyles, and the grown children differ in how they feel about their own sense of having an adult identity (Arnett, 2000), so one would anticipate variation in how families navigate issues of responsibility and autonomy. Thus, it was expected that part of the homelife experience of displaced students was the degree to which they were treated like and felt like an adult, including the degree to which parents actively encouraged seemingly responsible behavior, which could come across as intrusive. These experiences would also be expected to contribute to relationship outcomes between the parents and the students due to inherent ambiguity and thus the opportunity for mismatches between parent and child expectations regarding adultlike treatment and behavior.

Distress can be lessened or avoided with effective behavioral and cognitive coping skills (Boss, 2002, 2012). However, given the social restrictions during the quarantine, familiar behavioral coping strategies were likely limited, such as leaving the home to visit others (or work) or bringing others into the home as means to blow off steam or find support from different people (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Jordyn & Byrd, 2003). High predictability and excessive routine—common descriptors of the quarantine—can also play into boredom and stagnation in relationships (Vogl-Bauer, 2009). The way people interpret a situation—like framing a setback as an opportunity for growth (Seligman, 2004)—could lead to different types of family experiences and outcomes (Boss, 2002, 2012; Henry et al., 2015). For example, the nature of the quarantine could push some students to take advantage of the proximity and time together by strengthening family relationships, while others respond by creating as much distance as possible from those imposing on their space. Similarly, the more optimistic students might embrace an opportunity to take the extra time to improve other aspects of their lives, while others lose motivation to be productive. Thus, it would be expected that coping via a positive outlook on the situation would manifest through homelife experiences (e.g., getting to know family better) and influence relationship quality (e.g., Aron et al., 2000).

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to analyze homelife experiences of dislocated college students during the quarantine by investigating variation across potentially associated individual and family variables. Specifically, the study sought to test two questions.

Question 1: How do “external family context” (i.e., race, gender, parental education, household income, first-year student status) and “internal family context” (i.e., parent empty-nest experience, which parents in the home, number of siblings in the home, students or parents working outside the home, student excitement about returning home, and parent attitudes about the student being back home) associate with homelife experiences as represented by adult identity issues (i.e., treated adultlike, felt adultlike), parenting focus (i.e., invasive parenting regarding student employment, whereabouts, sleeping habits, time management, and homework; and restricting freedom), and student cognitive coping strategies (e.g., struggles on lack of privacy and feeling stifled by family, took opportunities to improve family relationships, and focused on personal growth)? As speculated in the literature review, attitudes about the student being home could be critical to priming the homelife experience (Henry et al., 2015; Lemay & Wolf, 2016), thus being excited to return home and parental acceptance of being home will also be investigated for associations between such attitudes and the external and (other) internal family contexts.

Question 2: How do the homelife experiences associate with changes in family relationship quality during the quarantine, while accounting for external and internal family contexts? Survey items were created on the basis of the issues identified in the literature review and with specific emphasis on the quarantine.

This study can contribute to a new knowledge base about how pandemics and quarantine affect families in the United States, particularly in the case of displaced college students. Learning from such a situation can inform future efforts to assist universities, policy makers, and family practitioners to best prepare for similar situations in the future and to better anticipate the types of assistance such families may need to help them adapt to their circumstances. Because of the rapid nature in which campus closure and government mandates were executed and the ambiguities related to the potential ending of social restrictions, efforts were made

to gather information quickly from dislocated college students. Furthermore, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic led to a variety of idiosyncratic survey questions to address a long list of potential novel experiences, while retaining a level of brevity less likely to dissuade study participation.

METHOD

Coinciding with the state’s stay-at-home order, in the middle of March 2020, a midsized university in Indiana closed its campus, ceased offering face-to-face courses, and transitioned all courses to online instruction. The vast majority of students who were living on or near campus left the area, likely to live with family. About 80% of the student body are residents of Indiana, and about 18% are residents of the western region of Ohio. Both states had similar stay-at-home orders during the month of April, significantly restricting activities outside one’s household. During this time, only essential businesses remained open, only essential travel was authorized, restaurants were limited to carry out or delivery, and no social gatherings of more than 10 people were allowed.

