# First-Gen Families: How First-Generation College Students Experience Family Relationships

Dissertation

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Abstract

As the share of young adults enrolled in four-year colleges has increased, first-generation college students have become a population of particular interest. First-generation college students, those whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree, experience unique challenges and rewards throughout their journeys in higher education. Research on college students and their families has primarily focused on how families contribute to the reproduction of advantage or disadvantage, but recent work on first-generation college students has shifted the lens of analysis by re-centering the experiences of first-gen students and their families from their own perspectives. Drawing on longitudinal interviews with first-generation college students at a large land-grant institution in the Midwestern United States, this dissertation contributes to this literature by exploring how these relationships change throughout college, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted first-gens' relationships with their families, and what the parent-child tie is expected to look like in the future.

First, I examine how first-generation college students' relationships with their parents change over the first year of college, using interviews with 52 first-gen students and a small comparison group of 10 continuing-gen students. To my knowledge, this is the first study on college students' perceptions of the changing parent-child relationship that focuses specifically on first-generation college students. Contrary to previous research that concludes that parent-child relationships tend to remain stable or to improve throughout the college years, I find that there is much more variation in the perception of the relationship evolution for first-gen students, and identify four overarching categories of perceptions of change in the parent-child tie: positive, negative, changed but neutral, and no change. Second, employing the framework of habitus—

tendencies toward thinking, acting, and feeling—I explore the narratives of three first-gen college students who were forced to reckon with their new habituses they've developed throughout college in the context of where their old habituses were formed, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the U.S. in March of 2020 and they were sent home from campus to live with their parents. These students experience a cleft habitus—feeling split between an old habitus and new habitus as a result of upward social mobility—and this distress was heightened and exaggerated by the suddenness of the onset of the pandemic and consequent move back home. Third, I explore how first-gen college students foresee their relationships with their parents in the future (n=39), with a particular focus on tensions these students expect to arise given their expectedly more advantaged futures. For students who anticipate tension with their parents over their upward mobility, three overarching themes emerge: (1) jealousy and resentment; (2) changing worldviews; and (3) parents lack understanding. Employing the framework of the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model, I conclude that the expectation for conflict must be undergirded by some form of intergenerational solidarity, given that these students expect to continue their relationships with their parents despite predicted conflict—indicating expected ambivalent intergenerational ties.

Taken together, these findings contribute to our understanding of the complicated role of parents and family in first-generation college students' lives. By focusing on students' perceptions of their relationships with their parents, I illustrate the importance of students' narratives to their development as emerging adults. The research in this dissertation has implications for family sociology, higher education research, and university policies more broadly.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the openness, bravery, and honesty of the students who shared their stories about their families, friends, and experiences of college. I remain in awe of the fortitude of the first-generation students who are navigating their way through college in the wake of family struggles, financial precarity, academic hardships, a global pandemic, and increasing climate crises, just to name a few of their ongoing challenges. Their hope for their futures is inspiring, and as a first-generation college student myself, it has been humbling to have the privilege of sharing their stories. To the students who shared their lives with me, thank you. I hope I've handled your stories with the care and consideration they deserve.

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## Fields of Study

Major Field: Sociology

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Going to college represents a unique period in the life course, as it is typically the first time that young adults are spending significant time and distance apart from their families. But, experiences in college are not the same for everyone. Being a first-generation college student[1] is a unique experience as these young adults are grappling with their upward social mobility in progress, by definition of being the first in their families to attain a bachelor's degree. The proportion of young adults in the U.S. enrolled in four-year colleges has increased—up from 35 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in 2000 to 41 percent in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics 2020) and today 33 percent of college-goers are first-generation college students (Skomsvold 2014). First-gen students as a group have lower retention rates than their non-FGC peers and face myriad additional barriers to success (Gibbons and Woodside 2014), making the FGC experience critical to understand.

Family support is particularly important for first-generation college student success (Capannola and Johnson 2020), and researchers have challenged the pervasive idea that first-gens succeed despite their family backgrounds and instead argue that their families facilitate their success (Gofen 2009). Yet, balancing new identities, habits, preferences, and behaviors that develop from internalizing new values, beliefs, and outlooks (i.e. habitus) during college with one's family and community of origin can make connections to home difficult as students' habituses change as they navigate the middle-class milieu of university environments (Baxter and Britton 2001; Lehmann 2013; Lee and Kramer 2013). Parent-child relationship quality has implications for many different aspects of wellbeing, including academic achievement (Holt,

[1] First-generation college student, first-gen, first-gen student, FGC student, are all used interchangeably in this dissertation.

Mattanah, and Long 2018) and depressive symptoms (Guassi Moreira and Telzer 2015). While a relatively recent, but extensive, body of literature has examined the parent-child tie in "emerging adulthood"—ages 18-25—much of the theory on emerging adulthood is specific to middle-class emerging adults (Arnett 2006). Existing research on family relationships during emerging adulthood thus may not capture the complexity of the parent-child tie for upwardly-mobile, first generation college students.

This dissertation seeks to provide a better understanding of the relationships between first-gen college students and their parents, from the perspective of the students themselves. Drawing on interviews with 52 first-gen students and a small comparison group of 10 continuing-gen students, in the first empirical chapter, I ask, (1) how do first-gen students describe their relationships with their parents changing over the first year of college? (2) What factors do students see as driving these changes? (3) How do they perceive these changes? In empirical chapter two, I analyze the narratives of three students' forced moves home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate (1) how these students experience cleft habitus when they are in their home environments, and (2) how the suddenness and uncertainty of the pandemic heightened the awareness of their cleft habituses and amplified the distress they experienced as a result. In the third and final empirical chapter, using interviews with 39 first-gen students, I ask, do first-generation college students expect tensions to arise with their parents over their upward mobility, given their expectedly more advantaged futures? Why? Along with answering these questions, this dissertation underscores the importance of first-gen students' narratives to their development as emerging adults and the value of narratives for helping us make sense of our lives.

Author's Note

This dissertation, while representing the culmination of my graduate school education, also holds a particularly emotional weight for me. As a first-generation college student who often felt lost and alone during my undergraduate years, largely because of painful family dynamics, one could argue that this dissertation is a bit of "me-search." I experienced firsthand the challenges of being in a space I felt I didn't belong in, and I am grateful that I am able to now participate in research that aims to find ways to improve experiences and outcomes for first-gen college students. I joined this project in the hope that I would be able to contribute to policy conversations in higher education, but I am walking away from this dissertation with much more than that.

## Data and Methods

### The Sample

The data for this project comes from the Higher Education Innovation Project (HEIP), a longitudinal study of both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. HEIP members included a team of graduate students, undergraduate research assistants, a faculty PI, and a staff member in the Office of Student Life as a PI. The data in this dissertation are from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place with students each fall semester starting in participants' first year of college, from fall 2018 through fall 2020. Data collection will continue through fall 2023, culminating in six years of interviews. Participants are first-generation college students at a large, land-grant institution in a Midwestern city ("Midwestern University"). First-generation is defined in this study as neither parent having attained a bachelor's degree. There is also a group of continuing-generation students (i.e. students whose parents have at least one bachelor's degree between them) in the study, intended to act as a small comparison group. In

some cases, we followed up with students who withdrew from the university or graduated early, but in this dissertation, all interviews presented are with currently-enrolled students at the time of the interview.

Respondents are typically 18 years old in their first year, as they were sampled for traditional college students, effectively excluding transfer students and non-traditional students from the sample. This is a major limitation in the data, as a large proportion of first-gens across the U.S. are not enrolled in four-year colleges and/or are non-traditional students—they may be older, attend only part-time, not enroll directly after high school, or any number of other factors that may have effectively disqualified them from the study. Participants were initially recruited using a survey. During the first several weeks of school, first-year students were emailed with a request to complete a survey, which included questions regarding parental educational attainment and other demographic questions. Respondents were able to opt into being contacted by a graduate student for a follow-up interview, with the promise of a small monetary reward following the completion of the interview.

The initial survey had an extremely high response rate. When recruiting students for follow-up interviews, we oversampled for students from rural areas, low-income status students, student athletes, and marginalized racial groups. Demographic information for participants is presented in each chapter, as the pool of participants changed slightly each wave as participants dropped out of the study, graduated early, or withdrew from the university. Students reported their parents typically held jobs in low-paying service sector work or blue collar jobs, such as factory workers, carpenters, and medical office assistants. Despite our best efforts, there was a very low response rate from eligible Asian students on the survey, and even fewer who were

willing to participate in a follow-up interview. As such, there are no students who identify as Asian in the sample, although some students identify as multiracial and may have Asian heritage.

### The Interview

Each student was interviewed by either myself or one of my fellow HEIP colleagues. In years 1, 2, and 3, I personally conducted 12, 10, and 9 interviews, respectively. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by interviewer to ensure that differences in the kinds of responses obtained were not heavily influenced by who interviewed each subject. Being close in age to the respondents, as well as being students ourselves, allowed us to build rapport with our respondents more quickly than we suspect would have been possible for other researchers. Personally, I am from a low-income, working-class background, and sometimes used this personal detail to make respondents feel more comfortable and give myself an "insider" status without directing the attention of the interview away from the subject. However, other aspects of my identity—namely being a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman—placed me as an "outsider" as my participants shared experiences of celebrating their Blackness, coming out as queer to their parents, experiencing racism on campus, and any number of experiences that I cannot personally relate to.

For each wave of data, interviews lasted approximately one hour, and all of the interviews took place on the campus of Midwestern University or via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviewers were armed with a general interview guide (see Appendix A), but we each allowed the topics of the interviews to be generated naturally based on how the subjects responded to some of the initial broad questions based on their most salient concerns regarding

being students. For some students, this was their working-class status or regional background; for others, it was minority status, student athlete status, immigration status, etc.

All students were provided IRB-approved informed consent forms, and all names and other identifying details have been changed (e.g., number or gender of siblings, choice of major, specific extracurricular activities). Students who participated in both the survey and the follow-up interview for wave 1 were provided a small payment of $20 for their time; in subsequent waves the payment was $50 cash (wave 2), and a $50 Amazon gift card (wave 3). Students were informed that this is an ongoing project, and they were able to opt into future follow-up interviews following the initial interview. Students were then contacted by email or text message in subsequent waves.

Some students declined to participate in the interview study after year 1 or year 2. Students who did not participate in years 2 or 3 are still eligible to participate in year 4 in fall 2021, but only students who participated in year 1 are eligible for the study. Our team attempted to track down students who withdrew from Midwestern University, but to my knowledge, only one of these students agreed to a follow-up interview. The interview guide was collectively created and approved by all members of the HEIP team, though all researchers allowed conversations to flow in the directions that participants took them.

The interview guide explicitly asked questions about relationships with family members in all waves of the data, and specific questions about how COVID-19 impacted family relationships were added for the third wave (the fall 2020 interview). In the first wave, participants were asked about their hometowns, friends back home, and their prior educational experiences. These questions were removed from subsequent waves, since we had the information from the first wave. In all waves of data collection, participants were asked about

their participation in on-campus activities, how their academics were going, and what their plans for the future were. Effort was made to match participants up with the same interviewer each year to avoid needing to reestablish rapport, though several members of the HEIP team did not continue with the project so participants were reassigned to new interviewers in some cases.

## Analysis

Data collection reflects an abductive approach, as we all were armed with theories and concepts from existing sociological literature before entering the field. We remained attuned to unexpected findings throughout the study (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Though I used the same overall data set for each chapter, I used the data in different ways for each. In the first empirical chapter, I use all of the interviews with both first-generation (n=52) and continuing-generation students (n=10) in which participants discuss their parent-child relationships. I use a "flexible coding" approach, which involves reading and rereading transcripts line by line, making connections across the data, and eventually narrowing down to specific codes and themes (Deterding and Waters 2018). I employ flexible coding in my third empirical chapter as well, which analyzes data from interviews with first-generation college students in their third year of college. Only first-gen students who answered the question: "Do you think your future position and status will be different from that of your parents, and do you foresee any tensions balancing out the place you came from with the place you end up in?" were included in the sample (n=39), as this chapter is specifically looking at this prediction. In empirical chapter two, I take a case study approach and profile three first-generation college students, using three waves of data and presenting a longitudinal analysis. My analysis involves crafting a cohesive narrative for each of the three students, balancing showing and telling the reader what the data means

(Thomson 2007; Frank 2010). More specific details regarding data, methods, and analytical strategies are laid out in each chapter (e.g., coding schemes for each chapter). I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to house and organize the data, but did not use the program to analyze the data and instead completed analysis myself.

### A Reflection on Group Qualitative Data Collection

Given that the interviews for this study were collected by a relatively large group of people, there was unsurprisingly some variation in interview questions and quality. Although we all worked from the same interview guide, we all discussed ahead of time that we wanted to memorize the guide to some degree so that we did not have to read from the sheet during the interviews. Thus, not all of the questions are phrased in the exact same way and some questions from the interview guide are not always asked in every interview. Additionally, some interviewers were more skilled at asking probing questions to glean more information from participants. As someone who sees being a qualitative researcher as part of my identity, it was mentally and emotionally difficult for me to give up control over the interviewing process to other members of the HEIP team. I can't in good faith claim that I managed this hurdle in a productive way, but this experience confirmed for me that I enjoy being in a managerial role that still involves getting my hands dirty in data collection and analysis.

Despite these challenges, there are innumerable benefits to group qualitative data collection. As a team, we were able to conduct interviews each fall much faster than data collection is typically completed. Our partnership with the Office of Student Life made many aspects of data collection more smooth, particularly the survey, which was sent out by their office. I personally feel my interviewing skills improve the most from reading other

interviewers' transcripts and adopting some of their techniques for building rapport, asking follow-up questions, and navigating difficult conversations. My fellow HEIP team members pushed my interviewing and my thinking throughout the course of this project.

## Overview of Chapters

My first empirical chapter examines how first-generation college students perceive their relationships with their parents changing over the first year of college. The 52 students in this chapter were interviewed during the fall of their second year of college and retrospectively evaluated how their parent-child relationships have changed. To my knowledge, this is the first study that investigates how the parent-child relationship changes to focus on first-gen students specifically. Previous research concludes that the parent-child tie tends to remain relatively stable or to improve throughout the course of college, but the students in my study complicate that prevailing sentiment. Drawing on theories of emerging adulthood and narrative theory to demonstrate how students make sense of their relationships with their parents, I identify four overarching categories of how students perceive the changes in the relationships with their parents: positive, negative, changed but neutral, and no change. This chapter concludes with suggestions for ways that universities can proactively address some of the difficulties first-generation college students face in the relationships with their parents.

Using the framework of habitus and building on natural disaster scholarship, my second empirical chapter explores three case studies of first-generation college students who were forced to move home with their parents when COVID-19 reached the U.S. and Midwestern University sent students away from campus. Habitus is the internalization of beliefs, values, tastes, preferences, norms, and tendencies that are embodied by us and guide our thinking, acting, and

feeling (Bourdieu 1977). Much of our habitus is developed during our early childhood socialization, but our habituses change over time with different experiences and encounters. While we know that first-gen students face significant barriers to integration on campus, we know less about how these students relate to their families as they begin to adopt a new habitus. The students profiled in this chapter were forced to reckon with their new habituses in the context of where their old habituses were formed—their parents' homes—during a pandemic and "stay at home" mitigation strategies that heightened the awareness of their cleft habituses. This chapter illuminates not only the painful experience of a cleft habitus—the experience of holding two habituses at once as a result of upward social mobility—but also draws attention to the importance of studying how family relationships are impacted by natural disasters as climate change continues to make these crises more frequent.

Drawing on the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model, my third empirical chapter analyzes first-generation college students' expectations of tension with their parents in the future over their upward mobility. While ambivalent intergenerational ties (i.e. a parent-child relationship characterized by both conflict and solidarity) during the college years have been established, we know less about how these relationships evolve over time, particularly as students are poised to embark on the transition from college to career. Studying the future has long been of interest to sociologists, as our expectations shape current decision-making behavior. As many of the 39 students in this study predict tension with their parents, but none plan to sever ties with their families, I conclude that there is some aspect of solidarity expected to keep the parent-child tie intact, thus creating or reinforcing ambivalent relationships.

The major aim of this dissertation is to illuminate some of the unknown or understudied aspects of the role of family relationships in shaping first-generation college students'

experiences and outlooks. Rather than having an overarching theory guiding this whole dissertation, I draw on the theories most relevant to the research questions for each chapter. Taken together, these three chapters seek to address some of the complexities of the evolution of the parent-child tie as first-generation college students are experiencing upward mobility in progress. While the primary focus of this dissertation is on the particular challenges first-gen students face in their relationships with their parents, their stories also demonstrate their perseverance, tenacity, and hope for the future.

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# Chapter 2. First-Generation College Students and the Changing Relationship with Parents Over the First Year of College


## Abstract

In this paper, I examine first-generation college students' perceptions of how their relationships with their parents change over the course of the first year of college. First-generation college students, whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree, face unique challenges and reap distinct rewards throughout their higher education as a result of their first-gen status. Previous research concludes that relationships with parents tend to remain stable or to improve throughout the college years, but thus far, no studies have focused specifically on first-generation college students and their perceptions of the changing parent-child relationship. Drawing on 52 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with first-generation college students early in the fall semester of their second year, I identify four overarching categories of perceptions of change in the parent-child relationship: positive, negative, changed but neutral, and no change. The narratives that students tell about their relationships not only demonstrate the impact of the parent-child tie on the college experience, but also on how emerging adulthood is uniquely experienced for these students who are undergoing upward mobility in progress. This research has implications for family sociology, the sociology of education, and university policies more broadly.


## Introduction

First-generation college students, those who are the first in their families to pursue or complete higher education, are a unique subset of the college-going population. For traditional-

age college students, attending college falls during the developmental stage known as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000). Emerging adulthood is the period between adolescence and adulthood, "years of profound change and importance," focused intensely on love, work, and worldviews (Arnett 2000: 469). First-gen college students are not only experiencing this transition to college and adulthood, they are also grappling with upward mobility in progress as they achieve higher levels of education than their parents. Although the period of emerging adulthood is often characterized by greater autonomy from parents, the parent-child tie remains an important part of college students' lives (Guassi Moreira and Telzer 2015). In this chapter, I explore the changing relationships between first-generation college students and their parents over the first year of college.