The researchers sent an invitation email (identical text) three times over a 10-day period toward the end of April 2020, with the intention of reaching all undergraduate students. The email purpose was to announce that the researchers wanted to “learn about [students’] experiences with [their] family during the quarantine.” The recruitment email invited students to participate in an anonymous online survey if they were living with at least one parent during the quarantine. Without confirmation of who actually received and read the email, the response rate is indeterminable, but the maximum number of students who could have received an email was about 15,000, although it is unknown how many of these 15,000 students would have met the study criteria. At the conclusion of data gathering, the exact nature of any lifting of restrictions were still unclear and would not be announced until May 1, 2020.

Sample

A total of 323 students who had been living away from home at the beginning of spring semester but returned home due to the campus closure responded to the survey. The sample included

38% freshman, 25% sophomores, 22% juniors, and 14% seniors, with the mean age of all participants being about 20 years ($SD = 1.25$). The population of students responding was homogeneous in nature: about 70% self-identified as female, and 30% self-identified as male. About 87% identified as White, 3% as African American, 5% as Latinx, and 5% as “other.” Compared with the population of undergraduates at the university, this sample was disproportionately female (70% in student survey compared with 60% in student population), White (87% responding to survey compared with 76% in student population), and first-year students (38% responding to survey compared with 24% in student population).

Students reported their family household income as follows: 9% reported their family earned less than \$25,000 annually; 16% reported between \$25,000 and \$50,000; 20% between \$50,000 and \$75,000; 24% between \$75,000 and \$100,000; and 32% reporting income of greater than \$100,000. When indicating the education level of the parent with the highest degree in the home, the percentage of students reporting the parent had a high school education or less was 11%; some college, 10%; 2-year college degree or equivalent, 13%; 4-year college degree, 36%; master’s degree or certificate, 25%; and doctoral degree or similar degree in their field, 6%.

Regarding living situations, 76% of student participants reported returning to a home where both a mother and father were present, about 63% of participants indicated returning to a home that was already populated by others in addition to their parents, and 37% reported returning to an “empty nest” that only included their parents, although in some instances this included being joined by other siblings who were also returning home. Regarding employment status, 64% of participants were not employed, 15% were employed but able to complete their employment tasks in an exclusively virtual fashion from home, and 21% were working outside of the home. About 12% of participants indicated that it was typical for neither parent to be at home during the day, whereas 88% indicated that there was generally one parent at home, whether due to being jobless or the ability to work from home.

Measures

A survey was created based on theory and concepts from literature—regarding external and

internal family contexts associated with family stress theory (Boss, 2001, 2012), as well as on speculations about how the unique elements of the quarantine could influence individuals and families under the current circumstances. A question was used to ensure that participants qualified for the study and to learn of their distinct family circumstances—namely, if they had lived away from home before the quarantine. For further clarification, students responded to questions about the parent(s) with whom they were living, whether other family members were living in that home, and whether any of those other family members had been living in the home before the quarantine. In combination, these questions allowed for distinguishing diverse living situations.

External family context. The following demographic information was gathered: age, biological sex, student year in school, race, yearly parent/parents’ household income where student was living, and education level of most educated parent in the home. A dummy variable was created to indicate whether the student was a “first-year student.” Four items measured the extent to which students felt their lives were disrupted. Students rated responses using a 5-point Likert-scale, with *strongly disagree* = 1 to *strongly agree* = 5. Sample questions asked “if [they] wanted to” do these things: shopping, dating, leisure activities, and eating out. A scale was created by averaging the sum of these items ($\alpha = .80$).

Internal family context. On the basis of questions asking about the parents with whom the students were living, a variable called “parent partner” was created and coded as “1” if a parent was living with a romantic partner who was not the student’s other parent, “2” if a parent had no partner (single parent), and “3” when the parent was living with the student’s other parent (however students defined parent). A dummy variable was created to indicate whether students returned to an “empty nest” (no other family members at home when the child moved in, either alone or simultaneously with other family members). A dummy variable was created to indicate whether a student was “home full time” either working from home or not having a job. Similarly, a dummy variable was created for whether at least one parents was “home full time” either working from home or not having a

job. Students also reported the “number of siblings in the home.”