The general consensus from previous research on the parent-child tie during the college years is that the relationship between parents and their college-going children tends to remain relatively stable or to improve (Sun et al. 2000; Lopez and Gormley 2002; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). Most of this research is quantitative, however, and cannot capture the complexity of these relationships (see Lefkowitz 2005 for a notable interview-based study on this topic). Beyond the dearth of rich qualitative data on this subject, research on first-generation college students and their relationships with their parents is specifically lacking. To advance an understanding of the changing relationships between first-generation college students and their parents, and to shed light on the first-gen experience of college and emerging adulthood more broadly, I analyze in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 52 first-generation college students at a large land-grant institution in the Midwest. I also include a small comparison group of 10 continuing-generation students, or students whose parents have attained a bachelor's degree or higher.

I ask: how do first-gen students describe their relationships with their parents changing over the first year of college? What factors do students see as driving these changes? How do they perceive these changes? Rather than focusing analysis on the state of the relationship between students and their parents today, investigating how students' relationships with their parents changed over the course of the first year allows them to retrospectively assess how they perceive those changes (Lefkowitz 2005). As college and young adulthood are periods of intense self-exploration, this is an insightful stage in the life course as students may be particularly attuned to the changes in themselves and their views and beliefs (Lefkowitz 2005; Arnett 2006). I find that, contrary to prevailing conclusions about the overwhelming stability or improvement in the quality of the parent-child relationship throughout college, first-generation college students perceive the changes in the relationships with their parents over the first year of college as much more nuanced. The narratives that the first-gen students in my sample tell of the relationship between themselves and their parents fall into four broad non-mutually exclusive categories: positive change (n=20), negative change (n=16), no change (n=11), and neutral change (n=7). These findings have implications not only for family sociology and the sociology of education, but also for how institutions of higher education can enact policies and programs that contribute to the success of first-gen college students.

## Literature Review

### The Parent-Child Tie in College: An Emerging Adulthood Perspective

The parent-child tie is one of the most important relationships throughout the life course. Relationship quality between parents and their children is associated with many different aspects of wellbeing in adolescence, emerging adulthood, and young adulthood, including self-esteem

(e.g., Bouchard et al. 2013), depressive symptoms (e.g., Bulanda and Majumdar 2008; Guassi Moreira and Telzer 2015), and academic achievement (e.g., Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). Jeffrey Arnett's (2000) theory of "emerging adulthood" has been met with a proliferation of research on how the parent-child tie evolves during this time period in emerging adults' lives, namely ages 18-25, when many emerging adults are attending college. As defined by Arnett (2000: 469), the uniqueness of emerging adulthood is that it is "… distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations." Although college is not a requisite for emerging adulthood, it provides emerging adults with the time and space to engage in self-exploration, as Arnett (2000: 469) describes: "Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews."

Previous studies indicate that the parent-child relationship tends to change relatively little or to improve throughout the college years (Sun et al. 2000; Lopez and Gormley 2002; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). Although seeking autonomy is a common feature of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2014), parents continue to play an important role in emerging adults' lives, particularly in the transition to college, and importantly, perceptions of increased family cohesion are associated with decreased depressive symptoms during the transition (Guassi Moreira and Telzer 2015). Firstborns' leaving home for the first time is associated with declines in parent-child conflict and increases in parent-child intimacy over time (Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter 2011). Lefkowitz (2005) finds that, in interviews, most students discussed changes in the quality of their relationships with their parents over time, and these changes are overwhelmingly perceived as positive by the students. Students report feeling closer to their

parents, having more open communication, and developing a friendship with their parents, among other positive changes (Lefkowitz 2005). While these studies demonstrate the importance of the evolving relationships between college students and their parents, we still know little about the unique relationships between first-generation college students and their parents.

Arnett (2006) finds that the period of emerging adulthood is focused on the self, allowing for self-exploration and an individualistic approach to identity building. Many sociologists see this as a distinctly middle-class endeavor, however, as these young adults have the resources and time to engage in the luxury of self-exploration (see Benson and Furstenburg 2006; Silva 2012; Silva 2013). Other work on emerging adulthood accounts for structural inequities that may impede youths' ability to engage in this identity construction, particularly for those from working-class backgrounds (Furstenburg 2008; Silva 2013). This chapter contributes to the literature on emerging adulthood by focusing on emerging adults who are encountering the somewhat unique experience of upward mobility (i.e., first-generation college students), and how they negotiate their family's socioeconomic backgrounds and their relationships with their parents as they come of age and progress through higher education.

## First-Generation College Students, Their Families, and the Transition to College

Research on college students and their families has primarily focused on how families contribute to the reproduction of advantage or disadvantage (Alon 2009; Hamilton 2016; Wilbur and Roscigno 2016). Parents' style of engagement with their college-going children shapes their experience of college and their future career prospects (Hamilton 2016). Universities "outsource" emotional and academic support to parents, and parents armed with firsthand knowledge of the college experience, financial resources, and personal and professional networks are more adept at

guiding their college-going children through the college and career process (Hamilton 2016). Based on measures of access and achievement, inequality is intergenerationally transmitted (Alon 2009), and first-generation status is a distinct disadvantage in college attendance and completion, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Wilbur and Roscigno 2016).

Recent work on first-generation college students has shifted the lens of analysis by re-centering the experiences of FGC students and their families from their own perspectives. Studies have found that low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students must navigate impression management strategies with not only their new elite peers, but with their nonelite home communities as they reconcile their own social mobility (Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013). Working-class students who become integrated at their universities and are academically successful describe not just gaining new knowledge, but "also about growing personally, changing their outlooks on life, growing their repertoire of cultural capital, and developing new dispositions and tastes about a range of issues, from food to politics and their future careers" (Lehmann 2013: 1). Students balancing these personal changes with their relationships to their families and communities of origin struggle to maintain connections with their families and former peers (Lehmann 2013), and class-disadvantaged students experience painful divides between their newly-acquired identities, habits, and behaviors and their home communities (Lee and Kramer 2013). First-gen students experience "family achievement guilt," a discomfort that arises when they realize their own educational achievements are inaccessible to their family members, and this guilt is associated with increased depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem (Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli 2015).

Despite the unique strains on family relationships that result as a student is the first in their family to attend college, some studies have found more positive aspects of the relationships of

FGC students and their parents (Gofen 2009; Melendez and Melendez 2010; Capannola and Johnson 2020). Gofen (2009) challenges the portrayal of first-gen students succeeding despite their family background, and instead finds that families of first-gen students facilitate their success, through their attitudes toward education, interpersonal relationships, and family values. Rondini's (2016) study on the narratives of the parents of LIFG college students found two mechanisms through which parents glean social meaning from their children's higher education: 1) redemption narratives for parents' own failures or mistakes and 2) framing their child's success as their own. Although they lack firsthand college experience, parents of FGC students can offer both instrumental support (e.g., financial assistance, researching educational opportunities) and emotional support (e.g., frequent visits) (Capannola and Johnson 2020). Despite the potential for discord in relationships with parents and family members who have not achieved academic success, familial support has been shown to be a particularly important contribution to college success for students from marginalized populations (Melendez and Melendez 2010; Lee and Kramer 2013; Rondini 2016; Capannola and Johnson 2020).

Narratives can help us make sense of our lives and allow us to create a sense of self (Frank 2010; Frank 2013; Lea 2015; Smeraldo Schell and Silva 2020). The established literature on the narratives of working-class people as they cope with the "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett and Cobb 1973) has a long tradition in sociology. In this chapter, I build on existing research by exploring the narratives of upwardly mobile youth, namely first-generation college students, as they navigate their mobility and relationships with their less-advantaged parents. Specifically, I ask, how do first-gen students describe their relationships with their parents changing over the first year of college? What factors do students see as driving these changes? How do they perceive these changes? Using a sociology of the family approach to investigate first-gen college

students' higher education experiences sheds light not only on the impact that students' social networks outside of the classroom can have on their experience of college, but on the unique transition to adulthood that first-gen students experience.

## Methods

This chapter is based on interviews with 52 first-generation college students, with a small comparison group of 10 continuing-generation students, as part of the Higher Education Innovation Project (HEIP). All interviews were conducted during the fall semester of the students' second year of college in 2019 (see Chapter 1: Introduction for a full description of the study methods). Efforts were made to match participants with the same interviewer each year, so in some cases I referred back to their initial 2018 wave 1 interview to fill in gaps where the participants referenced their prior interview or assumed the interviewer remembered details from their prior interview. This was the second wave of data collection, and eight students had dropped out of the study between the first and second waves. A team of graduate students, undergraduate research assistants, one faculty PI, and one staff PI conducted the interviews. In this wave of data collection, I personally conducted 10 of the interviews. There were no major differences in responses by interviewer, affirming the strength of the interview guide and the HEIP team's consistency in interviewing.

All interviews were transcribed by different team members, but I coded all the interviews for this project. Five interviews were dropped from the overall sample, as they did not discuss their relationships with their parents at all throughout the interview. All participants were given pseudonyms and some minor details in their biographies have been changed (e.g., number of siblings, clubs students were in, majors, etc.) to further ensure anonymity. Direct quotes have not

been altered except for changing these small details, anonymizing names, and removing some "likes" and "ums" for readability.

I employed Deterding and Waters's (2018) approach of "flexible coding." The organization of my coding process was facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. I first read students' transcripts line by line to uncover broad themes in students' responses. Some of the initial codes include: parent relationships, sibling relationships, extended family relationships, money, home community, and home visits. From this initial round of coding, several broad themes began to emerge in students' narratives of their changing relationships with their parents: positive change, negative change, neutral change, and no change. As I incrementally narrowed down to more specific codes, I uncovered more nuanced details in students' narratives that became subthemes, such as independence as a positive change, financial struggles, and sources of motivation. Out of the 52 first-gen students in this chapter, 23 students are white, 16 are Black, 7 are Latino, and 6 are multiracial. 33 students identify as female; 19 identify as male. Demographic data was collected through a survey prior to the interviews (See Table 1). There were no clear patterns by race or gender when examining students' relationships with their parents (although there were clear differences when examining other details, like general experience of college, opinions on campus diversity, treatment from professors and police, and more).

I initially was looking for students' relationships with their parents growing either closer or more distant, but as I got further in the coding and analysis process, I realized this did not fully capture how these relationships were evolving. Some students were already close with their parents, but their relationship still evolved in ways the student framed as positive—so even though some students may actually speak to their parents less or go home less frequently, the

students who frame this as good for the relationship because their greater independence showed them a greater sense of self are in the "positive evolution" category. Conversely, some students describe their relationships with their parents suffering, even if they actually are talking to them more now than they did before they left home. Ultimately, my analysis pointed to four categories of how students perceive the changes in their relationships with their parents: positive change, negative change, no change, and neutral change.

## Findings

This chapter explores the narratives of first-generation college students as they describe how their relationships with their parents evolved over the first year of college. The students in this sample are grappling with their upward mobility in progress and negotiating their relationships with their parents along the way. While some students are performing really well academically and satisfied with their social lives, others are consistently failing classes, at risk of losing scholarships and financial aid, floundering with no social ties to fall back on, or simply just feeling lost. As the interviews for this chapter took place at the beginning of the first semester of the second year of college, students were able to look back on how their relationships changed and reflect on where their relationships with their parents stand today.

Students' relationships with their parents over the course of the first year of college fell into four categories: positive change, negative change, neutral change, and no change in the relationship. Students who fall in the positive change category may not have necessarily grown closer to their parents, but their relationship has evolved in ways the student sees as positive, such as being able to talk more openly about different things or gaining more independence. Students whose narratives fall in the negative change category may still talk to and see their

parents a lot, but describe seeing their parents in a more negative light, strife in their interactions with their parents, or harboring resentment for their upbringing. Students who are neutral about the changes in their relationships with their parents acknowledge that their relationships have evolved, but do not evaluate this as good or bad. Some students say their relationships with their parents have not changed. Out of all 67 participants, just two first-gen students and one continuing-gen student describe having different changes in their relationships with each parent (all three of these students describe positive changes in their relationships with their mothers and negative changes in their relationships with their fathers or step-fathers).

While continuing-generation students are similarly experiencing time and distance away from their parents for the first time, the narratives of the first-gen students in this sample are uniquely first-gen. Financial support (or lack thereof) was a common theme in most first-gen students' interviews. First-gen students often discussed how hard their parents have worked to allow them to get to college, despite the financial difficulty of their attendance; sometimes students expressed bitterness over their parents' inability to support them financially and resentment of other students whose parents were able to provide that support for their kids. First-gen students in all categories talked about how their parents' emotional support (or lack thereof) stemmed from their own inability to attend or complete college, as well as how their parents' general lack of understanding about the college experience impacted their relationships. As I discuss each category of relationship change below, I include details about the continuing-generation students who had these same narrative types. Although this small subsample is not a true comparison group, these students' narratives illuminate some of the differences in experiences of family relationships for first-gen students and continuing-gen students.

## Positive Change

Twenty first-gen college students have experienced the changes in their relationships with their parents as positive. Students who describe the changed relationships as positive are not necessarily closer with their parents than they were before college, but feel the relationship has evolved in constructive ways. Three common themes emerge within the narratives of students who fall within this category: (1) appreciation for the way their parents raised them and/or sacrifices their parents have made for their education; (2) a newfound independence that wouldn't have been possible without their college education and experiences; (3) parents' support of their decisions, both academic and non-academic. Four continuing-generation students also fell in this category, and while they do discuss their affinity for the independence they've gained, as well as their parents' support, they also express their appreciation for their parents' guidance through the college process, which first-gen students' parents do not have the ability to provide.

### Independence as a Positive Change

The most common subtheme within the narratives of first-gen students who have experienced positive changes in their relationships with their parents is enjoying or having pride in their newfound independence. Many of the students who embrace this independence have also become more self-motivated in their academic endeavors. As none of the students in this category were commuter students, the physical distance from parents may have contributed to the sensation of emerging independence. Students' burgeoning autonomy and self-reliance, and concurrent decline in dependence on their parents, is framed as a positive, progressive shift in their relationships with their parents.

Emily, a white woman majoring in neuroscience, has always been close to her parents, and the adjustment to college was very difficult for her. As an only child, “my mom and dad were everything to me.” Emily’s parents live in a different state, but her dad comes to the area for work every other week so they have dinner together often. Although he can be tough on her, Emily’s dad is a grounding force for her: “It's very good to see him and like it's good to have a straight opinion, cause your friends are great, but your friends will always tell you like, ‘Oh you're great.’ So it's good to have a straight opinion from my dad sometimes where he's like, ‘No, you're being dumb. Don't, don't do that.’ Like that's always, you always need that grounding.”

Emily’s parents have always been very supportive of her and both highly value education, to the point where it was a lot of pressure on Emily when she was younger: “So from a very young age, like she [mother], I don't want to say forced, but it was definitely a little forceful, um, to do well in school from a very young age.” Emily has been able to gain some independence while in college, and has learned to branch out and make friends in a way that she wasn’t able to in high school: “I feel like I'm just a little more well-adjusted. I'm not as dependent on other people.”

Although she’s still very close with her parents (and financially dependent on them), Emily is able to have her own life and is exploring herself as an adult while away at school. She has become more self-motivated:

> There's going to be a moment where you have to realize that you're in charge of your own fate and no one's gonna tell you to go eat. No one's gonna tell you to go study. You have to do that for yourself. Yeah. But no one told me that. And so I sort of just hit that point.

> It was probably like midway through spring semester last year where I was like, 'Oh, I'm a mess. I need to fix this.'

Emily's independence arose not only from the mere distance away from her parents, but was a conscious decision on her parents' part to allow her to flourish on her own: "As soon as I moved out of the house, [my mom] was like, 'Do whatever you want.' Like, 'Go ahead.'"

Unlike Emily, Tamala, a Black woman from the same city that Midwestern U is located in, has historically had a rocky relationship with her mom. Her father died a few months before she started college, and right before college started, she and her mom were evicted from their home. They were bouncing around, staying with different relatives, and were butting heads a lot. However, the physical and emotional distance from her mother that Tamala was able to achieve living on campus helped improve their relationship: "Me and my mother had some real rough times, but she's the only thing I have, literally." Tamala learned that when her home life is unsteady, it has negative consequences on her academic performance, and she really had to search within herself to find the independence and self-motivation required to pull her grades up. Tamala says that when "things not right at home, it's not right at school." Tamala learned from her hardships that the responsibility for improving her circumstances really lies within herself: "It got resolved. It was really through me. I was the key piece. Like nobody can fix me, but that's how I see it." Tamala's learned independence has allowed her to put up a safe distance between her and her mom, which has been a positive shift in their relationship.

For many first-gen students who have experienced a positive evolution in their relationships with their parents, greater independence was a strong driver of this change. These students are learning more about themselves as individuals with the opportunities provided by greater distance from their parents and more control over their own lives and decisions. As these

young adults like Emily and Tamala are coming of age, they understand this independence as a positive shift in the parent-child relationship.

### Appreciation for Upbringing

One of the common themes that emerged in the narratives of first-gen students who perceived a positive evolution in their relationship with their parents is a pointed appreciation for how their parents raised them, as well as admiration for the sacrifices their parents have made throughout their lives and the transition to college. These students often credit their parents for many of their own accomplishments, and are motivated to do well in college by the prospect of making their parents proud. These first-gen students discussed different kinds of sacrifices as evidence of their parents' dedication to their education, including working multiple jobs and long hours, or relatedly, one parent deciding to stop working to spend more time with the children even though it was financially difficult. First-gen students also talked about how meaningful it was to have parents who listened to their troubles and triumphs about the college experience, despite lacking understanding about what the process is like, which is juxtaposed by continuing-gen students, who express appreciation for their parents' guidance.

Shaina, a Black woman on the pre-med track at Midwestern U, didn't do that well academically her first semester of college, but really feels like she grew from that and has learned how to study and be a better student. Although Shaina and her mother have always been close, their relationship has gotten even deeper as she's gotten older and had new experiences in college: "My mom kind of calls me her best friend. I mean, she still acknowledges that I'm her child, so she still enforces that mother-daughter relationship. But she also talks to me more freely and I talk to her more freely."