Students’ attitudes about being displaced to their homes was captured with the following items: “How excited were you at the beginning of the quarantine about the following elements of living at home?: spending more time with parents, being around other people in the home, the comforts of a familiar environment, and being able to care for parents to be sure they are healthy.” Students rated responses on a 5-point Likert scale where *I dreaded it* = 1, *I was mostly not excited* = 2, *neutral* = 3, *I was a little excited* = 4, *I was very excited* = 5. A total excitement scale was created by averaging the sum of these items ($\alpha = .80$). Four items asked about what students believe parental attitudes were about them being home (5-point Likert scales, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), namely, happy to have them home, happy to spend more time together, having their lives disrupted, and seeing it as an opportunity to strengthen relationships. Items were scaled representing a “parental acceptance” scale ($\alpha = .80$).

Adult identity, parenting focus, and coping. Measures were created based on scholarship of emerging adulthood concerning parental and emerging adults’ perceptions of having reached adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000, 2014), ambiguity about proper parenting style toward emerging adults (e.g., Berlin et al., 2010), and parent–child issues during the launching stage of the family life-cycle (e.g., Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Vogl-Bauer, 2009). Four items addressed how adultlike students felt treated by their parents (5-point Likert scales, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), namely, as a teenager, as an independent adult, as an equal, and as if they were less knowledgeable than they really were. The items were reverse coded when necessary and scaled together as a “treated adultlike scale” ($\alpha = .86$). Similarly, a set of items focused on how adultlike the students felt “regardless of how others have treated [them] (5-point Likert scales, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), namely, like a teenager, like an independent adult, like an equal, and as if they were less knowledgeable than they really were. The items were reverse coded when necessary and scaled together as a “felt adultlike scale” ($\alpha = .65$).

A series of items focused on a broad array of specific homelife experiences to help investigate

these unprecedented circumstances. Specifically, students responded to 14 items about how the “quarantine has affected [their] homelife” (5-point Likert scales, *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), six of which focused on how responsibility-focused their parents were (bugging the student about getting a job, their whereabouts, sleeping habits, time management, and homework; restricting freedom), five of which focused on coping with family relationships (struggle with lack of privacy and lack of a break from family; taking the opportunity to work harder to get along, spending time having fun, and getting to know each other better); and four of which focused on coping with excess time or monotony (chance to simplify life, loss of motivation, wasted more time than should have, bettering self in neglected ways).

To consolidate the 14 items, a principle component factor analysis with varimax rotation identified three factors that could be scaled to have alpha reliability coefficients at least .7. A scale called “improvement” consisted of the following items: the quarantined pushed them to work harder to get along with family members, to spend more time having fun with family members, and to get to know family members; having a much-needed break by simplifying life; and having chance to focus on bettering one’s self in ways that had been neglected ($\alpha = .76$). A second scale called “low autonomy” included the following items: not getting as much privacy as needed, not getting as a needed break from family, and parents being too restrictive ($\alpha = .75$). The third scale called “laziness” included the following items: has become less motivated to do things and waste more time than should have ($\alpha = .76$). Although using Cronbach alpha for two items can underestimate reliability, it is a common convention with substantial support (Eisinga et al., 2013).

Relationship changes during pandemic. A family’s external and internal contexts influence how families manage stress and ultimately affect family relationships (Boss, 2001, 2012). Thus, a question focused on how the “quality of [their] parent(s)–child relationship has changed during the quarantine,” namely, “things started out pretty rough but we adjusted and have been getting along fine,” “things started out pretty rough and stayed pretty rough,” “things started out pretty well but it has gotten harder to get along,” and “things started out pretty well and we have

Table 1. Significant Mean Differences for Dichotomous Variables Across External and Internal Contexts (N = 294–320)

	Male		White		First-year student		Empty nest		Student home FT	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
External context										
Quarantine disruption	3.60	3.98**								
Attitudes about home										
Excited to return					3.02	3.37**				
Parent acceptance					3.58	3.81**				
Adult identity										
Treated adultlike					2.70	2.99*				
Felt adultlike					3.04	3.27*			3.13	3.40*
Parenting focus										
Bug about job	3.10	2.81*					3.80	2.78*		
Bug about whereabouts										
Bug about sleep					3.34	3.10*				
Bug about time use					3.55	3.16**				
Restricting activity					3.13	2.63**				
Pressure to study			2.77	3.33*						
Coping										
No privacy										
No break from family					4.10	3.76*				
Effort get along with family	1.56	1.97**			2.97	3.46***				
Have fun with family	2.01	2.48**			2.57	3.00**				
Get to know family better	1.72	2.03**			2.97	3.28*				

Note. FT = full time. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

continued to get along fine.” Students selected the description that most closely reflected their perception, offering a general sense of how relationships were affected during the quarantine.