A primary reason for Shaina's mother's support is that she wants Shaina to create a more stable life for her than she could provide. Shaina says, "My mom already told me she wants a she-shed in the backyard, so she's already been basically placing this impression on me that I am going to be better than her...I'm going to be living comfortably." Being around other college students has made Shaina more appreciative of her mom, family, and how she was raised:

> You could tell when people's parents don't raise them right. They do stuff that I'm like, 'I would never, ever do that.' I dunno. It also makes me, it makes me really appreciate my family. I just have a very strong foundation to lean back on honestly. Because when you're up here and you haven't talked to anybody in a couple weeks, you kind of might actually get a little sad. And so then I could just call my mom and be like, 'Yo, I'm going to come home this weekend,' and she will send me a ticket and be like, 'Here.'

Although their family continues to struggle financially, Shaina is grateful for the emotional bonds she shares with her family. She credits her mom's openness with her as underlying the strength of the family relationships, and her appreciation for her mom raising her this way has deepened their bond.

Leah, a multiracial woman who is the child of Somali refugees, has always been close with her parents. Her parents both survived war and after coming to the US, her father's educational credentials meant little—although he was working as a teacher in his home country, his degree did not transfer. Her mom was born into a poor family and was never able to pursue an education, and she now works a low-paying, physically-demanding job. Leah and her siblings are always cognizant of their parents' hard work and sacrifice, and Leah consciously prioritizes family over school (even though she performs very well in her classes). She's realized that even though school is important, family has to be her top priority:

> I'm really close to my parents. A lot of times, I'll prioritize my family only because hearing their stories and just knowing the experiences they've gone through, I realized that sometimes anything can happen and if you don't prioritize your family, um, you're gonna regret it cause your time is limited with them. Even when it comes to classes and stuff, I'll prioritize my parents.

Leah admires her parents' dedication to their family, and hopes to be able to replicate that kind of commitment when she has her own children someday.

Going to college and spending significant periods of time away from parents gives students the opportunity to reflect on their parents' choices and evaluate their upbringing. For some first-gen students, like Shaina and Leah, this space and consideration leads to a deepening appreciation for their parents' sacrifices and choices. These students perceive a greater understanding of their parents as a result of this recognition, which they experience as a positive, progressive evolution of the parent-child relationship.

### Parental Support

Parents' emotional support of their children was a common characteristic in the narratives of first-gen students who experienced positive shifts in their relationships with their parents. These students felt confident that their parents trusted their children to make sound decisions and did not try to be overly-controlling or disapproving of their choices, in both academic and non-academic realms. As all the students in the sample were in the first semester of their second year, and Midwestern U expects students to declare a major by their second semester of second year, the focus on big life decisions may have been heightened. Although both continuing-gen and first-gen students discussed their choice of major with their parents, first-gen students more

commonly elaborated that their parents didn't really understand what different majors meant, but were supportive of their child's choices. First-gen students also discuss how their parents don't really understand the demands of college extracurricular activities and how that can be difficult to balance with social life, but are supportive of and interested in what their children are doing regardless.

Marquita, a Black woman, struggled her first few weeks of college, particularly because she didn't feel like she belonged at Midwestern and instantly regretted not attending an HBCU for college. She would often call her mom, crying, wishing she could transfer or drop out. Her mom always encouraged her to stay and do her best, and this support helped motivate her when she didn't have motivation within herself. Marquita purchased a car this year and lives just a few hours from home, so she goes home frequently—about every other weekend. She was surprised when she got to college and had to actually study, because things came really easily to her when she was in high school. Her mom warned her about having to study, and Marquita wishes she had listened to her more. But her mom is her biggest supporter: "She called me every day. She, she real supportive. My mom is like my whole backbone." Elaborating, Marquita says, "She makes sure I'm okay. Like mentally, physically…She always encouraged me every day, like 'You can do it.' Like she always sends me like little quotes and stuff." Her dad is also very supportive, but more reserved, though Marquita feels his support. Marquita's mom in particular is a huge source of motivation for her: "My mom always said a goal is like for me to be better than her and my kids better than me, you know? So I think that even by me coming here, it's a step up." As Marquita navigated the struggles of the first year of college, she found herself leaning on her mom for support more than ever, and her mom consistently demonstrated she will

always be there for her child. This deepened sense of security in their bond has been a positive evolution in their relationship.

Lauren, a white woman, has changed her major several times throughout her time at Midwestern. She struggled a bit academically her first year, but feels like she's gotten things figured out. Lauren decided to drop her science major and is now pre-law. She has a twin sister and they are part of a very large family, with nine additional younger siblings. Lauren, her siblings, and her parents are all well-connected with each other. Although they always had strong bonds, Lauren's relationship with her parents is even better now that she's seen that they are okay without her and she is free to enjoy her life without worrying about her parents taking care of all the other kids. Lauren and her twin sister have always felt supported by their parents: "They've always been super supportive of everything we've done. So, like if I throw an idea at them, they're like all in for me."

Lauren frames her parents' support of her going to college and being a first-gen student beautifully: although they sometimes lack understanding about what college is like, "It's also kind of exciting because it's almost like they're doing it with me." She feels supported in all areas of her life:

> My parents have made it really clear that they don't expect any of us to go to college and like, I mean it's not, they don't have certain expectations. They just hope that we're happy with whatever we're doing and we're successful with whatever we're doing. And so like I know that if college doesn't work out next year and I choose to go do something else, they'll still support me through it regardless. So, I think that's kinda good cause it feels like everything is my choice and they just hope I'm happy doing it.

In general, Lauren is very motivated to do well by the thought of making her family proud. She was disappointed in herself when she received a D her first year of college, as she "felt like I let my family down cause like I've always been the big sister with good grades." However, her family supported her through the process of negotiating major options and a future career change, which encouraged her to build some internal motivation as well.

Parents' emotional support in college is crucial for many students' wellbeing. For the first-gen students in this study, that support was all the more meaningful as they were aware that their parents were supporting and encouraging them through life events that they couldn't understand themselves, as parents who did not complete college. Feeling like someone is always in their corner helps give these students confidence as they navigate both academic and non-academic aspects of college life.

### Negative Change

Sixteen first-gen college students experienced the changes in their relationships with their parents as negative. While some of these students overall still have a good relationship with their parents, they perceive that relationship as changing in negative ways. Three common themes emerged in these students' narratives: (1) financial struggles impacting the college experience; (2) parents' lack of understanding about the college process; and (3) conflict over students' worldviews changing while parents' worldviews remained stagnant. Two continuing-gen students also perceived a negative change in the parent-child relationship—one was not doing well academically or mentally, and said the independence college affords students is "toxic." The other continuing-gen student in this category experienced conflict with her dad over her changing worldviews (i.e., her increasingly liberal political beliefs), but unlike the first-gen

students who experienced this kind of strife, her father did not accuse her of becoming snooty or thinking she is too good for her family.

### Financial Struggle

First-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation counterparts to come from low-income households, and as they are the first in their families to go to college, first-gen students are grappling with upward mobility in progress. Nearly every first-gen student in this study brought up the salience of money in their college experience—some students worked long hours on top of school work to put themselves through college, some lived every day in fear of losing their scholarship money, and some simply could not move past their resentment over other students' more privileged financial positions. Students who experienced negative changes in their relationships with their parents were more likely to frame their financial difficulties as ongoing struggles and with bitterness towards their parents, rather than frame their families' financial situations as an obstacle they have already overcome just by being in college or with admiration for their parents' hard work and sacrifice.

Alex, a Latino man from the Southeast, struggled tremendously his first year of college. He found out that his father was "most likely going to get deported," and since his dad is the sole breadwinner for the family, "I thought I was going to probably have to move down South so I can provide that financial need that my family needs." Due to the stress of the uncertainty, Alex didn't pass his classes second semester. His family lives so far away that he wasn't able to go home for visits and just had to deal with his emotions on his own. He felt like he wasn't getting the support he needed from his family either: "The problem with my family is like they were

acting like everything was okay and that everything was going to be okay...you can't just assume everything's going to be okay."

Unfortunately, Alex lost his financial aid because his GPA dipped so low. He was able to convince his scholarship program to continue the scholarship because they were aware of how difficult his circumstances were. He has applied for a private loan, but is still waiting to be approved for it. He's incurred late fees because of this, and with a hold on his account, he won't be able to register for classes next semester unless the loan goes through for his tuition payment. He hasn't had any help applying for a loan.

Luckily, Alex's father didn't get deported, but he still has to keep up with court dates. His parents are not aware of how tenuous Alex's situation is. They aren't aware that he applied for the private loan, and he has been working up the courage to tell them. He needs them to cosign on the loan, and plans to tell his dad over the phone, because in person, "there's too many ways to react and I'd rather be up here where he can't touch me." Alex is working in a dining hall on campus and is close to making a lead position, which would include a small pay raise. He's working 20 hours a week on top of classes to try to make some extra money. However, he doesn't feel overworked because Midwestern U's academic probation policy prevents students from taking more than 15 credit hours a semester until they reach a certain GPA threshold.

Similar to Alex, Shay, a Black woman, has a lot of pressure to help support her family financially. The summer after her first year, she moved back home and was working full-time, contributing significantly to the household bills. She often feels overwhelmed by the heavy expectations on her, and recently had to quit her on-campus job because she couldn't handle working along with her classes and family troubles. She has started to worry about what the financial consequences of not doing well in school will be on her family:

> What if this doesn't work out? Then what am I going to do? You know? And that's really, really hard for me because my family is very dependent on my success. Like right now they feel like I'm gonna walk outta here with a high-paying job and take care of everybody, but that might not be the case.

Shay feels like she doesn't always belong on campus, in large part due to her financial circumstances, but she also doesn't feel like she belongs at home anymore either as she has tried to distance herself from her family, especially her mom. She has a lot of guilt over the declining relationships, but also knows she needs to prioritize herself and is grateful she does not have to go home for breaks anymore.

It is unsurprising that the first-gen students in this study experience significant distress over money. Students who experienced a negative change in their relationship with their parents were more likely to focus on how their financial situations contribute to their experience of college. Especially in regards to academics, students often discussed how working long hours to help support themselves interfered with studying and socializing, or even more commonly, harbored a deep fear of losing their scholarships. University policies for academic probation may serve the purpose of helping students get back on track with their grades, but these policies can unfairly penalize students like Alex, who do not have the financial support to take extra time to graduate. Students can't graduate in four years when only taking 15 credit hours a semester, thus academic probation forces them to prolong their time to completion, as they rack up more debt. Similarly, scholarships with GPA requirements may not account for the additional stressors that first-gen students are grappling with. For the first-gen students who have experienced a negative change in the parent-child relationship, these financial struggles often lead to resentment of their parents that creates tension in the relationship.

Parent Lack of Understanding

Although nearly all first-gen students discussed their parents' lack of understanding about the college process, students experiencing negative changes in their relationships with their parents framed this as an obstacle in the parent-child relationship. Both commuter and on-campus students discussed their parents' inability to relate to the college process, or even their combative stance towards their children over the first year of college.

Karla, a Latina woman, lived on campus her first year at Midwestern, but decided to move back home for her second year to save money because she felt like she experienced enough her first year. Karla is working in an assisted living facility about 12 hours a week. Her mom does not have a concept of how demanding Karla's schedule is: "My mom wanted me to volunteer and work, and I was like, 'You are crazy.' I was like, 'I don't think you understand how much that is to balance out.'"

Karla has had a lot of strife with her mom due to her mom's lack of understanding about how much work college is. Her mom sometimes accuses her of lying about how much work she has, particularly when she's not able to go to church with her family: "In the beginning my mom was really mad and she told me, 'Oh, why are you lying? You don't have that much work to do, you have time.'" In Karla's family's religion, celebrations are not permitted. She hid from her mom that she went to things like Thanksgiving celebrations or exchanging birthday presents with friends. Her mom is very watchful:

> I remember that like the first year my mom would FaceTime me every hour almost to make sure where I was and if I was in class and I came out, cause you know sometimes I had classes that were like an hour long. I would come out and she would get really mad at

> me and say, ‘Where were you? Why didn't you answer the phone? Oh you were [doing] something bad, weren't you?’ It was a lot of paranoia on her part thinking that I was doing something, but I always came back home Saturdays and Sundays because she made me come back home.

The relationship between Karla and her parents has never been worse: “It creates a lot of tension, honestly. I feel like I've never, this is probably going to sound awful, but I've never argued so much with my parents.” Karla finds herself staying on campus late so that she can study and doesn’t have to deal with her parents when she gets home.

Luna, a Latina woman, similarly struggles with her parents’ lack of understanding about what it’s like to be a college student. Although she maintains that she feels close to them, their relationship has suffered as she feels they don’t understand how difficult college is and how tough it can be to be away from home. She feels like she can’t go to them for advice about academics because “I'm a first-gen student. My parents don't know any better.” When she was struggling with her grades, her parents made her feel worse about herself:

> ...I was like a straight A-student my entire life, and then to go from straight As to failing, like everything, um, they constantly were like, ‘How could you be doing this?...Are you just messing around out there?’ All of these things, and me having to sit down and tell them very respectfully, ‘Okay Mom, Dad, do not take this the wrong way but I'm in college, a university, specifically at a state that's not near us. Like it's six hours away, completely alone. I don't have family out there. I don't have friends out there. You guys have never experienced anything near that. Yes, Father, you did some college at a community college right down the block from your home. But that's nowhere near the things that I'm dealing with now.’...They weren't understanding why I was struggling so

much and why I was so sad out here and why I hated all the people here and all of this because they've never had that experience.

Beyond not experiencing college, Luna's parents have never experienced living in a predominantly white space, a feature of Midwestern U that has weighed heavily on Luna throughout her time there so far. Luna not only struggled academically her first year of college, but was also targeted in racist and homophobic ways on campus, especially in her first-year dorm—so she was never fully able to feel safe where she lived. Luna and her friends also had a traumatizing encounter with the local police, as someone had called the cops on them saying there was a group fighting when they were really just waiting for the bus. The cops arrived, hands on their guns, and only let them leave when the bus came. She wanted to transfer to a different school, but realized over the summer that persevering would be good for her in the long run. Luna continues to feel tension in her relationship with her parents, which she attributes to their lack of understanding about college life and how the traumatic experiences she endured might impact her performance and emotional state: "And so for me to try to tell them like the things that I've dealt with and everything, they kind of brushed it aside and it was like I made it up like that can't happen, all of these things."

For students experiencing a negative shift in their relationships with their parents, parents' lack of understanding about the college experience was credited as a driver of this change. Many first-gen students describe conflict with their parents over their academics, as parents couldn't understand why their children were suddenly not doing as well in school because they did not have a concept of how much more rigorous college is than high school; other first-gen students described frustration over their parents not understanding aspects of college that seemed basic to them, like what it means to declare a major. Parents lacking

understanding of non-academic aspects of college life, such as poor mental health or balancing social life, were also commonly-listed frustrations of first-gen students.

### Changing Worldviews

First-gen students commonly lamented that their parents were close-minded and had strong negative reactions to their children's changing worldviews and habits. While it is a popular conservative talking point that colleges are "indoctrinating" students with liberal ideas, the first-gen students in this study were actually far more likely to attribute their changing worldviews to meeting other students who are different from themselves, rather than anything they learned in their classes from professors. Students expressed frustration that their parents criticized their changing views, and were hurt by their parents accusing them of changing who they are as people and thinking they are too good for their families now that they are getting a higher education.

Oceanna, a Black woman, feels like college has given her the opportunity to learn more about herself and flourish as an individual. Seeing how her college friends treat her versus how her home friends have treated her has shown her that she's worthy of more respect in all her relationships. She is very self-driven and has taken advantage of her time in college to figure out who she is and what she wants. She used to try hard to fit in, but now she just wants to be herself:

> I think I used to try to fit into and conform to a society and a way of acting because I wanted to fit in with my friends or I wanted to hang out with my friends and I wanted to be a part. Now I can care less. I mean I have, I have certain friends, but I'm very, I'm a lot more selective with who I let in my space now. So I think, um, in terms of thinking about

the energy that I allow around me and how I feel, like just being more self-reflective, I think I've changed in that instance.

While Oceanna's newfound security in herself has been a positive shift for her personally, it has caused some tension in her relationship with her mom. Her mom accuses her of being "uppity" and is often critical of Oceanna: "I remember I was in the car and I was just putting on lip gloss and she's like 'Getting all boujee now since you're in college,' I'm like, '[I'm] just putting on lip gloss. I was in the mirror putting on lip gloss and she told me I was boujee." Oceanna feels secure enough in who she is to not change to satisfy her mom, but she is hurt by her mom's criticisms.

Ben, a white man who is studying criminology and hopes to become a law enforcement officer, struggles with balancing his passion for his studies with his father's insecurity about his son's intellect and education. His dad accuses Ben of thinking he's stupid because he hasn't attained a higher education, which really frustrates and upsets Ben. He doesn't enjoy it when his parents visit because of this tension: "He just gets on my nerves a lot and he acts really weird when he comes to [the city]. Like they came and visited me for my birthday and he was just like very off-putting, his attitude." Although his relationship with his mom is better than that with his dad, he's bothered that his mom wasn't more upset about him not coming home for Thanksgiving break: "They weren't as upset as I thought they'd be, which is kind of like sad to me." While Ben does not feel like he's changed that much, his parents still accuse him of changing how he views them and treats them.

College is a period of intense growth and self-exploration for young adults. The changing worldviews of their children may be jarring for any parent, but may be especially difficult to navigate for parents who did not attend college and go through this process themselves.

## No Change

Eleven first-gen students in this study indicated that their relationships with their parents have not changed over the course of the first year of college. Students who fall in the "no change" category range from having very close to very distant relationships with their parents, but two themes emerge from their narratives: (1) starting college having an already very strong relationship; (2) tending toward internal motivation and validation, rather than seeking external motivation and validation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the commuter students in the study indicated that their relationships with their parents haven't changed. The three continuing-gen students who fell in this category all were close with their parents before leaving for college.

### Existing Strong Relationship

Many of the students who indicated no change in the relationship with their parents have maintained an already-close bond with their parents over the first year of college. For some, there wasn't much room for improvement in the relationship in the students' eyes; others remain dependent on their parents for day-to-day functioning, such as still needing their parents to book doctor appointments for them.

Isabella, a Latina woman, has always been close with her family, and those relationships haven't changed much since she's been in college. She goes home about once a month and talks to her parents at least every other day. She turns to her parents for advice and especially uses her mom as a sounding board when making big decisions, like choosing a major:

> I had to think out loud to my mom cause I feel like if anyone should be able to help me, cause she knew what I liked since a kid. So she kind of had threw ideas at me and I think

> that kind of helped because I was able to see what interests I had and how that can be applied to what jobs I want. So I think that helped a lot.

Isabella trusts her parents' advice and feels like they truly know who she is as a person.

Anna, a white woman, is very close with her mom in particular, and they have not allowed Anna being away at college to stand in the way of their relationship. Anna explains:

> …my mom's my best friend. So, I go home, like I wouldn't say every other weekend, but around that I guess. And even some days. I live like an hour from here. So my mom, she has no problem. Like if I'm like, 'Hey, can I come home for a day?' Like she'll just come and get me and then take me back up the same day. So, it's really nice.

Even as Anna has "grown as a person" over the first year of college, her bond with her parents remains strong and she has confidence in their perpetual support of her.

Kelsey, a Latina woman, is a commuter student living with her parents. She has great respect for her relationship with her parents and has always felt supported by them:

> My parents and I have always had a pretty good relationship to where my opinions have always been respected and taken seriously. We'll have deep conversations about changing views, stuff like that, or just kind of like being more open-minded about stuff that I'm learning, stuff that I'm learning about myself… And I, I know, especially when it comes to politics…even though we're within the same political views, like more liberal, we'll still have disagreements on what politicians we like, so on and so forth. So it's, but it's not an argument, it's more of a discussion than anything.

Kelsey's parents have always treated her with mutual respect and granted her autonomy. Although she's still living at home and not getting much physical distance from them, they give her the space to change her mind and grow as a person.

For students who had a strong relationship with their parents, parents played a strong role in their children's lives. Although they may not be able to see or talk to their parents as often, the bond endures.

### Self-Motivated

A common theme in the narratives of students whose relationships with their parents didn't change was being guided by internal motivation. Some of the students who are self-motivated have very close relationships with their parents, while others were relatively distant.

Andrew, a white man, describes his parents as "awfully supportive," but very hands-off when it comes to academics. According to Andrew, neither of his parents "really valued education that much in themselves. Even if they value it for like their kids now, it's not something that they're going to like get up in arms if I'm not doing well or as well as [I] should." Before high school, Andrew didn't really care about his grades and had to find motivation within himself to perform well in school:

> It wasn't until like high school that I really developed my own academic interests, but they weren't ever really addressed in a high school setting. And then my parents obviously weren't much of a more motivating force for me either…In terms of motivation, it's like, it's very internally driven for me, whereas others always had some sort of external force driving them or motivating them.

Although sometimes Andrew feels like he puts too much pressure on himself to do well, he likes about himself that he knows he's going to college and working hard to make himself proud, rather than be able to just show his parents a good GPA.

Justin, a white man, is pretty close with his parents, and "not much has changed...I still talk to my parents all the time, I go home on breaks and stuff." He's determined to go to medical school after college, and has sought out opportunities to make himself a better applicant at every step of his college journey—he's doing research with a faculty member for a clinical trial for a medication, he volunteers at a hospital, and volunteers at free medical clinics. Neither of his parents have ever lived out of their small town, but Justin knew he wanted to push himself out of his "comfort zone" and go to college a few hours away. He has a strong desire to challenge himself, and maintains that even if he chose a different career path that didn't require a degree, he would still want to go to college to have the experience. Justin's parents didn't have the cultural capital to help steer him towards the opportunities he's sought in preparation for applying for medical school, so he has really had to work hard to find those for himself. Justin's parents are very proud of him, but his focus on his future is what really drives him.

Students who had no changes in their relationships with their parents commonly talked about having a strong inclination toward internal motivation. As these students did not depend on the external motivation of their parents' approval, their internal drive may have prevented changes in their relationships with their parents.

### Neutral Change

Seven first-generation students have experienced changes in their relationships with their parents, but have a neutral attitude about these changes. Students in this category tended to talk about their parents less overall in their interviews than students in other categories, but one clear theme emerges: believing that changing relationships with parents is just a fact of growing up.

Two continuing-generation students also fell in this category, and their primary commonality is that they are both pursuing careers in the same high-status fields as their parents.

### Just Part of Growing Up

Students who had neutral feelings about their changing relationship with their parents more commonly indicated that they felt like this was just a natural progression in the relationship as part of growing up and becoming an adult. Students who were enjoying college and were struggling alike expressed these neutral feelings.

Jean, a Black woman, has struggled to find her footing in college: "I feel so dumb sometimes. Like I don't, I don't need to be in college or deserve to be in college. I sometimes, I just feel like I'm not smart enough compared to other people." She's not really sure what's going wrong, because she thinks her high school prepared her well for college. She's also still exploring her faith and hasn't found a religious organization that matches her beliefs.

Jean has never had much of a relationship with her father. Her mother is on disability after having surgery, but before that, was struggling to find a job due to having a criminal record. Josie can't lean on her mom that much for support anymore: "[In college] you're supposed to be grown. You're supposed to be able to figure stuff out on your own." Jean's mom doesn't always treat her like a child anymore, as she asks her for money often, but it doesn't really bother Jean and she's happy to help her out: "Sometimes she does need a little help and I'm willing to help." Although the relationship with her mom has changed and Jean doesn't always feel like the child in the relationship anymore, she frames this as a normal and expected part of going to college and growing up.

Ray, a white man, is majoring in business and is extremely involved on campus. Ray is really proud of his involvement in a group that is specifically for first-gen college students in the College of Business. He is a mentor now, but his first year he found it really helpful because "I don't have anybody to talk to [in] my family about what that's like." He's an extremely self-motivated person and believes that at Midwestern, "There is no real barriers to success" as long as you get involved on campus.

Ray is from a very small, rural town and "always knew it wasn't for me." He chooses to only go home on official university breaks, because his family demands a lot of his attention when he's home because they want to spend time with him. It's not very restful for him. Although Ray recognizes that this is a huge shift in his relationship with his parents, he remains neutral about it because he loves being at Midwestern so much and has learned so much about himself as a person. Although he sometimes wishes he could still see his family more, he knows that being on campus and pursuing internships will be the best for him in the long-run: "I was home for four days and I didn't even unpack my stuff and I had to come back to campus. So it was like I didn't really see my family at all this summer…I want to live in a big city and I know that sometimes that's a consequence of that."

Students who are neutral about their changing relationships with their parents commonly frame the relationship evolution as natural and just a normal feature of emerging adulthood. As students in this category tended to talk about their parents less overall compared to students in other categories, their relationships with their parents may in general be less salient to them in their day-to-day lives.

## Discussion

This is a study of first-generation college students' perceptions of their changing relationships with their parents over the first year of college. By focusing on students' perceptions of these changes, rather than the state of the relationship, I illustrate the importance of students' narratives to their development as emerging adults (Arnett 2000; Silva 2013). Perhaps surprising given the prevailing conclusion that relationships between college students and their parents tends to remain relatively stable or to improve (Sun et al. 2000; Lopez and Gormley 2002; Lefkowitz 2005; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018), I find that the first-generation college students in my study experienced much more variation in their perception of the relationship evolution. Namely, although the majority of the 52 first-gen students in the study indicate that their relationships with their parents have changed in positive ways (n=20), a substantial portion perceive the parent-child relationship changing in negative ways (n=16); further, 11 students say their relationships with their parents has not changed, while just 7 describe the relationships changing, but frame these changes as neutral. Although the small comparison group of continuing-gen students in this study was also distributed across the categories of positive, negative, no change, and neutral, the narratives of first-gen students reveal the importance of focusing on this subset of the population, as they are distinct from those of continuing-gen students. First-generation college students face unique challenges and rewards in their relationships with their parents as they transition to college.

First-gen students whose relationships with their parents have changed in subjectively positive ways often point to their greater independence, developing an appreciation for their upbringing, and parental support as drivers of these changes, mirroring existing research on the quality of the parent-child tie tending to improve throughout college (Lefkowitz 2005; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). Their descriptions, however, are distinctly first-gen as they discuss

things like feeling liberated from taking care of younger siblings, having a newfound appreciation for their parents' sacrifices to allow them to attend college, and admiring their parents for trying to understand their college journey. These students often see their parents as facilitators of academic success, rather than feeling they have succeeded despite their parents (Gofen 2009).

Students' narratives that fall in the "negative change" category also reflect first-gen problems, such as financial strain causing friction in the parent-child relationship, parents' lack of understanding of the college process being frustrating to students, and students' changing worldviews as a reason to accuse the student of thinking they are too good for their less-educated family. These students' narratives reflect Lee and Kramer's (2013: 31) assertion that "social mobility is not a tidy process," as these students must reconcile their newly-acquired knowledge and identities with their less-advantaged family and origins (Lehmann 2013).

While fewer students fell in the categories of "no change" or "neutral change," their narratives still reveal important aspects of the first-gen experience of both the parent-child relationship in college and the experience of college itself. These include existing strong relationships with parents being important in many different aspects of their lives, as well as students viewing themselves as very self-motivated and this trait acting as a protective measure against being too affected by the relationship with parents or parents' opinions. These findings reflect Hamilton's (2016) conclusion that parenting style and engagement with their children has implications for their day-to-day experience of college.

Beyond the implications for scholarly research, the narratives of the students in this study illuminate some of the ways that universities can better accommodate the unique needs of first-gen students. Stories like Alex's, a Latino man who lost his financial aid and was forced onto

academic probation following the trauma of his father potentially being deported, demonstrate that although some policies may be well-meaning, they may disproportionately impact those who have fewer resources. Although Alex fought to maintain his financial aid, he did not have the institutional support he needed to fight losing it, and was forced to apply for a predatory loan from a high-interest lender. Although the academic probation policy of limiting credit hours is ostensibly to help students get caught up, it disproportionately penalizes students who do not have the financial means to take additional semesters of college to accumulate enough credits to graduate without the help of loans. Late fees for tuition payments may be useful for getting some students to pay their bills on time, but for students like Alex, this is an additional unforeseen financial burden that can make or break a student's registration in courses.

Widening the lens beyond financial constraints, universities can proactively engage in outreach to the parents of first-gen students to help them understand what college is like for their children. Take, for example, Karla's story of her mother accusing her of lying about being so busy with school and using that as an excuse not to attend church and family gatherings. Karla's mother had no understanding of how demanding college courses can be, and the sheer amount of work that students often have to juggle. Universities can create programs for the parents of first-gen students who want to learn more about what their child is experiencing. We know from previous literature that the relationship with parents continues to be important for many different aspects of emerging adults' wellbeing (Guassi Moreira and Telzer 2015; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). And as many of the students who perceived negative changes in their relationships with their parents attributed this negativity to their parents' lack of understanding, this kind of intervention may prevent friction in the parent-child relationship.

This study complicates the prevailing knowledge that the parent-child relationship tends to remain stable or to improve throughout the college years (Sun et al. 2000; Lopez and Gormley 2002; Lefkowitz 2005; Holt, Mattanah, and Long 2018). Avenues for future research in this field may have a more robust comparison group between first-generation college students and their continuing-generation counterparts. Future research may also build upon this paper by interviewing parents to gain their perspective and evaluations of the changes in their relationships with their children.

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**Chapter 2.**

**Table 1. Relationship Change**

| Pseudonym | Race | Sex | Relationship Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| *First-Generation* | | | |
| Andrew | White | Male | No change |
| Paula | Black | Female | Negative |
| Melissa | Latino | Female | Positive |
| Shaina | Black | Female | Positive |
| Lyona | Black | Female | Positive |
| Lena | Black | Female | Positive |
| Luna | Latino | Female | Negative |
| Josie | Latino | Female | Neutral |
| Meena* | Black | Female | No change |
| Alex | Latino | Male | Negative |
| Tamala | Black | Female | Positive |
| Ashley | Black | Female | Negative |
| Jean | Black | Female | Neutral |
| Karla* | Latino | Female | Negative |
| Kelsey* | Latino | Female | No change |
| Marquita | Black | Female | Positive |
| Rachel | Black | Female | Negative |
| Darren | Black | Male | Positive |
| Emily | White | Female | Positive |
| Ian | White | Male | Negative |
| Alyssa | Multiracial | Female | No change |
| Oceanna | Black | Female | Negative |
| Danni | Multiracial | Female | Negative |
| Cher | Multiracial | Female | Positive |
| Lauren | Multiracial | Female | Positive |
| Jason | White | Male | Neutral |
| Ray | White | Male | Neutral |
| Ethan | White | Male | No change |
| AJ | Multiracial | Female | Neutral |
| Claire | White | Female | Positive |
| Noah | White | Male | Positive |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leah | Multiracial | Female | Positive |
| June | White | Female | Positive-mom; negative- stepdad |
| Sophia | White | Female | Positive |
| Ben | White | Male | Negative |
| Bristol | White | Male | Neutral |
| Thomas | White | Male | No Change |
| Lucas | White | Male | No Change |
| Patrick | White | Male | Positive |
| Seth | White | Male | Positive |
| Victoria | White | Female | Negative |
| Becca | White | Female | Positive- mom; negative- dad |
| Anna | White | Female | No change |
| Justin | White | Male | No change |
| Jake | White | Male | No change |
| Damien | Black | Male | Negative |
| Isabella | Latino | Female | No change |
| David | White | Male | Positive |
| Isaac | Black | Male | Negative |
| Minnie | White | Female | Positive |
| Destiny | Black | Female | Neutral |
| Shay | Black | Female | Negative |

*Continuing-Generation*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Piper | Latino | Female | Negative |
| Ryan | White | Male | Neutral |
| Tessa | Multiracial | Female | Positive |
| Nicolas | Latino | Male | Neutral |
| Vinny | White | Male | No change |
| Rose | Latino | Female | Positive- mom; negative- dad |
| Caleb | Latino | Male | No change |
| Len | White | Male | Positive |
| Nathan | White | Male | Positive |
| Ciarra | Latino | Female | No change |

# Chapter 3. No Longer "Fish in Water": Three Case Studies of First-Generation College Students Moving Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic


## Abstract

First-generation college students face significant barriers to integration on campus, but less attention has been paid to how these students interact with their families and home communities as they begin to adopt a new habitus—tendencies toward thinking, acting, and feeling certain ways (Bourdieu 1977)—as they progress through higher education. In this paper, I explore the narratives of three first-generation college students who were forced to reckon with their new habituses in the context of where their old habituses were formed, when they were sent home from campus to live with their parents during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. Using longitudinal interview data, I present three case studies on the difficulties of navigating these divergent habituses in the wake of natural disaster mitigation strategies—namely, lockdowns at home—and how such a crisis and its management heightened the awareness of this conflict. The longitudinal data allows me to trace the students' changing habituses over time and contextualize the challenges they faced when they returned home to live with their parents. While the intent of this research is not to establish general trends, it does have implications for higher education studies and natural disaster research.


## Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the U.S. in the spring of 2020, many colleges across the country decided to send students home and opted to finish out the semester virtually. Given that this period in college students' lives is typically marked by independence from their parents,

unexpectedly moving home and adjusting to trying to socialize and perform academically through virtual instruction while under their parents' roofs presents unique and unforeseen challenges in the college experience. First-generation college students, those whose parents have not attained bachelor's degrees, were particularly vulnerable to complications arising from the pandemic, including moving back home with parents.

When first-gen students returned home during the onset of the pandemic, they were forced to contend with their new dispositions of thinking, acting, and feeling that they've developed throughout college in the context of the home environment they grew up in. The internalization of beliefs, tastes, preferences, social norms, and tendencies that guide our thinking, acting, and feeling is known as habitus (Bourdieu 1977). The development of one's habitus is a social process, and is heavily associated with social class. First-generation students' habituses are confronted by the middle-class milieu of higher education once they begin college, and research has shown that they begin to internalize some of these middle-class dispositions and incorporate them into their changing new habituses (Baxter and Briton 2001; Bourdieu 2004; Horvat and Davis 2011; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013).

When COVID-19 reached the U.S. and college students around the country were sent home, first-gen students were put in the predicament of grappling with their old habituses that they developed in their home environment alongside their new and changing habituses they'd been developing in the middle-class university environment. The unexpectedness and abruptness of moving home in March of 2020, the uncertainty of an unfolding pandemic, and being at home for a much longer period of time than typical school breaks—without an end in sight—threw this conflict into sharp relief and forced first-gen students to reckon with their changing habituses. In the words of Bourdieu, "when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is

like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127). Thus, students' discomfort in their home environment, and recognition of how they've changed as individuals and no longer relate to it, indicates that their home environment no longer matches their current habituses.

Acknowledging the devastating losses and hardships that billions of people have faced throughout the course of the pandemic, COVID-19 still yet presents a "once in a lifetime," "international social experiment about family life" (Lebow 2020: 1). Research on the social impacts of natural disasters reveals that family relationships are often strained in the wake of these crises (McFarlane 1987; McDermott and Cobham 2012). I merge scholarship on higher education, family, and natural disasters to investigate how family relationships have been affected by the forced moves home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—and the role of first-gen status in this process—for three first-gen college students.

In this paper, I use longitudinal interview data to explore how three students' experiences of moving home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic collided with their continually-reformulating habituses, and how this impacted their relationships with their family members. I trace the changes in students' worldviews and personal identities over time to contextualize the challenges they faced when they moved home. While these three case studies are not intended to make sweeping theoretical contributions, they do have implications for higher education studies focused on first-gen college students, as well as begin to fill an important gap in natural disaster research, which has not yet fully examined the impacts of such a sustained and ongoing crisis as a years-long pandemic.

## Literature Review

## The Concept of Habitus

For first-generation college students, whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree, higher education is not just an opportunity to gain knowledge or credentials, but is a process of learning how to navigate an elite space. As socially-mobile students progress through college, they must negotiate their habituses—their internalized preferences, orientations, and worldviews, which are informed by class position (Bourdieu 1977)—with the expectations of the middle-class environment of universities (Lee and Kramer 2013). Habitus is the idea that society becomes internalized by individuals "in the form of lasting *dispositions*," that pattern how we think, feel, or act, and is acquired through one's position in a particular social class (Wacquant 2016: 65). Although habitus can be a slippery concept, a key feature is that it is embodied, rather than just consisting of attitudes and perceptions—it is expressed in how we speak, walk, and gesture; what skills we possess; our tastes for art, food, clothing, leisure activities, and other lifestyle choices—and although habitus allows for individual agency, it predisposes us to certain ways of thinking, acting, and feeling (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004).