RESULTS

The first stage of analyses was to test for group differences (external and internal contexts) related to students’ homelife experiences and changes in relationships (see Tables 1 and 2 for statistically significant results). Attitudes about being home were analyzed for connections with the other context variables and the homelife experience variables because they address personal meanings that could be influenced by demographic differences and also influence perceptions of homelife.

There were only a few demographic-type group differences as a whole. Male students had a higher mean for feeling bugged to get a job, $t(297) = 2.09, p < .05$, and lower means on quarantine disruption, $t(294) = 2.97, p < .01$, as well as on the positive family coping items: work to

get along, $t(293) = 3.16, p < .01$; having fun, $t(292) = 2.68, p < .01$; and get to know better, $t(299) = 2.59, p < .05$. White students were less likely to feel pressure to do schoolwork, $t(293) = 1.08, p < .01$, than were non-White students. Higher household income correlated with quarantine disruption, $r(297) = .12, p < .05$, and several positive coping variables: fun with family, $r(295) = .17, p < .01$; know family better, $r(297) = .12, p < .05$; and improve aspects of self, $r(294) = .17, p < .01$. Highest level of parental education correlated with greater quarantine disruption, $r(297) = .12, p < .05$; less bugged to get a job, $r(300) = -.12, p < .05$; and several positive coping variables: work to get along, $r(296) = .12, p < .05$; fun with family, $r(295) = .18, p < .01$; know family better, $r(297) = .15, p < .05$; and self-improvement, $r(294) = .16, p < .01$.

First-year college students had lower scores for being excited to return home, $t(320) = 3.58, p < .001$; parental acceptance, $t(317) = 2.66, p < .01$; treated adultlike, $t(320) = 2.38, p < .05$; felt adultlike; and $t(319) = 2.37, p < .05$; they

Table 2. Significant Correlations for Continuous Variables Across External and Internal Contexts (N = 294–320)

	Highest parent education	Household income	No. siblings in home	Excited to return	Parental acceptance
External context					
Quarantine disruption		.12*		-.14*	-.26***
Attitudes about home					
Excited to return				n/a	.52***
Parent acceptance				.52***	n/a
Adult identity					
Treated adultlike				.45***	.20***
Felt adultlike			-.17**	.24***	.23***
Parenting focus					
Bug about job	-.12*				
Bug about whereabouts					-.15**
Bug about sleep					-.12*
Bug about time use				-.23***	-.23***
Restricting activity Pressure to study			.15*	-.24***	
Coping					
No privacy				-.26***	-.19*
No break from family			.12*	-.39***	-.23***
Effort get along with family	.12*			.25***	.34***
Have fun with family	.18**	.17**		.40***	.46***
Get to know family better	.15**	.12*		.43***	.45***
Simplify life					.28***
Less motivation				-.13*	
Self-improvement	.16**	.17**		.36***	.20**

Note. n/a = not applicable. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

also had lower scores for positive coping with family: getting along, $t(299) = 2.59, p < .05$; having fun, $t(299) = 2.59, p < .05$; getting to know, $t(299) = 2.59, p < .05$. First-year college students had higher scores for parents bugging them about sleep, $t(299) = 2.08, p < .05$, and time, $t(298) = 2.88, p < .01$; and for parents being too restrictive, $t(298) = 2.76, p < .01$, and having a break from family, $t(298) = 2.11, p < .05$. Who the parent figures were in the home did not correspond to any of the variables. Returning to an empty nest only corresponded to being bugged about getting a job, $t(299) = 2.36, p < .05$. The student being home full time (not employed outside home) corresponded with feeling less adultlike, $t(319) = 3.4, p < .05$. Having more siblings in the home corresponded with feeling less adultlike, $r(297) = -.17, p < .01$; restrictive parents, $r(298) = .15, p < .05$; and needing a break from family, $r(297) = .12, p < .05$. Being more excited about returning home was highly relevant and corresponded with less quarantine disruption, $r(296) = -.14, p < .05$; more parental