Habitus determines how individuals act in social worlds as they follow their own interpretation of societal rules (Bourdieu 1977; Horvat and Davis 2011). Habitus is not merely constituted by an individual's personal history, but also "the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of" (Reay 2004: 434)—thus, no two individuals' habituses can be identical (Bourdieu 1990; Reay 2004). Although it is strongly associated with early childhood experiences, habitus continues to change in the face of new experiences and encounters throughout one's lifetime (DiMaggio 1979). According to Reay (2004), habitus is a deep, interior guiding force made up of matrices. These internal matrices

> demarcate the extent of choices available to any one individual. Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in…within Bourdieu's theoretical framework he/she is also circumscribed by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable (Reay 2004: 435).

Habitus can thus also be understood as an "individual's internalization of possibility" (Horvat 2003: 7). Although habitus is largely associated with early childhood experiences and family socialization, schools have been sites of interest for studying habitus and habitus changes since Bourdieu's original theorizing on the concept (Reay 2004; Lehmann 2009; Lee and Kramer 2013).

## Upward Mobility and Habitus Change

As first-generation college students begin to internalize the values, beliefs, and worldviews of their elite institutions, their habituses may begin to reformulate (DiMaggio 1979; Horvat and Davis 2011; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013). Educational programs have the potential to fundamentally change participants' worldviews, even in as little as nine months (Horvat and Davis 2011). Well-integrated, academically-successful working-class college students claim that in their four years of college, they grow as individuals, change their outlooks on life, acquire a new repertoire of cultural capital, and develop new tastes—from food, to politics, to future careers (Lehmann 2013: 1). Lee and Kramer (2013) explore Bourdieu's (2004) concept of cleft habitus—the possibility of holding two habituses simultaneously as one experiences social mobility—and apply this to the ways that socially-mobile college students shift their dispositions as they alternate between their elite school setting and nonelite home

setting. They find that these students struggle to foster their ties to home and adopt new strategies of interacting (e.g., avoiding certain conversation topics so that they don't appear to be a "snob") that allow them to navigate their relationships with their families and high school friends (Lee and Kramer 2013: 30).

The challenge of maintaining two habituses can be a difficult and painful process for upwardly-mobile students (Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013). Baxter and Britton (2001: 87) consider upwardly-mobile college students' tendency to distance themselves from a working-class habitus to be "inevitable." The results of their study, focused on returning adult British students, reveal that the students' new trajectory of class mobility creates a painful schism between their old and newly-developing habitus, which they recognize as hierarchically-ranked and connoting inferiority or superiority (Baxter and Britton 2001: 99). This assumption of the superiority of their newly-acquired middle-class habitus over their old working-class habitus caused the students anxiety and guilt (Baxter and Britton 2001). Their findings are mirrored by Lee and Kramer (2013: 18), who find that "social mobility does not come without sacrifice," and Lehmann (2013:1), who finds that upwardly-mobile students exhibit a "complicated mix of allegiances to and dismissal of their working-class roots." I expect that the three first-generation college students in my study will embody many of these same internal struggles, particularly in the wake of moving home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were each forced to confront their old habitus as their new habitus was still in development.

## Natural Disasters and Family Relationships

Sociologists have long concluded that natural disasters expose weaknesses in society and lay bare inequities; the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this social fact.[2] Public health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 helped slow infections in high-income counties in the US, but not in low-income counties (Jung, Manley, and Shrestha 2021). Deaths due to COVID-19 have disproportionately occurred among nonwhite individuals, those with below-median incomes, and individuals with less than a high school degree (Seligman, Ferranna, and Bloom 2021). First-generation college students, who by definition are from families with relatively low levels of education, are also more likely to be from low-income households than their non-FGC peers and more likely to be from marginalized racial groups (Horn and Núñez 2000; Chen and Carroll 2005; Saenz et al. 2007). First-generation college students may not only have been more impacted by COVID-19 directly than their continuing-generation peers (through infection, deaths of family members, etc.), but also more at risk for economic and academic hardships associated with the pandemic, such as loss of employment, poor study environments, and caring for younger siblings (Davis 2020).

Family relationships face a greater chance of deterioration and dysfunction in the aftermath of a natural disaster (McFarlane 1987; McDermott and Cobham 2012). At least in the short-term aftermath, a higher frequency of family dysfunction is reported (McDermott and Cobham 2012). Families affected by natural disasters report higher levels of conflict, irritability, and withdrawal than those who have not been affected (McFarlane 1987). Family-related resources, such as "close relations between family members, parental warmth, and attention" are important protective factors for youths' wellbeing in the wake of natural disasters (Bokszczanin 2008:

[2] In some instances, "natural" disasters is a bit of a misnomer, as many of these crises are human-induced (e.g., the increasing frequency and intensity of floods is largely due to human-caused climate change). Additionally, sometimes the human response to naturally-occurring events is in and of itself its own disaster (e.g., misinformation campaigns regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and subsequent unnecessary death and suffering).

326), but the social and environmental stressors catalyzed by a natural disaster are linked to lower parental efficacy (Scaramella et al. 2008). In the wake of the Ebola outbreak, higher levels of distrust were found in participants engaging in Ebola containment measures in Liberia, even among family members (Pellecchia et al. 2015).

COVID-19 presents a complex challenge for investigating the impact of the pandemic, as public health measures designed to slow the spread of the disease forced people to spend more time with their family members than ever. For many, the only in-person social, emotional, and physical contact with others came from their family members in their shared household (Lebow 2020). Beyond these complications, the pandemic has—as of this writing—been affecting daily life for nearly two years. Existing research on family relationships in the wake of more discrete disasters like hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes may not capture the complexity of the sustained levels of stress and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Gallagher et al. 2020). COVID-19 is an ongoing natural disaster with consequences for relationships among families, and an entire generation of college students' higher education experiences are being shaped by the pandemic.

## This Study

This study merges scholarship on higher education, family relationships, and natural disasters, and builds on prior work demonstrating that habitus can change throughout one's life (Baxter and Briton 2001; Bourdieu 2004; Horvat and Davis 2011; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013). First-gen college students who moved back in with their parents during the pandemic were forced to not only face the realities of a natural disaster, but also to reconcile their old habituses they developed growing up with their parents in their home environment with

their new habituses they've acquired as they've internalized the milieu of their university. The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to take a magnifying glass to the unique challenges and rewards of first-gen college students' new habituses—dispositions towards thinking, feeling, and acting—and the consequences this can have for their family relationships.

## Methods

This paper is based on interviews with three first-generation college students collected over three years at "Midwestern University," a large land-grant institution in the Midwestern United States. The data for this paper come from the Higher Education Innovation Project (HEIP), a longitudinal study of first-generation college students beginning in their first year at Midwestern (see Chapter 1: Introduction for a full description of the study methods). HEIP researchers are a team of graduate students, undergraduate research assistants, a university staff member PI, and one faculty PI. All interviews were conducted and transcribed by different team members, but all coding and analysis for this paper was conducted by the author. All students in this paper have been given pseudonyms and some minor biographical details have been changed (e.g. number or gender of siblings) to further ensure anonymity. "Likes" and "ums" have been removed from direct quotes for readability in some places, but otherwise remain intact.

While the primary focus of the analysis is on the third wave of interviews, which took place in 2020 during the fall of the students' third year of college and a few months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I also referenced and analyzed the students' first- and second-year interviews. The earlier interviews provide detailed background information on the students, their families, and their hometowns, as well as allowed me to investigate changes in the students' dispositions over time. These longitudinal qualitative interviews allow me to identify change and

interpret its meanings across the students' time in college (Hermanowicz 2013). When quotes are used from the first or second wave of interviews, I include a parenthetical note of (W1) or (W2), respectively.

When I began coding for this paper, I sought to uncover broad themes in how students' relationships with their families changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the third wave of interview data. I was specifically interested in students who were forced to move back home in March 2020, when like many colleges across the U.S., Midwestern University shut down in-person classes and sent students home. Commuter students who were already living with their parents were dropped from the sample for this reason. To begin the coding process, I read the students' transcripts line by line to reveal broad themes in the data, writing analytic memos after I coded each interview, eventually narrowing down more specific codes as I reread the transcripts and updated the analytic memos. As I engaged in this process, I realized that very few students were actually talking about their family relationships when the interviewer inquired about how they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, instead focusing on how their academic and social experiences were affected. I then chose to focus solely on students who talked about their family and home lives during the pandemic. Ultimately, I selected three students to pursue in-depth, longitudinal case studies of, primarily based on which students gave the lengthiest and most comprehensive accounts of their family relationships, but also who are representative of the diversity of the sample—a Black woman from an urban area, a white woman from a rural area, and a Black man from a suburban area.

The analysis that follows is based on three students whose stories provide rich detail about the unique experiences of being a first-generation college student during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As described by Matthews (2005: 804), analyzing qualitative data is a

"creative process that requires spending a great deal of time with the data, reading and rereading, coding and recoding, writing memos and rewriting memos and then making connections among them." Once I completed an initial round of coding, I collected the transcripts of those that spoke of their family and home lives. Early codes at this stage included relationships with parents, moving home during COVID, and tension in the household. More specific codes later in the analysis included first-generation identity and relationship to parents, COVID as an opportunity to reflect, and motivation to better oneself. As I continued to refine codes even further, I began noting the specific changes in each students' dispositions, including new tastes (e.g., food, leisure activities), changed worldviews (e.g., meaning of life, politics), and internalized values (e.g., mental health, privacy), which I was able to compare against their earlier dispositions from their prior interviews. These themes clarified that the students were experiencing changes in their habituses, and upon this realization, I returned to the data for a final round of coding that included making connections between the earlier code of "moving home during COVID" to the students' habitus changes, to establish the role of the pandemic in clarifying the habitus changes from the students' perspectives.

The primary strength of case studies is their depth, richness, and detail (Thomson and Holland 2003; Flyvberg 2011: 314). Analyzing these students' stories longitudinally allowed me to investigate how and why certain events in their lives took place, and how these experiences shaped them as individuals (Thomson 2007). Qualitative analysis is a balance of showing and telling the reader what the data means, and my job as the researcher was "drawing together all the data relevant to each field across the different interviews and sketching a narrative of change and continuity over time" (Thomson 2007: 574). I attempt to piece together cohesive narratives for each of the cases that provide context, coherence, and meaning (Frank 2010) to the specific

human experience of first-gen college students' family relationships in the face of their changing habituses and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Findings

This chapter explores the stories of three first-generation college students who were forced to move home with their parents during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. These three students—Ashley, Minnie, and Isaac—reveal some of the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students in the wake of the pandemic, particularly related to their family relationships and changing habituses.

First, we meet Ashley, whose story is one of triumphing over her dire living conditions at home, her at-times abusive relationship with her mother, and battling her own insecurities to emerge from living with her parents during COVID resolved to improve herself and build her future. Ashley was devastated when she found out she would have to move home, and her fears about the challenges of her home environment were realized when she found that her standards for living conditions now far exceed those at home, her family's negative outlook on life no longer resonates with her, and she doesn't even like the same foods her family eats. Next, we are introduced to Minnie, who has always been close with her family, but being home during the pandemic amplified the differences she now sees between herself and her family directly as a result of her ongoing college education. Minnie resolves to keep the peace in her family despite the vast distance between them, and finds herself changing how she speaks around them in order to accomplish this mission. Finally, we meet Isaac, the son of Nigerian immigrants who do not provide him with the emotional support he needs and craves, whose narrative arc culminates in the earnest intention to unlearn the "toxic traits" he picked up from his parents. Isaac has

internalized the idea that there is more to life than just being financially successful, and this shift in his outlook on life stands in stark contrast to his parents' singular focus on their children's educational and financial success, which was once instilled in Isaac.

While these three students' stories alone cannot be used to make sweeping generalizations about this population's experiences or develop new theories about the impact of natural disasters, their narratives illuminate some of the ways that first-gen status matters for life events beyond the context of educational institutions.

## Clashing Habituses and Irreparable Family Relationships: Ashley's Story

### Introducing Ashley

Ashley is a Black woman originally from a major Midwestern city in the same state as Midwestern University. She grew up as one of nine children, and always dreamed of attending Midwestern. The high school she graduated from was predominantly attended by low-income, Black and Hispanic students. Ashley is the second oldest child in her family, and her older brother attends a community college in their hometown. Ashley's mom did not want her to attend MU, as she's "very over-protective" (W1), and she's never had much of a relationship with her father. Her mom wanted her to go to the same local college as her brother and to live at home, "But I didn't want to live at home. I wanted to go somewhere else" (W1). Ashley and her mom have never been particularly close, and her role as the eldest sister in the family has added personal pressure and responsibility to Ashley and has further strained her relationship with her mother: "I was that mature person. I was that person going to college. So I honestly had to talk to her [mother] about their [siblings'] problems and give her advice on what she should do and stuff" (W2).

By the fall of her third year of college, Ashley is feeling confident about her major in social work. She once felt that she wouldn't be able to have a social work career "because I kind of felt like since I have my own problems, like emotional, mental problems" and feared that "I can't help other people with theirs, or you know, try to, you know, help them if I can't even, you know, be that perfect person who doesn't have problems." However, she feels that she has moved past these limiting beliefs, largely because of how she's handled her own family relationships and dealt with the stress and anxiety that they cause her. Ashley's story of moving home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is largely focused on how she sees herself as different from her parents, and how her experiences at home during this time reinforced her dedication to improving herself on a personal level and focused her sights on her future career as a social worker.

### The Move Home

The suddenness of the move home due to COVID was particularly destabilizing for Ashley—she "was not ready to be kicked off campus" when the unfolding pandemic forced Midwestern U to send students home. When she left for college, her bedroom was repurposed for storage, so when she visits home, she's forced to live among piles of old stuff, which she generously describes as "not fun to sleep in." Knowing this, and how overbearing her mom can be, she panicked when she received the email that all students needed to move out of their dorms. Ashley covertly applied for special approval to remain on campus, but her mother found out and foiled her plan. Ashley felt so desperate to avoid being at home that she secretly took a Greyhound bus back to school without telling her mom, and to this day cannot explain exactly

what she thought the result would be: “I don't know why I did that.” Of course, her mom found out, and she came to MU to help Ashley move out of her dorm.

The move-out process was even worse than Ashley anticipated, as her mom was acting “unstable, very, very unstable.” She describes her mother as “paranoid in general,” and the fear of COVID heightened her mom’s paranoia. To Ashley’s horror, this “paranoia” manifested in a racist interaction with her mother and her floormate:

> …This sweet girl, international girl. She was Chinese, on my floor, and they're just walking past my mom and then my mom was like, ‘Oh, I don't want to get COVID from you, from her,’ and said it. I’m just like, ‘That is a college student, the same age as me and you're a grown ass woman and you're being racist to a child basically. And that's really something, I’m just like, that is really, I think that's what really changed my perspective about her. I don't like this person, you know, that's like this to a college student. Even when my stepdad, he was like, ‘You shouldn't have said that to that girl.’ And when I was like, ‘Yeah, you shouldn't do that,’ she was like, to me, she said ‘I’m gonna slap you,’ and I’m just like, ‘But he's saying the same thing,’ but she was like, ‘Just shut up.’ She was mad because we were right, that she shouldn’t have done that.

After the painful move-out experience, Ashley just sat in the car outside her family’s house in disbelief at the circumstances she was facing. After having her own space in college for so long, Ashley was forced to confront the vast and growing differences between her family (particularly her mother) and herself. In this moment, Ashley clearly saw her old habitus colliding with her new one—she started to see her family and the living conditions she was returning to through the lens of her new self, with the preferences, tastes, and attitudes that she began developing in college. The life that was once acceptable to her—the life she was returning to at home—was no

longer tolerable as Ashley's minimum standard of living increased, her taste in food changed, and her need for and expectation of privacy became apparent.

### The Long Months of Living at Home

Ashley's family is low-income and struggles with the basic necessities. Most of the family's food comes from pantries, which Ashley says is "mostly little kid food," so she couldn't eat a lot of it. The "food thing" at home was a particularly stark realization for Ashley about how much her tastes have changed in college, as she found herself secretly ordering her own food or else she would get into a cycle of not eating at all and "feeling horrible." Her mother insisted she get a job to help pay for food, but because her mother receives government assistance, she told Ashley she could only work 14 hours a week. Once Ashley secured a job, though, her mom started telling her she couldn't work at all because the risk of contracting and spreading COVID is too high, initiating another cascade of arguments. Ashley wanted to be out of the house as much as possible, as she doesn't "feel comfortable around my stepdad and like what he did in the past." Although she does not elaborate what her stepfather did to make her feel uncomfortable, she says the "childhood trauma" still impacts her to the point where she had just cried over it two weeks prior to moving home. Her mom started "being really nasty just, just really nasty, really nasty. Like, I remember it just gave me social anxiety fighting with her, like so many emotions and stuff."

Ashley grew increasingly depressed while at home, unable to get out of bed sometimes for days on end:

> …things like you get up, brush your teeth, wash your face, take a shower, blah blah blah, that's really hard for me to do at home, for some reason. I just want to be in my bed a lot

> and so I really have to force myself to, you know, get up and do regular things that people should do. I think it's like, even if I'm there for a long time, then I'll be like, 'Okay, I'll just skip this day.' I won't even do it, and then I'm just getting a cycle of, you know, being dirty as hell. That's something, so my mom and my stepdad, I had, I had a lot of fights with her during March and over summer.

When someone that Ashley confided in told her mom that she was having suicidal thoughts, her mom threatened not to sign her FAFSA, which provides the documentation Ashley needs for her financial aid. Eventually, their arguments came to a head and Ashley's mom kicked her out of the house.

### Personal Growth and Leaving Home

Although Ashley was forced to scramble to find a place to live after her mom kicked her out, the experience illuminated how important it is to Ashley to establish boundaries. The painful experiences with her mom have changed how she sees herself, and Ashley happily reports that

> I've definitely grown in a sense of being more comfortable with other people. Because I had a lot of anxiety, even now, I'm still taking medicine for my anxiety and depression. So that was a big thing in my first year, but I feel like now, especially the things I went through with my mom over the summer. I think I really just grew up in a sense. I was like 'Okay I can make my own decisions now,' you know, 'I'm not scared.' Because usually, I'd be scared to do anything major or anything that will be big changes, but I literally did it and I was like 'This, not, it's not bad at all.'

Although she suffered tremendously while living at home throughout the pandemic, Ashley has used this as motivation to "work on myself because I want to, you know, be a better person for

myself instead of other people." While being in college as a first-gen student once created a cycle of comparing herself to other people, Ashley is now using her time in college as "my time to change what I don't like about myself. So I'm trying to slowly do that."

### Looking Forward

Since her mom kicked her out of the house over the summer, Ashely has only returned home once, for Thanksgiving. She has a cat now, and still doesn't have a car, and while those things limit her movement, she is also somewhat grateful to have excuses not to visit home because her family still doesn't "understand boundaries." Ashley sometimes feels like she is abandoning her siblings, but knows she needs to prioritize herself in order to be able to be a good sister. Her younger siblings often want to spend time with her, but "I just realized I need space. Like I could still, you know, love them and still, you know, be a person in their life despite being almost two hours away, but it's still a struggle for me. Because I still feel guilty about it." The relationship with her mom is still rocky, and they continue to argue a lot, but Ashley maintains the relationship while still protecting herself:

> I'm very outspoken about things that I don't like. I'm still very outspoken about things that I, like the way she parents and stuff. I will say something and she always gets pissed off. She's like, she's like, 'You're not, you're like, you're a child, whatever blah, blah, blah.' So we still butt heads a lot and so I just keep my distance from her. Like, she will reach out to me, but I don't really reach out to her. I still care for her as a mother, I'm still buying her Christmas gifts. So I still, you know, talk to her. But you know, when you need space, I'm going to be gone.

Ashley hopes that one day she'll be able to build a more stable life for herself, and plans to help her family financially in the future, despite all of the hardships she's endured.

Going away to college gave Ashley the space she needed from her family to start to figure out who she is and who she wants to be. As a first-gen college student, she started to develop a new habitus: predilections, identities, and beliefs that set her apart from her family. When she went back home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, she was forced to confront her former life, which her family is still living. Ashley reverted back to many of her self-defeating habits, like not showering and arguing with her mom. Particularly as the eldest sister in the family, Ashley was expected to take on more responsibilities for caring for siblings and helping the house run, and she hadn't really questioned these gendered expectations until she was able to leave for college and develop a new perspective on her mom's dependence on her.

Despite the challenges Ashley faced in her time at home during COVID, the experience reaffirmed her desire to better herself by continuing her education, becoming a social worker, setting an example for her younger siblings, and taking care of her mental and emotional health. Although Ashley's story is ultimately one of triumph for her as an individual, she also demonstrates that as students begin to adopt a disposition in line with the middle-class values of the university environment, this shift in habitus can have potentially catastrophic consequences for family relationships; for Ashley, this is evident in her desire to keep her distance from her family.

## Hiding Incompatible Habituses to Keep the Peace: Minnie's Story

### Introducing Minnie

Minnie is a white woman from a rural area about two hours south of Midwestern U. Although “almost half” of her graduating high school class of approximately 60 went to college, only two (including herself) left the area, while the rest stayed at local colleges (W1). When Minnie left for Midwestern U, “the hardest part was leaving my family because I'm really close to them” (W1). Her parents have always

> been very supportive and wanted me to do this my whole life. Like even when I was younger, I remember them saying, ‘Okay, you got to go to college when you get older.’ And they wouldn't be disappointed if I didn't go to college, but that's the route they preferred I take just because like my dad had to work himself up and he didn't want us to have to go through what he had to go through, just like having to go from job to job and build a career every time (W1).

Minnie has always been very conscious of her first-generation status and her parents’ inability to help her with certain parts of the college process, and as a result, has learned to always “find someone who could help me. So, I don't feel like it was just me being thrown into the water. I feel like it's very much like they give you flotation devices around the way so you can grab them” (W1).

While Minnie has always been resourceful and sought help when she needed it, after her first year of college, Minnie surprised herself with

> how independent I actually am. Because at home, my mom was a stay-at-home mom, so I didn't realize that I could do everything that I could do on my own because I really depended on my parents a lot. So, I thought coming to college was going to be really hard not having my family. And so it surprised me how well I adjusted like, yeah, I had some bumps in the road, but how easy it was for me to find friends and do my laundry and eat

healthy. Like those types of things that I thought I needed other people to help me with (W2).

Her adjustment to college life was fairly smooth, as she came in with her mind set on becoming a teacher, made friends quickly, and joined an academic sorority that provided her with emotional, social, and academic support. Being "highly involved in things helped the transition from high school to college and make it feel smaller." She started to really enjoy being in a city and the opportunities it could offer her, asserting that she changed her mind about wanting to move back to teach in her hometown eventually, as she now desired to "go outside my comfort zone" and not "limit myself" (W2). Minnie was very happy with how her college journey was unfolding, which made the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the forced move home all the more difficult.

### The Move Home

Minnie's parents are divorced and live separately, but when she first had to move home in March of 2020, neither of her parents had internet at home. Her rural hometown does not have widespread internet access, so "I had to drive to McDonald's and sit in the parking lot for the first few weeks until my dad, he was able to get internet. So that was a plus of having divorced parents, was one could get internet." The university's assumption that students have access to internet at home to be able to participate in courses was a clear collision between middle-class expectations and working-class realities for Minnie. The initial transition was really difficult for Minnie, as "I went from having a campus job and having like, you know, secure resources to not having that." At first, she tried to remain positive, but when it really sunk in that "Oh, we're really not going back" to campus, it was difficult for Minnie to process. She had to find a job

quickly, and unlike her on-campus job at school, her new workplace would not schedule her shifts around her class schedule.

### The Long Months of Living at Home

Beyond the difficulty of keeping up with her academics in the face of internet inaccessibility and an uncompromising work schedule, Minnie struggled to feel connected to her hometown. She recounts:

> Nobody wore masks. Nobody followed the rules. Everybody kind of had that mindset, like it's 'It's fake,' you know…One day as an educator, when I need the community support, is it going to be a similar situation like 'Oh no you don't actually need the funding, you don't need that, that's fake'? So kind of being home during a pandemic for an extended time with some college under my belt, it made me realize like, maybe, maybe I shouldn't go back home.

She admits, "…my dad wouldn't wear a mask." This tension with her parents continued to build as the protests in pursuit of racial justice gained steam in the spring of 2020, as "You could definitely see that there was an adjustment and how I thought and how my experiences have changed and what they felt and how their experiences are what they are." As a white family from a rural (and white) area, Minnie's parents have not been exposed to the people and ideas that she has while attending college in a large city, and those differences became obvious in their reactions to the pandemic and the racial justice movement. Minnie experienced this shift in her habitus with great clarity, as she explicitly ties her college education to her "different political views" or "different mindsets" that set her apart from her less-educated home community and family: "I am a first-generation student, my family doesn't always understand." While Minnie's

personal growth and education have opened her mind about other people, cultures, and political views compared to what she grew up with, she has also increasingly begun to think about her working-class origins—and old habitus—as restrictive and shortsighted.

### COVID Providing Clarity

Throughout the course of college, Minnie started to realize that her hometown would not be able to provide her with the teaching job she's always dreamed of, and her experiences at home during the pandemic strengthened her resolve to "expand to new horizons." Before college, "I did have those blinders on," that prevented her from understanding other people's experiences, particularly as a white woman from a rural area. But since then, she has "changed my mindset to there is more than just that small hometown I grew up in." Minnie attributes this shift in thinking to "going back home for the very long time" when COVID initially hit the US. While Minnie sees this as personal growth, it has also created tension with her parents, particularly with her mom after she communicated to her mom that she did not want to visit home as often: "It's been hard for her, but she's slowly starting to understand and accept it. At first it was, 'No you're still coming home.' It was like denial, but now it is that slow acceptance of, 'Okay I'm starting to understand.'" Minnie concludes, when "I was home I realized like, I love my family, but it's also very healthy for me to step away from it sometimes and be my own person."

Minnie recognizes that she has changed as a person throughout her time in college, and while she still values her relationship with her family, she sees her education as the main difference between them. She has to change how she speaks to her parents in order to feel like she is reaching their level, a problem she did not have before her mind was opened in college.

Despite—or perhaps due to—being painfully aware of her evolving habitus, she works hard to keep her relationships with her parents peaceful. Like Ashley, a significant part of maintaining her family relationships has been recognizing that she sometimes needs to keep some distance from them. Minnie remains hyper-aware of her first-generation college student status, and being home during the pandemic reminded her of how important this identity is to her. Unlike Ashley, whose old habitus and new habitus are completely incompatible, Minnie is able to withhold from her parents parts of who she is and how she sees the world in order to continue her relationship with them.

## New Values, Changing Relationships to Parents: Isaac's Story

### Introducing Isaac

Isaac is a Black man originally from a suburb in the same state as Midwestern U. Isaac's family now lives on the West Coast, and he specifically targeted MU because he "wanted to go to school away from my family" (W1). His mother and father both immigrated to the US from Nigeria and they both work in the medical field. His family has always taught him to value education: "I feel like everybody who goes to school values school, of course they do. But people of color value school in a different way in the sense that we come from nothing, so we have to build ourselves from the ground up" (W1). His father attained a bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering in Nigeria, but when that degree did not transfer in the US, he pursued a career in the medical field and became a "self-made man" (W1). As a first-gen college student, Isaac feels that what sets him apart from his parents is that "I can pursue whatever I want and possibly attain whatever I want" (W1). He feels "privileged to say that I always knew I was gonna go to college. I'm privileged to say that I, I had no doubt if I was going to succeed or not"

(W1). Isaac has wanted to be a surgeon since kindergarten, and his parents' "biggest prayer" for him is to succeed and "do better than them" (W1).

Isaac is the oldest of three children, and looks forward to when his two younger brothers go to college someday because "when they go to school, it's going to be easier for them. I'll help them out. So yeah, like I was going through this process, like kind of on my own" (W1). Mentorship like this has always been important to him, and he even co-founded a club for first-generation college students at Midwestern that is "a safe space" where they "talk about different things and challenges that first-generation college students deal with. Like, like mental health, or filling out the FASFA, or you know, different things like that that first-generation college students kind of have to take on by themselves" (W2). His Nigerian identity is central to his self-concept and his relationships with others, and he is running for an executive board position in the African Youth League at MU. Isaac has had to forge connections and create resources for himself at Midwestern, as "being a Black student…there's a lot of barriers."

Although Isaac takes pride in being such a self-starter, he also struggles with his parents' lack of emotional support: "with African parents, they assume that if they're financially supporting you, then that's all you need. You know? My mom will call me and she won't ask about how I'm doing, she'll ask about how my grades are doing" (W2). He enjoys being across the country from his parents while he's in college: "I feel like in some cases distance is good because I feel like the closer one is to you in proximity, the easier it is for them to be on your neck or stuff like that. So I feel like when I'm kinda further away, I can do that kind of thing, my own thing by myself" (W2).

### COVID Providing Clarity

By the fall of his third year, Isaac is surprised by how much he's matured and grown, remarking "I didn't expect to become an adult so fast." The COVID-19 pandemic helped clarify some of his priorities in life, but his "mental health was definitely affected heavily." Although he admires his parents and is grateful for the sacrifices they've made to allow him to get a college education, he sees himself as very different from them and is deeply affected by their parenting approach. He finds his parents to be very emotionally distant, and their constant criticism of him weighs heavily on his mental health. Speaking about his parents' treatment of him and his brothers, Isaac opines: "Your kids don't ask to be born, so I feel like it's your job to make sure that they enjoy the world that they're living in. And with that being said, like, you know, I'm tired of the sentiment of, 'That's just the way, like, that's just the way I am,' or 'That's just how, that's just how they are.'" Isaac's parents are singularly focused on their children being more financially successful than they are, and for a long time, this goal was Isaac's guiding force in his life choices, and he didn't always even realize how unhappy he was and how much his mental health suffered in service of this goal.

### The Long Months of Living at Home

While living with his parents during the pandemic, Isaac was arguing with his parents a lot and felt under surveillance. At the time of the interview, Isaac is home with his parents on the West Coast for Thanksgiving break, and I see that surveillance for myself when his mom interrupts the Zoom call and initiates a verbal argument about Isaac and his brother leaving the house without telling her the day before. Later, Isaac lowers his voice and reveals "If I wasn't in [my parents' house], you would probably get a more in-depth answer," demonstrating his fear that his parents may be listening in. Like Ashley, his discomfort with this surveillance at home

reveals Isaac's need for and expectation of privacy, which is further demonstrated by his relief at going to college across the country from his parents.

Isaac's mental health severely declined while he was living with his parents, and because he was taught to not show emotion growing up, he struggles with asking for help. When I offer to help him find a counselor through Midwestern U, he sorrowfully shares that he cannot access those resources because he no longer has health insurance, after his father recently lost his job. He insists "I feel like I've done a good job dealing with it on my own. And, I feel like I'll be good, but it's kind of scary sometimes when I'm like, 'I don't think I can do this,' but like I always bring myself back to Earth." Isaac tries to frame his mental health decline in a positive way, sharing that being around his parents and being reminded of their treatment of their children has also given him the

> opportunity to like, you know, come face to face with my mental health and, and just force me to be honest with myself. You know, these are your toxic traits. Don't just live with your toxic traits, work on your toxic traits so that you can be a better person, not only for yourself, but also for the people around you.

While Isaac once believed that showing emotion or needing help was unacceptable, he has internalized the value of living for more than just being financially successful, and this clear shift in his habitus manifests in his privileging of strong mental health.

### Looking Forward

Since being back on campus after living with his parents during the early stages of the pandemic, Isaac has resolved to "unteach myself a lot of the bad habits that I was taught growing up." He is committed to "learning how to communicate more and learning how to

validate people's feelings and learning how to, you know, be calm and, and be patient," traits that his parents do not possess nor did they instill in him. Isaac is consciously teaching himself how to embody the values he's unconsciously internalized throughout college—the emotional distance his parents embody once seemed normal to him, but his recognition that emotional closeness and openness is possible (and desirable) is a clear shift in his habitus.

Isaac looks forward to seeing what the future holds for him, but qualifies his hopes for his career with a comparison to his father: "I try to be optimistic like one day, I'm going to be very successful. Right now, like at 20, 20 years old and going on 21. I know that when my dad was in Nigeria at 21 years old, he wasn't, he didn't have the same privileges that I have now." While he acknowledges that attaining a college degree will set him apart from his parents financially—"the honest truth of being in America is that money provides you a lot of freedom that a lot of other people don't have. And I definitely feel like my future of being financially free is going to be different than my parents"—he primarily focuses on how he will be different from his parents emotionally. He continues, "I want my kids to be able to just come to me for anything. And I genuinely want to like, be my kids' best friend. And I wasn't, you know, I feel like I'm very emotionally intelligent. So I feel like my future is different from my parents."

Like Ashley, college has given Isaac the opportunity to explore who he is as a person and square his new feelings and identities with how he was raised. Going home during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced Isaac to face his parents and their emotional distance in a way that he had been protected from while living on campus, across the country from them. His habitus has been altered as he has internalized the idea that life is not just about being financially successful—his outlook on life is now that life is worth living for the connections you make with other people, how you can uplift others, and most clearly in his case, prioritizing mental and

emotional health. His orientation to work and life have thus changed dramatically, and this new outlook on the world put him in a difficult predicament once he returned home. He is grateful his parents raised him to value education, but feels their singular focus on him being more educated and financially successful than they are did not give him the space he needed to share who he truly is with them, and they do not understand the difficulties of being a college student. While Isaac is excited to pursue medicine, his primary focus is working on becoming a more patient, understanding, and empathetic person, for both himself and for others. Isaac's story is characterized by one aspect of his habitus changing—his internalizing of the value of enjoying life and not just working to be more educated and have more money than one's parents—and having major consequences for how he sees himself and his family, while still maintaining other valuable parts of his identity, like his Blackness and Nigerian heritage.

## Discussion

The three students profiled in this paper are experiencing upward mobility in progress as they continue their higher education. The stories of Ashley, Minnie, and Isaac illuminate some of the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students as they continue to negotiate their new habituses that they have developed throughout their time in university with their old habituses (Baxter and Briton 2001; Bourdieu 2004; Horvat and Davis 2011; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013), which they were confronted with when they moved home with their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, three case studies cannot establish trends in first-generation college students' experiences, but these three cases offer important implications for both higher education studies and natural disaster research.

## First-Generation College Students and Habitus Change

The three students in this study have all faced the COVID-19 pandemic as their upward mobility is unfolding. Ashley, who has a clear vision of her future as a successful social worker, must actively reject her mother's at-times abusive attempts to pull her back into her old life, but still feels guilt about leaving her younger siblings behind and hopes to be able to uplift them financially someday. She teaches us that for some students, the clashing of their old habitus and new habitus can have catastrophic consequences for family relationships. As a low-income, urban, Black woman, Ashley feels she needs to maintain distance from her family in order to protect herself and avoid falling back into the living conditions she grew up with. Minnie, a future teacher, was dismayed by her parents' behaviors and attitudes during the pandemic, but still acts as the peacemaker in her family while attempting to keep her distance from them. She shows us that some students are able to hide the pain they experience as their old and new habituses collide, and as a white woman, she has the privilege of avoiding some of the most inflammatory interactions with her parents, like discussions of the racial justice movement. Isaac, the son of Nigerian immigrants whose own habitus has always kept them at an emotional distance from their children, saw the pandemic as an opportunity to recognize and reflect on the traits he developed during his upbringing, and hopes to better himself by becoming a more patient and empathetic person. His story shows that even one change in how someone thinks about the world—in his case, the meaning of life as not just about being financially successful—can have major effects on their relationships with their families. All three of these cases ground the changes they see in themselves, particularly in relation to how they differ from their families, in their first-generation college student identities.

Although many universities engage in initiatives focused on integrating first-gen college students on campus, less attention has been paid to the consequences of students' internalizing the values, tastes, and dispositions of the university environment when they return home. First-gen college students experience a "cleft habitus": the experience of feeling split between one's old habitus and new habitus, as a result of upward social mobility (Bourdieu 2004; Lee and Kramer 2013). While existing research on cleft habitus typically focuses on students' experiences while in their university environment, this research shifts the lens of analysis by focusing on the experiences of the home environment. This paper contributes to the literature on habitus and first-generation college students by demonstrating that certain elements of upward mobility—which is almost universally framed as positive—like the transformation of habitus as one internalizes middle-class values, can have negative consequences. Namely, conflict with family, discomfort in one's old environment, and feeling torn between two worlds can cause first-generation college students significant distress. The narratives of Ashley, Minnie, and Isaac all embody this tension within themselves and with their families. I expected to find that these students would feel guilt or shame that they view their new and evolving habitus as superior to their old habitus (Baxter and Britton 2001; Lee and Kramer 2013), but instead they confidently embrace who they are and who they strive to be.