acceptance, $r(297) = .52, p < .001$; being treated more like an adult, $r(298) = .45, p < .001$, and feeling more adultlike, $r(298) = .24, p < .001$; not bugged about how spending time, $r(297) = -.23, p < .001$, and less restrictive parents, $r(297) = -.24, p < .001$; lacking privacy, $r(296) = -.26, p < .001$, and having no break from family, $r(296) = -.23, p < .001$; working to get along with, $r(298) = .25, p < .001$; having fun with, $r(298) = .40, p < .001$; and getting to know, $r(298) = .43, p < .001$, family; not losing motivation, $r(297) = -.13, p < .05$; and self-improvement, $r(297) = .36, p < .001$. Parental acceptance of being home was likely highly relevant and revealed the same overall pattern and excitement about being home: less quarantine disruption, $r(296) = -.26, p < .001$; being treated like an adult, $r(298) = .20, p < .001$, and feeling more adultlike, $r(298) = .23, p < .001$; not bugged about their whereabouts, $r(296) = -.15, p < .01$, sleep, $r(296) = -.12, p < .05$, and how spending time, $r(297) = -.23, p < .001$; lacking privacy, $r(296) = -.19, p < .05$, and having no break

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Coefficients and Odds Ratios Comparing Groups to “Stayed Good” (N = 288)

	Rough to good (n = 25)		Stayed rough (n = 35)		Good to harder (n = 73)	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
External context						
Household income	-.12	.89	-.42	.66*	-.04	.96
First-year student	.30	1.35	-.16	.86	.39	1.47
Attitudes about home						
Excited to return	-.55	.58	-1.49	.22***	-.15	.86
Parental acceptance	-.59	.56	-1.74	.18***	-1.10	.33***
Adult identity						
Treated adultlike	-.16	.86	-.62	.54*	-.33	.72
Felt adultlike	-.70	.50*	-.64	.53*	-.20	.82
Parenting focus/coping ^a						
Low autonomy	.65	1.92*	.53	1.70	.67	1.96***
Self-improvement	.38	1.47	-.05	.95	-.12	.89

Note. Comparison group (“stayed good”) n = 155. ^aScales based on factor analysis. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

from family, $r(296) = -.23, p < .001$; working to get along with, $r(298) = .34, p < .001$; having fun with, $r(298) = .46, p < .001$, and getting to know, $r(298) = .45, p < .001$, family; coping by simplifying life, $r(297) = .28, p < .05$; and self-improvement, $r(297) = .20, p < .01$.

Chi-square and analysis of variance tests were used to analyze how the context variables and homelife variables related to reported change in parent-child relationship quality during the quarantine. First-year students were more likely to report things starting off well but getting harder (30.1% compared with 21.5% of other students) and things starting out and staying rough (16.8% compared with 10.2%), $\chi^2(3, 299) = 8.1, p < .05$. Those with higher households incomes had higher means for things staying positive compared with those for whom things stayed negative, $F(3, 296) = 2.88, p < .05$. Those most excited about coming home, $F(3, 297) = 31.37, p < .001$; those with the most parental acceptance, $F(3, 296) = 41.07, p < .001$; those who were treated most adultlike, $F(3, 296) = 8.01, p < .001$; and those who felt most adultlike, $F(3, 296) = 8.45, p < .001$, generally had higher scores on things staying good or improving.

A multivariate model was constructed to predict relationship changes during the quarantine while accounting for intercorrelations among the variables associated with family relationship change. For the sake of efficiency and to focus on the most robust measures, the multivariate model included the scales identified in the factor analysis of the 14 homelife experience items

instead of each item individually. A multinomial logistic regression was conducted that used the “stayed positive” group as the comparison group. This analysis is appropriate for models with dichotomous and continuous dependent variables. The model was a good fit, $\chi^2(24, N = 232) = 162.3, p < .001$. Compared with the “stayed positive” group, the “rough to good” group was less likely to have felt adultlike and to have had high autonomy; the “stayed rough” group was less likely to be from higher income households, to have been excited about coming home, to have parental acceptance, and to be treated and feel adultlike; and the “good to rough” group was less likely to have parental acceptance and high autonomy (see Table 3).