## The Role of COVID

As first-generation college students, the suddenness of the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly destabilizing for the students in this study. To be clear, I am not criticizing Midwestern U's decision to send students home initially—I do believe that strict lockdowns could have prevented much of the suffering and death we have all witnessed over the

past year and a half, and universities had very little time to decide what to do when the pandemic reached the U.S. However, this abruptness meant that students had little time to think about what their time at home would be like or prepare in any meaningful way. Unlike during scheduled university breaks, which are planned far in advance, students did not have the ability to plan for themselves, and in many cases couldn't leave the house at all due to fears about COVID—meaning they couldn't access the things that would typically help relieve some of the conflict in their old and new habituses, like being able to work outside the home to get a break from family. This paper advances the literature on habitus by investigating how a dramatic and unforeseen event—like a natural disaster—has the potential to amplify the distress associated with a cleft habitus.

The uncertainty of the novel coronavirus itself, along with having no end in sight of when the pandemic would end and on-campus life could resume, exaggerated the heightened awareness of the dangers of their hometowns and their family's political choices. Resources that students were accustomed to having on campus—even as seemingly simple as Wi-Fi—suddenly became unavailable to them, along with more complicated resource loss, like therapy for Isaac, whose family lost health insurance coverage due to a job loss during COVID (Davis 2020). As first-gen students moved home during the pandemic, they started to feel like it didn't really feel like "home" anymore—returning to Bourdieu's words, these students no longer felt like "'fish in water'" in their home environments (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127). Context shapes the extent to which an individual is subject to experiencing a cleft habitus—for the students in this study, COVID forced this reckoning of their old and new habituses.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold as an ongoing natural disaster. As first-gen students may be particularly vulnerable to the health hazards, economic tolls, and academic

hurdles that have arisen in the wake of the pandemic (Horn and Núñez 2000; Chen and Carroll 2005; Saenz et al. 2007; Davis 2020; Seligman, Ferranna, and Bloom 2021), they are an important population of study for the far-reaching social impacts of COVID-19. As Ashley, Minnie, and Isaac recount, family dysfunction was at an all-time high for them as they faced moving home during the pandemic and returning to campus once Midwestern U reopened its doors (McFarlane 1987; McDermott and Cobham 2012). Although we can hope that COVID-19 will not be replicated by a similar event in the near future, the realities of climate change—and the expected increase in natural disasters as a result—point to the urgent need for continuing research on the social impacts of sustained natural disasters.

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# Chapter 4. "Sugar-Coated Animosity": First-Generation College Students and Their Expectations of Future Tensions with their Parents Over Their Upward Mobility


## Abstract

Despite the prevalence of conflict in parent-child relationships for first-generation college students, these relationships endure throughout college, indicating ambivalent intergenerational ties (i.e. both conflict and solidarity). While these ambivalent ties during the college years have been established, less is known about how these relationships evolve over time, particularly as students are considering the transition from college to career. Investigating predictions of the future is especially important, as our expectations shape our current decision-making behaviors (Mische 2009). Drawing on interviews with 39 first-generation college students, I explore first-gen college students' expectations of future tension with parents over their upward mobility, and find that for students who predict tension, three overarching themes emerge: (1) jealousy and resentment; (2) changing worldviews; and (3) parents lack understanding. Situating this expected tension within the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence framework, I conclude that some aspect of solidarity is predicted to keep these bonds intact—thus creating or reinforcing ambivalent ties—as no students indicate that they plan to sever ties with their families. For students who do not expect tension with their parents over their upward mobility, the most commonly cited reasons are (1) parents are supportive, and (2) parents are already well-off. This study demonstrates that even just the prospect of upward mobility post-graduation can create strife in family relationships, underscoring the importance of social forces in family conflict (Connidis 2010).


## Introduction

College students nearing graduation are on the precipice of many consequential life decisions, and the role that their parents play in their lives remains a question. The importance of parental involvement before and during college has been firmly established (see, for example, Conley 2001; Hamilton 2016), but we know less about the parent-child relationship as young adults are making the transition from college to career. First-generation college students, whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree, are of particular sociological interest as they navigate their relationships with their parents while they near closer to graduation and start to seriously consider their imagined post-graduation futures.

While older generations popularly claim that young people do not think enough about the future—and some scholarship suggests this sentiment (Arnett 2006)—others have refuted this disparagement and conclude that young adults carefully balance their expectations and hopes for both the short-term and long-term (Anderson et al. 2005; Threadgold 2012). While we know that a major factor in the parent-child relationship for middle- and upper-class young adults is financial and other assistance from parents throughout their "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2006), we know less about first-gen students' evolving relationships with their parents after college and how these students envision this relationship changing as they are making that transition post-grad. This is particularly important in the context of first-gens' upward mobility as college students and their expectedly more advantaged class and status positions compared to their parents.

Although parental support is particularly important for first-gen students (Capannola and Johnson 2020), FGC students' parents lack firsthand knowledge about navigating the university environment and the transition from college to career (Tate et al. 2015), potentially creating tensions in the parent-child relationship. Tensions are consequential for relationship quality and

life satisfaction (Birditt et al. 2009; Fingerman et al. 2012), but thus far, research on youths' expectations for the future has primarily focused on more positive feelings, like hope and ambition (Strand and Winston 2008; Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Frye 2012). First-generation college students and their parents face unique tests to their relationships throughout college, but we know little about how this relationship evolves as students near closer to graduation.

In this paper, I explore the narratives of first-generation college students to understand how they foresee the trajectories of their relationships with their parents in the future, with a particular focus on potential tensions that may arise as a result of the students' expectedly more advantaged class positions. I find that many first-gen students expect to experience tension with their parents in the future given their upward mobility and most commonly point to (1) jealousy and resentment, (2) changing worldviews, and (3) parents lack of understanding as the reasons for the anticipated tension. I situate these findings within the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model (Lefkowitz 2003; Birditt et al. 2010; Connidis 2015; Reczek 2016; Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020), and given that these students plan to continue their relationships with their parents despite conflict, conclude that they foresee ambivalent intergenerational ties. Students who do not expect tension with their parents over their upward mobility cite their parents' ongoing support or point out that their parents are already relatively well-off as reasons they do not foresee tension with their parents given their expectedly more advantaged futures. This paper answers the call to investigate how social forces influence conflict in family social interactions (Connidis 2010) and to take seriously the role of future expectations in social interactions (Mische 2009) by exploring the function of first-generation college-going status in the imagined

future of the parent-child relationship as students are considering the transition from college to career.

## Literature Review

### Thinking About the Future

While popular thinking and some scholarship (Arnett 2006) suggests that young adults don't think about or plan for the future, others find that young adults carefully consider both the short- and long-term future as they make decisions for themselves and their lives (Anderson et al. 2005; Threadgold 2012). Expectations for the future shape current decision-making behavior (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische 2009) and give actors the power to stake claims over identity and morality (Frye 2012). Regardless of their ability to actually accomplish their plans, young adults "see active opportunities for choice and for formulating their own lives in the years ahead" (Anderson et al. 2005: 139). While this kind of hope for the future is a powerful motivating force (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012), hopelessness for the future is tied to feelings of individual powerlessness and dislocation from social institutions (Smeraldo Schell and Silva 2020).

Despite the importance of imagined futures for present decisions and individuals' self-concepts, sociologists have tended to neglect research on the importance of expectations, leaving open questions about the possibility of projected futures acting as a social force in and of themselves (Mische 2009). First-generation college students offer an opportunity to explore how an identity like first-gen status shapes these expectations for the future, particularly at a pivotal period of transition like their upcoming graduation and progression into their careers.

Tensions and the Conflict-Solidarity-Ambivalence Model

Family scholars have long recognized both conflict and solidarity in the parent-child relationship (Lefkowitz 2003; Birditt et al. 2010; Connidis 2015; Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020). Conflict, and its associated feelings of tension, broadly defined as "irritations experienced in social relationships" (Birditt, Rott, and Fingerman 2009: 769), is common in relationships between adult children and their parents (Birditt, Rott, and Fingerman 2009; Lefkowitz and Fingerman 2003). These kinds of negative emotions, like frustration and disappointment, are normative in intergenerational ties, regardless of if either party communicates or acts on those emotions (Birditt, Rott, and Fingerman 2009; Lefkowitz and Fingerman 2003). Despite the propensity for conflict between parents and their children, intergenerational solidarity, or connectedness, is measurable throughout the life course (Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020). Intergenerational solidarity can function through many different domains, including prevailing beliefs about what is normative for parent-child relationships, cognitive-emotional realms, like feelings of obligation or closeness, or through more functional aspects, like emotional or financial support (Silverstein and Bengston 1997; Silverstein, Gans, and Yang 2006).

The prevalence of both conflict and solidarity in the parent-child relationship has led scholars to view intergenerational ties through a lens of ambivalence, or simultaneous solidarity and conflict (Connidis 2010; Connidis 2015; Reczek 2016). Intergenerational ambivalence integrates psychological ambivalence, or an individual holding both negative and positive emotions, with sociological ambivalence—"incompatible and conflicting expectations and norms of behavior, beliefs, and attitudes" (Reczek 2016: 644). Reczek's (2016) concept of "perceived ambivalence," or the ways that individuals construct others as thinking, feeling, or acting in contradictory ways, suggests that even just perceiving other family members as having feelings

of ambivalence—whether or not they actually harbor those feelings—can contribute to psychological distress. Major life transitions are especially consequential for ambivalence in family relationships (Connidis 2015), and thus it is a particularly opportune time to investigate the presence of tensions and intergenerational ambivalence with their parents as students are gearing up for the progression through graduation and starting their careers.

As first-gen students consider their post-graduation plans, family influence is an important factor in their career decisions (Tate et al. 2015). But while their parents are often a major source of support and motivation for FGC students, they lack knowledge about navigating the college to career process that their children need (Tate et al. 2015), possibly creating tension in the relationship. For young adult students, different aspects of parental support—including financial, advice, emotional support, listening, and companionship—are positively associated with higher life satisfaction (Fingerman et al. 2011). This finding, though, lumps together low- and high-socioeconomic status parents, possibly obscuring different patterns for low-socioeconomic status families (Fingerman et al. 2011). Although tensions between parents and children are normative, tensions predict poor relationship quality between parents and children across the lifespan (Birditt et al. 2009). As relationship quality is consequential for wellbeing in young adulthood and beyond (Fingerman et al. 2012), it is important to investigate the tensions in adult children's relationships with their parents.

## Clues About Future Conflict, Solidarity, and Ambivalence: First-Gens and Their Families

While we know relatively little about the relationship between parents and children during the transition from college to career, there are unique factors in the relationships between first-generation college students and their parents that give indications of possible future conflict,

solidarity, and ambivalence in the relationship. Throughout their time in college, first-gen students are significantly more likely to experience stressful life events in their personal and family lives than continuing-generation students (Wilbur and Roscigno 2016), indicating the prevalence of conflict in first-gen families. First-generation college students are more likely to live closer to home (Saenz et al. 2007) and more likely to live with family members (Wilbur and Roscigno 2016) compared to their non-FGC peers, capturing an aspect of solidarity. Somewhat contrarily, though, first-generation students also report more tensions with their home communities as a result of their place in higher education, reflecting their parents' resentment, fear, or ambivalence about their education and college experiences (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), as well as the students' own complicated feelings about how their outlooks evolve throughout college and how their perceptions of their home communities change (Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013).

While enrolled in college, FGC students work significantly more hours at their jobs, suggesting that rather than relying on their parents for support, many first-gen students are instead more likely to need to support themselves (Wilbur and Roscigno 2016). Research on emerging adulthood—ages 18-25—reveals that young adults are delaying independence from their parents until later in life than previous generations (Arnett 2006). Compared to earlier points in U.S. history, young adults are relying on their parents for financial support later into adulthood—two-thirds of those in their early twenties receive financial support from their parents, while roughly 40% continue to receive parental assistance in their late twenties (Schoeni and Ross 2005; Swartz 2009). But for many first-generation college students, who are more likely than their non-FGC peers to be from low-income households (Horn and Núñez 2000), this kind of financial support from parents may not be possible.

Yet, despite these challenges to family relationships, familial support is particularly important for college success for first-generation students (Capannola and Johnson 2020). First-gen students also internalize messages from their parents about rejecting a sense of entitlement and instead profess their appreciation for the opportunities they've had in college and their career prospects (Tate et al. 2015). Further complicating the conflicts in families with first-gen students is the power of financial precarity and family instability to shape family conflict (Robinson 2018). Existing research on middle-class emerging adulthood (Arnett 2006) and non-college-going working-class emerging adulthood (Silva 2012) thus may not capture the complexity of the family relationships experienced by upwardly mobile, first-generation college students.

Upwardly-mobile college students tend to avoid the discomfort within themselves or conflict they experience with their families over their mobility by simply distancing themselves from their home communities (Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013), but we know less about how they expect these relationships to evolve over time once they are no longer part of a university environment. Predictions of the future have real consequences, even if the ultimate consequences are not the outcomes we anticipated, as they shape our behavior and can even sometimes be self-fulfilling (Mische 2009). While this study is specifically focused on conflict in intergenerational ties—namely, tension over the child's upward mobility—the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model helps contextualize students' expectations of tension within a framework that allows for the continuing parent-child bond, despite the presence of conflict in the relationship.

## This Study

First-generation college students are a particularly important population of study, as their paths in life already substantially differ from their parents' lives, and thus they may not have a model of how they can expect their future experiences and relationships to unfold. Given that the parent-child tie is one of the most important relationships throughout the life course, this paper investigates one aspect of this relationship—tension expected in the future—as students are considering the looming transition from college to career. Sociological research investigating youths' expectations for the future typically focuses on their hopes and aspirations (see, for example, Strand and Winston 2008; Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Frye 2012) and thus the present study further develops the imagined future literature by exploring more negative expectations for young adults. This paper answers the call to study how social forces create the conflicts in the social interactions of family life (Connidis 2010) and to "reclaim the analysis of the future" (Mische 2009: 702) by exploring how first-generation college-going status influences the expectations for the evolving parent-child relationship as students are considering the transition to post-graduation.

## Methods

This chapter is based on interviews with 39 first-generation college students currently enrolled at Midwestern University, as part of the Higher Education Innovation Project (see Chapter 1: Introduction for a full description of the study methods). All interviews for this paper were conducted during the fall semester of the students' third year of college in 2020. This was the third wave of data collection, and numerous students dropped out of the study, graduated early, or withdrew from the university between the first, second, and third waves. Interviews for the third wave were all collected virtually over Zoom by a team of graduate students,

undergraduate research assistants, one faculty PI, and one staff PI. In some cases, I referenced the participants' earlier interviews to fill in biographical details and clarify gaps where the participant assumed the interviewer remembered stories from their earlier interviews. Participants are all given pseudonyms and some identifying details have been altered (e.g., number of siblings, choice of major, etc.) to further ensure anonymity. Some "likes" and "ums" and "you knows" have been removed for readability in some places, but direct quotes otherwise remain unchanged.

Interviews were transcribed by different team members, but I coded all interviews for this paper. Students who withdrew from the university, but still participated in the interviews, were dropped from the sample, as were eight students whose interviewers did not ask them questions specifically about how they envision their future relationships with their parents. 15 of the 39 students in the sample identify as male; 24 identify as female. 17 of the participants are white; 12 are Black; 6 are Latino; 4 are multiracial (see Table 2).

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics, including students' academic experiences, extracurricular involvement, family and home community relationships, and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is based on students' answers to questions regarding whether or not they expect their future status and class position to be different from their parents', and if they foresee tension in their relationships with their parents in the future as a result of their expectedly more advantaged status and class positions. Thus, the definition of "tension" was up to the interpretation of the participants.

I used a "flexible coding" approach to code the data (Deterding and Waters 2018), beginning with first coding for the specific question regarding expected tensions from the interview guide. When answering this question, students spoke in prospective terms and used

future-tense language, indicating their predictions for the future. At this initial stage, I also coded for descriptions of existing tensions in the relationship, which included past conflict as well as ongoing strife. Examples of existing tensions include interactions where parents explicitly accused their children of being snobby or acting boujee, feeling like home was no longer "home," and questioning religious beliefs. Despite the prevalence of existing intergenerational conflict, these first-gen students still maintained relationships with their parents. Though it was beyond the scope of the data to uncover which aspects of intergenerational solidarity were helping maintain this bond, it was evident that students were experiencing intergenerational ambivalence.

As I narrowed down from description to analysis, I coded for themes of "yes, tension expected" and "no, tension not expected." As I read the transcripts line by line, creating analytic memos after the initial coding of each memo, more specific subthemes came to light. Within "yes, tensions expected," more specific codes included reasons for expecting tensions (e.g., parents accusing their children of belittling them, parents are overbearing, student questioning their religious upbringing), which eventually coalesced into three overarching categories: (1) jealousy and resentment, (2) changing worldviews, and (3) parents lack understanding. Within "no, tensions not expected" more specific codes included reasons for not expecting tensions (e.g. parents make a lot of money, parents have good jobs, pursuing a degree for family), which eventually coalesced into the overarching categories of (1) parents are supportive and (2) parents are already well-off. I updated the analytic memos as the codes became more refined. Findings from these expectations of evolving family relationships are presented below, with a focus on students who do foresee tensions in balancing their new status and class positions with their parents.

## Findings

This chapter seeks to answer the question: as students begin to think about their career trajectories and life chances, how do they envision the evolution of their relationships with their parents upon graduation and beyond? In particular, do they expect any tensions to arise with their parents as a result of their expectedly more advantaged class and status positions (i.e., their upward mobility)? The students in this sample are in their third year of college, and the end of their higher education feels near. They are thinking about their future career prospects, what they want for their personal lives, and how they can make the most of the rest of their time at university. As these students consider how their relationships with their parents have evolved over the course of college so far, they also have expectations for how these relationships will continue to unfold over time as they progress from college to career.