DISCUSSION

A variety of individual characteristics and family living situations were analyzed to investigate variation in homelife experiences of displaced college students—those who were compelled to leave campus and who returned home and to live in restrictive environments due to COVID-19. External and internal family structures appeared to influence connections between family stress and families’ responses to it (Boss, 2001, 2012). Males were more likely to be nudged by parents to get a job and were less likely to feel pushed by the quarantine circumstances to connect with family (i.e., work harder to get along, have fun, get to know better). This pattern follows a traditional, gendered work-family role allocation, indicating a tendency within

the sample to conform to such expectations or desires (Hall & MacDermid, 2009). Results suggested that race was largely irrelevant to the constructs of interest, although given the lack of diversity in the sample, race-related findings must be interpreted with considerable caution. The one racial difference indicated that White students felt less pressure to study than other students. For many racial minority parents, education is seen as a key to getting ahead (Pew Research Center, 2016), which could account for this finding. Parental education and household income were associated with more pressure to connect with family and to focus on self-improvement. Students representing traditionally marginalized or minoritized populations may experience additional stressors that limit their time and capacity for such endeavors (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007).

First-year students especially were unique in their homelife experiences, particularly in negative attitudes about being home, feeling the target of invasive parenting, and connecting less with family. These students experienced a disruption of a social rite of passage that many new college students tend to (or hope to) experience, characterized by identity exploration and sensation-seeking behavior (Ashenhurst et al., 2015) without parental knowledge. Living at home during a quarantine could make such activities more difficult, if not impossible. More experienced students may have settled down, may miss their families more, and may feel more secure about who they are, contributing to positive attitudes about returning home and having positive experiences that appear less threatening to their identities and desires. First-year students have only begun the emerging process of their adult identities (Arnett, 2000), making it more ambiguous for parents as to how direct to be with their parenting in this life course stage and how much independence to honor (Berlin et al., 2010; Carter & McGoldrick, 1980).

Internal context elements of a more structural nature were only somewhat relevant to the homelife experiences. Students with more siblings were likely to feel they needed a break from family. This could speak to issues of privacy and space impeded by more people in a household (Graham et al., 2015). One might expect that siblings could affect motivations or opportunities to connect more with family (e.g., play games, more diverse conversations), but the siblings variable did not associate with connecting

with family, on average. Students with more siblings also felt less adultlike and reported more parental restriction of their freedom. Perhaps having more siblings in the home contributes to clearer and distinct boundaries between the sibling and parent subsystems (Bowen, 1993) and thus to siblings being treated more similarly as a group of children. The students might likewise identify more with the other children in the home and feel pulled into the long-established rules and roles for children within the family system (Bowen, 1993; Minuchin, 1974), thus feeling less adultlike. Given how much variation there could be in the constellation of sibling relationships (e.g., gender, age, gaps, biological relationship), it could be that accounting for additional variation could help identify situations in which students would connect more with family and might feel more adultlike and autonomous.

Other structural components, such as returning to an empty nest and being at home due to not working outside the home, had little relevance to the homelife experiences; one exception was that formerly empty-nest parents were more likely to push their returning student to get a job, perhaps to protect valuable couple leisure time that boosts their relationship (Gorchoff et al., 2008). Overall, one might expect more unique home dynamics due to the disruption of the empty-nest stage and reactivation of more direct parenting (Vogl-Bauer, 2009). Perhaps the supposed temporary nature and highly unusual circumstances of the quarantine contributed to how families adjusted to this particular type of boomerang. Qualitative investigations could be well suited to uncover nuance in why empty-nest parents may perceive and respond very similarly to other parents regarding dislocated children who had little choice but to return home.

Students who were not working outside the home only differed in one way: They were less likely to feel adultlike, perhaps feeling a bit useless or overly dependent on their parents, contradicting internalized markers of adulthood (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). Having at least one parent home most of the time did not associate with any of the homelife experiences. Because the measures were insufficiently sensitive to the actual amount of time families were quarantined together on a daily basis, it is possible that real differences in experiences were undetected. Other unmeasured differences likely exist related to time and space that could account

for various homelife experience, such as unrestricted leisure time away from the home (e.g., walks around the neighborhood, time alone in a nearby park) and the sizes and layouts of homes that allow for more privacy.

Subjective interpretation is a key element of family stress theory and influences how families adjust to stressful circumstances (Boss, 2001, 2012). It was anticipated that attitudes about the student being home could shape perceptions and expectations that contribute to daily interaction and coping strategies (Henry et al., 2015). Indeed, students who were most excited at the beginning of the quarantine about returning home perceived parenting to be more adult-affirming and used coping strategies that were more family-oriented and self-improving. Perceiving parents as being more welcoming was also highly relevant to homelife experiences and had the same types of associations with excitement about being home—and both attitudes were highly correlated. Perhaps students were good at predicting what would happen back home, and their excitement reflected the nature of their predictions. Or perhaps their recollection of such feelings was tainted or bolstered based on how they actually felt while being home, either as a function of the immediate context influencing memory recall (Fernandes & Manios, 2012) or as a form of confirmation bias (Kahneman, 2011). The students least excited to come home were first-year students, and as noted, first-year students generally had more negative experiences. The interrelationships between excitement and being a first-year student might account for some of their common associations across the daily home dynamics. Because the measures relied on retrospective reporting, the true causal order and association of attitudes and outcomes are not detectable, but the findings are consistent with the family stress paradigm that attitudes and meaning contribute to family stress management processes (Boss, 2001, 2012).

The other main focus of the current study was to investigate how external and internal family contexts associated with the nature of family relationship quality changes, given that how well families manage and adapt to new stressors such as student dislocation during a quarantine can influence family relationships (Boss, 2001, 2012). The sample largely reported positive relationships (more than 53% said they started out and remained positive, and nearly 9% started

out rough but improved), suggesting a relatively resilient sample. Given that 56% of the sample reported household incomes of \$75,000 or more (more than half of which were greater than \$100,000), the sample likely had economic resources that helped counter the effects of stress (Boss, 2002, 2012; Henry et al., 2015). Indeed, as noted in the multivariate model, lower household income predicted continuously rough relationships compared with continually positive ones.

Feeling treated less adultlike and having a less adultlike identity also predicted a continuously rough relationship. First-year students were less likely to feel adultlike, and, as mentioned, were particularly prone to report negative homelife experiences. Young adults who are more secure in their adulthood might feel less threatened and thus be less fixated on and defensive to parental influence. Perhaps they have made a more complete transition from dependence to interdependence, an important developmental milestone for young adults that helps transform the parent–child relationship (Baltes & Silverberg, 1994). Feeling more adultlike might help students relate better to their parents, finding joint interests and communicating on a more similar level (Casares & White, 2018).

The model also suggests that continuously negative relationships were possibly shaped by less adultlike treatment and perceived adultlike identity, affirming a likely desire of emerging adults to increase psychological independence from their parents (Arnett, 2014), and thus feeling discontent when this fails to occur as they hope. Negative attitudes about the student being home had especially strong associations with rough family relationships, again suggesting the relevance of subjectivity to stress management in the context of family relationships. Similarly, relationships that started out positive but became harder were predicted by less parental acceptance, which would be consistent with the idea that the negative attitude could have triggered a self-fulfilling prophesy (Jussim & Eccles, 1995). Parents who were less enthused about having their children home might have overly focused on the negative elements of the circumstances, contaminating their own and the child's interpretations and behavior throughout the quarantine. Students in this group also reported especially low levels of autonomy, suggesting perhaps that a deterioration of relationship quality over time occurred as students tired of lacking privacy and

wanted a break from family and more freedom. As noted, excessive closeness can be a source of family conflict (Bowen, 1993; Minuchin, 1974), and tolerance could break down.

Conversely, low autonomy also characterized students whose relationships changed from rough to good. These students also perceived themselves as less adultlike. Because feeling competent is related to an emerging adult identity (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007), perhaps a subset of students felt less adultlike due to struggles with managing adult responsibilities needed and benefitted from more structured, involved parenting. One might expect less resentment and more appreciation toward invasive parents if in the end such an approach helped the student. Also, in light of fears and concerns regarding the pandemic, some students may have yearned for a safe haven at home (Burn & Szoeki, 2016), attaching more with their parents, in exchange for sacrificing some autonomy. Such reasoning is only speculation, and more detailed measures or qualitative investigation could help determine whether and why certain students would desire and be affected differently by varying degrees of autonomy during a home quarantine.

Although the overall context of the study focused on quarantine conditions, the disruption measure itself did not correlate with relationship changes (or most of the external or internal contexts). This need not mean that dislocating into quarantine lacked unique dynamics. The survey questions and the recruitment materials framed the study with the quarantine focus, making it impossible to tease the quarantine context from this particular experience. Nevertheless, the results could be interpreted as indicating a more indirect influence of the quarantine on family relationships, as filtered through daily homelife experiences. From a family stress framework, the impact of a stressor depends on the resources and meanings or perceptions of the family (Boss, 2001, 2012; Hill, 1958), making it difficult to generalize how families will ultimately be affected by disruption due to quarantine circumstances.

Limitations

As noted, this cross-sectional research is unable to determine the direction of influence the associated variables have on one another and suffers from common limitations of similar survey research. The convenience sample

cannot universally reflect dislocated students' experiences during the pandemic, especially among more ethnically diverse populations. The measures were created for this study to try to capture a wide variety of home circumstances and unique elements of the pandemic and social restrictions, resulting in measures that lack robust testing of validity and reliability. The felt adultlike scale lacked a more desirable level of interitem reliability ($\alpha = .65$) so should be interpreted with additional caution. The family relationship change variable was not specific enough to capture potential differences between how relationship changes with one parent versus a second parent, so responses were likely oversimplistic. Having the perspective from parents, siblings, and other family members would also create a more complete study, shedding light on how various individuals could contribute to family stress, stress management, and outcomes.

Implications for Practice

Our findings suggest that despite restrictions associated with the pandemic, students and their parents have some control over how they manage their homelife together and subsequent changes to their relationships. Some of the research findings are reminiscent of general research on adult parent-child relationships and on boomeranging, making conventional suggestions and interventions relevant. For example, families should negotiate roles and responsibilities while respecting the emerging autonomy of the young-adult child (Casares & White, 2018; Vogl-Bauer, 2009). Parenting adult children can be difficult because parents may not know how much to intervene in the life of someone trying to develop independence (Arnett, 2000; Burn & Szoeki, 2016); having adult children live at home who might rather be away at school could make it an especially sensitive situation. Such parents could likely benefit from guidance on navigating such an ambiguous situation and on how to communicate their expectations and intentions to dislocated students.

Study findings also suggest that addressing attitudes and expectations before a dislocation could influence homelife experiences and outcomes. As noted, attitudes about the pandemic or quarantine can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, Chinese students were more psychologically vulnerable when they viewed the pandemic as a world-ending crisis

and believed that nothing good could come from it (Yang et al., 2020). Helping parents and adult children recognize and analyze damaging attitudes and expectations might help minimize their potential impact on individual well-being and relationship quality. Parents, educators, and other practitioners could help dislocated students challenge thoughts that lead to extra anxiety and family conflict in times of fear and uncertainty. Some individuals could benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy.

Quarantine restrictions may impede typical coping strategies when anxiety or conflict arise. Families may need assistance developing diverse coping strategies in times that restrict interaction with others and activity outside the home that help individuals “blow off steam” or “get away from it all.” Promoting use of cognitive coping strategies might be useful. For example, learning to reframe that lack of privacy as an opportunity (Seligman, 2004) to build a deeper (or repair a) connection with family members could instill motivation and tolerance at home. Families could be assisted in establishing new rituals, value or mission statements, and goals (Fiese, 2006) that encompass a positive tone that incorporates feeling safe and sacrificing some comforts for the safety of the larger community. Families that find or create novel activities can help curb relationship stagnation (Guerrero & Andersen, 2000), which would be especially important during a quarantine. Practitioners who share creative ways to repurpose home-based resources for individual and family activities could help families combat familiarity fatigue. Male and first-year students may need extra assistance or motivation to connect with their families in helpful ways.

Although this sample had generally positive family experiences, some students reported problematic family relationships. Some of these families might have avoided being reunited under more normative circumstances because of negative relationship histories or inadequate provisions at home. Thus, under conditions of a restrictive quarantine, some families could especially benefit from proactive efforts. Institutions of higher education could use their (or partner with additional) mental health and counseling services to help anticipate situations that put students at risk. Such efforts could lead to preparing some students for their environment (or to help them find alternative

living situations), sending psychoeducation resources to students’ homes to assist families with the transition (including information about emerging adulthood definitions and processes, and autonomy issues), and making referrals for telehealth or to conveniently located family counseling services.

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