The students in this paper were all asked to consider whether or not they foresee tensions in their relationships with their parents in the future as a result of their expectedly higher class and status positions; the focus of analysis is thus specifically on tension over this upward mobility. Students' responses fell into two overarching categories: 17 students predict there will be tension in their relationships with their parents; 22 students predict that there will not be tension in their relationships with their parents. Below, I explore the stories of these first-gen students and how they perceive their relationships with their parents and how they expect them to evolve over time, with particular attention to the complex narratives of the students who anticipate strife in their relationships with their parents as a result of their education and future occupation.

## Tension Expected Over Upward Mobility

Seventeen of the first-gen students in this study expect that there will be tensions with their parents over their expectedly more advantaged futures. Their expectations for future animosity fall into three main themes: (1) jealousy and resentment; (2) changing worldviews; and (3) parents lack understanding. Many of the students who expect tension with their parents still anticipate having a good relationship with them in the future, but sense conflict brewing as they consider their next steps in their education and beyond; others do not have a strong relationship with their parents and don't expect to in the future either. Yet, none of these students plan to cut ties with their families, indicating they expect that some aspect of intergenerational solidarity will help keep the bond intact, though the parent-child tie is expected to be ambivalent.

### Jealousy and Resentment

Jealousy and resentment were a common theme in the narratives of first-gen students who expect to have tensions with their parents in the future as a result of their expectedly more advantaged class and status positions. Students anticipate that their parents will envy their higher income or status, accuse them of thinking they are too good for their families, or think their children don't work as hard as they do. While some students plan to mostly ignore this jealousy, others resent their parent's attitudes and insist that they've worked hard to get where they are or have made better choices than their parents in order to achieve what they have and will accomplish in the future. Sometimes students envision their relationships with their parents devolving significantly, at least in part because of this tension; other students see this strain as just a minor blip in the evolution of their relationships.

Oceanna is a Black woman from a large Midwestern city and is from a family of nine children. She hopes to become a nurse or midwife someday and recognizes that "my life and my future plans compared to my parents differ just because they didn't have the same options that I have based on their financial status. Like they didn't, they weren't able to just pay for school and go to college, so they weren't able to look at these higher end jobs." Oceanna is grateful she sees more options for herself and her career, but feels her current and future success have been achieved in spite of her parents, as she "never really got much motivation from my parents to do more than just go to work." Oceanna is resentful that they didn't set an example for her of aspiring to career success:

> My mom always told me she had dreams of being a nurse, but she never really made it to the point, and she never really discussed why, but she just never really fully pursued that. I think she just went towards working and supporting herself financially. For the most minimum things that were available to her, so paying for an apartment and getting a car and sustain herself that way and helping her parents and things like that. When it comes to my dad, he never really directly communicated with me exactly what his dreams were.

Throughout the course of college, Oceanna has had to work on "setting boundaries" with her family, because seeing what their life is like at home and hearing their opinions on how she lives her own life is:

> …too much. It's too heavy sometimes. So setting boundaries like that, changing the amount of information I tell to my parents or tell to my sister just because, just to delete the judgmental-ness and things of that nature. Like the heavy influence that they have in my life because I know now it's time to live my own life. So just deleting the space for

them to have so much influence on my life through negative opinions or them projecting their fears or doubts on me, I just kind of got rid of that space for that to happen.

Given the conflict that has already unfolded in her relationships with her parents and family, Oceanna expects the hostility to continue.

Oceanna's parents already accuse her of being "boujee" and she believes that even when people "say they proud of me and things of that nature," their words are actually "sugar-coated animosity." Oceanna draws on an argument she had with her sister as another clue about future strife in her family:

> One summer I think before my second year, I was my niece's second mom. I had her almost every day from morning to night, every day of the summer. But when I left, my sister kinda got upset…And then one summer I actually got a job and so it was things that were being put on my plate that I just had to focus on more so than being that second mom or being that automatic babysitter for my sister. And she kind of just judged me for that or took it wrong…I think those same complications that I had with these minor changes in my life is definitely going to manifest when I become even bigger and move further on in my career or my education or just life in general. I definitely think it would be some conflict.

Oceanna envisions that once she is established in her career, she will

> …definitely be judged on that, just the way I will be living my life then compared to where I came from. It's just always gonna conflict. Like when you just look at how celebrities talk, or, even though I'm not gonna, I'm probably not going to be on the level of a celebrity, it's still kinda the same push back. Just people being silent haters, or

> something like that, or people expecting you to be in one place and having the time to do certain things that you're, you don't have time to do anymore.

Although Oceanna is aware that she has been given opportunities that were never available to her parents, she is still hurt by their jealousy of her academic success and future career prospects. However, despite the continued tension Oceanna expects with her parents over her upward mobility, she still hopes to move back to her hometown when she starts her career in the medical field so that she can be close to her family.

Madeline, a white woman majoring in business, has done well in college so far both inside and outside of the classroom. She has a strong GPA, has interned with several different large companies, and is heavily involved in her sorority, all while working an on-campus job during the school year. Madeline's parents both passed away when she was a young girl, so her aunt and grandma became her parental figures. She's very conscious of her status as a first-generation college student and sees herself and her life as "very different" from her family members' lives as a result of her education and prospective career path. While she is less specific in her accounts of existing conflicts in her family than Oceanna is, Madeline feels that because she has gone to college, she has learned "focus and being able to complete things on time and a lot of discipline," which, in her opinion, sets her apart from her family. She also is happy to be back on campus after living at home during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as

> I feel like it's much easier to focus just in an environment with a lot of like-minded people and everyone else is going to school. So it's easier, especially now being here versus rather being home because everyone's doing the same thing as you are. So I feel like that's a lot easier. People have similar priorities and things…

No one in Madeline's family has "really worked in business either. So I'd say it's completely different."

Madeline believes she's been able to experience a lot more than her family has as a result of going away for school, and although they have always told her that they wanted that experience for her, she expresses concern that her family might "internally" be more focused on the differences between them than she is. She expects that "being so young" and starting her career out in a lucrative business field, "making more than my family that's been working for how many years, could definitely cause some tension." She's thought about this a bit, but tries to put it out of her mind, because she doesn't want to think of her family being envious and doesn't "care to see it," even though she expects that it could be a "huge issue" for some of her family members. She hopes that because her family's "been pretty supportive in what I do and they know that I've worked hard," it will prevent conflict, though this sentiment indicates that Madeline has considered the possibility that her family does not consider her work to be as difficult as theirs.

While Oceanna points to clear instances of prior and current conflict in her family that undergird her expectation this strife will continue, Madeline has noticed differences between herself and her family that she expects will create tension, but she thinks her family will largely keep their feelings to themselves. Parents' jealousy, and sometimes FGC students' resentment of that jealousy, is an expected source of tension for many students as they graduate college and enter careers that are higher paying than their parents' jobs. These students often feel like they're only doing what was expected of them—and hoped for them—by going to college, so this jealousy comes as an unwelcome surprise. For students like Oceanna and Madeline, managing

this tension will be a difficult balance, but they hope it will not affect their relationships too heavily.

### Changed Worldviews

Another common source of expected tension that arose in the narratives of first-gen students is their changing worldviews and opinions that they've developed throughout their time in college. The students feel that their minds and worlds have been expanded by what they have learned and people they've met in university, and thus see new options for themselves and their lives. While some students believe their parents feel threatened by their changed outlooks, other students foresee themselves initiating disagreements because they now perceive their parents' worlds as too small and don't want that for themselves. Going to college showed these students the possibilities for their lives, and much of their expectations of tension result from their desire to not follow their parents' life paths.

Meena, a Black woman who is the child of Somali refugees, has already experienced serious struggles in her relationships with her parents as a result of her education, and she expects that that discord will continue. Most of their disagreement stems from Meena's withdrawal from her parents' conservative religious beliefs:

> My parents are from Somalia…It was a war-torn country… a lot of people who are holding onto religious values, because, after they lost their homes, their family members, their faith was the one thing keeping them going. And for me, I do hold faith to a high regard, but I feel like I'm able to think critically.

Although Meena has always questioned some of her religious teachings, she admits that college was the turning point for her that "played a really big" part in her confidence in vocalizing her

concerns. Meena's parents worry about how college might be changing her, but Meena is proud of the changes she's seen in herself, including being able to look at situations from multiple vantage points and see "which one that maybe aligns with my personal views more. But like, I think that's hard for a lot of people. And I think that's hard for my parents too."

Despite all of the disagreement with her parents, Meena shares "I love my family and I do respect them so much. Like there are some things that I will keep to myself cause I do not want to disrespect them." In order to protect her relationship with her parents, Meena resolves to keeping some of her beliefs to herself. She recognizes that other people find it impossible to "keep their personal views from their parents and they do tell them," but after hearing "all these different stories about families falling apart," Meena concludes that she is not willing to "sacrifice my familial relationships" in order to express some of her differing views. Even though she expects her parents will confront her for how college changed her worldviews and religious beliefs, Meena decides it's best for her relationship with them to keep parts of who she is to herself.

Lauren, a white woman from a large family that she has always been close to, expects to have tensions with her parents in the future, despite their strong relationships. Lauren has done well academically throughout college, has been involved on campus, and even got engaged before her third year of college. Her dad has worked in a factory his entire working life, and although he earns "decent money," their family does not have a "luxurious" lifestyle, given that her mom is a stay-at-home mom so their family of 13 relies solely on her father's income. Lauren is certain that a big difference between herself and her parents is that she will have far fewer children, as she feels their large family "limited what they [my parents] could do with their futures." Lauren is grateful that she took the opportunity to go away to college, as she has had

the "experience of embracing so many new things and learning so many new things and just seeing how many things are actually possible."

Lauren's parents' world seems much smaller to her now—she sees them as "super homebodies"—and she actively works to avoid replicating their life paths, as she is no longer "focused on moving back home and immediately starting a family and buying a house and having that white picket fence." College has thus not only changed Lauren's mind about what she wanted for her own life, but given her the opportunity to reflect on how she really feels about her parents' choices. Lauren hopes to eventually go to law school, and knows that she won't be able to return to her hometown to practice law, because "if I stayed at home as a lawyer, the only things I could really do would be underages or DUIs, and that's not the kind of law I want to practice. So I know that I'm going to have to be in a big city, or at least outside of a big city, to be doing what I want to be doing." She "guarantee[s] there will be" tensions with her parents, because she so intentionally resists making the same life choices as her parents. Although she respects her parents and feels close to them, Lauren does not want to follow their path of moving home and starting a family right away, because "I realize I can do so many other things than just that."

Although their stories are very different, both Meena and Lauren demonstrate that the lessons—both implicit and explicit—learned in college can have consequences for family relationships later in life. Meena has had an entire personality shift as she's become more confident in herself. Although her opinions of her religious teachings are not necessarily new to her, the way that college has helped her change how she sees herself and her place in the world has given her the boldness to vocalize her concerns. Lauren's vision of what is possible for her future has been shaped by the opportunities she's had in college, and although she loves and

appreciates her family, she knows that her parents' world is too small for her and she sees a different future for herself. Even though college is meant to be a time of expanding one's mind, many students expect that their relationships with their parents will be strained by their changed worldviews.

### Parents Lack Understanding

One reason first-gen students expect tension with their parents in the future is their parents' lack of understanding about the college process and navigating post-graduation life and career. These parents in many ways can't relate to their children's college experiences, and may not have a grasp of what navigating the job market for those with college degrees is like. The first-gen students in this study expect that not only is there an inherent tension in the relationship because of this divide, but also anticipate that they will grow frustrated or impatient with their parents' lack of understanding.

Patrick is a white man from a small town a few hours from Midwestern University. Even though he wanted to move further away, he's grateful he's been able to live on or near campus because he's learned to be more independent after growing up with a "helicopter mom." Despite his best efforts, his mom still tries to control his life, and even just a few months ago tried to convince him to transfer to a community college closer to his hometown to be near her. Patrick describes himself as "a very ambitious, spontaneous person," and resists being stifled by his mom's attempts to pull him back home. His mom struggles to understand why Patrick would want to be away from home and why he would want to engage in certain aspects typical of college life, including going to parties. Patrick has to hide some of who he is and what he does

from his mom— “she doesn’t know what’s going on here”—because she “would not be a fan” of his choices.

Patrick hopes to eventually go to medical school, though he admits he doesn’t have the GPA or resume to be accepted right now. He plans to pursue a master’s degree to make himself more competitive on med school applications and is excited by the prospect of moving out of state to pursue further education and eventually a career in medicine. Patrick isn’t very worried about his future relationship with his dad, who gives his children more freedom in their lives and is privy to Patrick’s enjoyment of parties and other things that are “not allowed” by his mother. Even though Patrick sees his social activities and other college experiences as normal, his mom can’t understand why he would want to participate in some aspects of college life, and Patrick expects this disconnect between them may continue as he transitions to his further education and career. While he appreciates that his mom loves and cares for her children, he gets annoyed that she is “a very emotional person. So it doesn’t take much to get her to cry.” Patrick knows that his mom is “going to miss me” when he leaves the state to pursue his ambitions and is already steeling himself against the frustration of his mom’s overbearingness. Ultimately, Patrick knows his mom will continue to try to impose on his life, but he knows that even though she often acts like she can’t understand his choices, “at heart” she supports him and understands that he will “do what I want for my career.”

Taylor is a Black woman on the premed track and has lived at home as a commuter student throughout her time as a Midwestern U student. She’s always planned to go to medical school but has recently considered a shift to optometry. Taylor has become much more confident over her time in college and has been able to open up to other people in ways that she never was able to before: “I became, I've noticed, very talkative. When I started college, I feel like I was

very introverted, in high school and even freshman year, kind of. I didn't talk a lot because, I don't know I, I just did not talk a lot at all." While Taylor has become more comfortable with herself, ascended to leadership positions in her extracurricular activities, and made lasting friendships, her relationship with her parents has been rocky. They argue often, and she particularly struggled living at home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, as she could never get away from the fighting.

Taylor is already frustrated with her parents' lack of understanding about—and seeming disinterest in—her academic journey, and she expects this will continue as she transitions out of college and into her career. Her parents don't check in with her about how she's progressing, so "they know I want to be a doctor, that's about it. I don't think they know anything like the classes I'm taking, or every other thing that I'm doing on campus and stuff. They just know I'm getting a degree, I guess." Taylor's sister once questioned how she could be so stressed if "'all you're doing is going to college and not working,'" and Taylor snapped back with "You wouldn't understand because you didn't go to college… You wouldn't understand unless you went, so you have no room to talk." To Taylor's surprise, her father took her sister's side in the argument, and lectured her that "'You don't need to go to college to understand stress.'" She is frustrated by her parents' lack of understanding about what it's like to be a college student and expects that they will also struggle to understand her post-graduation path. Despite her expectations for this tension, she doesn't expect to have direct confrontations with her parents, because "my parents know at the end of the day, it is my life."

Both Patrick and Taylor attempt to stake claims over the directions of their own lives and resolve to not be held back by their parents' lack of understanding. While the students in this study acknowledge that it's not their parents' fault that they don't understand their children's

college journeys and life paths, this disconnect still has the potential to cause conflict in the future relationship.

## No Tension Expected Over Upward Mobility

Twenty-two of the first-gen college students in the sample do not expect to have tension with their parents in the future over their expectedly more advantaged futures. Even students who have butted heads with their parents throughout the course of college predict that some of this strain will ease once they graduate and begin their own careers. Many students also indicate that they expect to help their parents and siblings out financially once they achieve their own success in the future. Two common themes emerge in these students' narratives as the underlying reasons that they do not expect tension with their parents: (1) their parents are supportive of their choices, and (2) their parents are already financially well-off, and thus even if the students expect to have a career with higher status accorded to it than their parents' occupations, they don't expect to make more money than their parents.

### Parents are Supportive

Of the students who said that they don't expect to have tensions with their parents in the future, almost all listed their parents' emotional support as at least one of the reasons for this expectation. Parents express their support in different ways, including frequent communication and visits to their children on campus, having high expectations for their children's future career success, and reminding their children of the importance and value of family. While not all of the students in this category necessarily feel close to their parents or expect to have a close

relationship with them moving forward, they believe that their parents will continue to support and encourage them through their life and career decisions.

Lena is a Black woman originally from the same city she now attends Midwestern University in. She has had her mind set on becoming a high school history teacher since long before attending college, and she is well on her way to achieving that goal. Lena holds a prestigious scholarship from Midwestern, and will graduate from college debt-free. She is one of just a few students from her high school who went on to college, and this often leaves her feeling a bit disconnected from her home community, but she's proud of her progress in school and feels confident in how she's set herself up for the future. Lena's father passed away just weeks before she started her first year at Midwestern, and she sees him as her driving force to motivate herself throughout college. Her father had once been enrolled at MU, also with the goal of becoming a teacher, but never completed his degree. She has a very close relationship with her mom, and being apart from her has been the most difficult part of college. Lena's mom has overcome a lot of hardship in her life, and Lena knows that " she made those sacrifices so we [Lena and her sister] could be better in life."

Lena is grateful for the life her mother has helped her create for herself, as she has supported Lena implicitly while still allowing her the freedom to be the captain of her own future:

> **Kait**: How will your future be different from your mom or from your dad's lives?
>
> **Lena**: I think about that a lot, too. I think honestly it's even different now, it's just…And honestly, I thank my mom for that. I thank my mom for, you know, having, having the life she did and raising us the way she did based off of her life so that we could appreciate things more. I mean, the fact that I'm in school debt-free, that's so much

different from what my family is used to. I have my, I live on my own, that's different…My mom, she did a hell of a job with me and my sister's life coming from where she came from to where we started out our life here…I've learned a lot from her and from my dad, but I just think it's, you know, best to take what you learn, take what you like, and what you didn't like, and make your own. And that's what I've been doing.

Although Lena realizes her life will be different from her parents', she is appreciative of how they've raised her, and how her mom continues to support her. Lena does not expect to have tensions with her mom in the future, because she feels like she and her sister are "doing what she wanted us to do" by going to college and pursuing their dreams. Lena's mother's support for her is encapsulated in Lena's telling of how she's known she would become a teacher since she was a child: "Pretty much everything that I've said I wanted to happen or I've written down on paper has come true. At six years old, I said I wanted to come to [Midwestern] on a scholarship and be a teacher. My mom sent me that, like she saved that, she sent me a picture of it." Lena was touched that her mother kept that sheet of paper all these years, and is just one piece of evidence for why she feels confident that she will not have tension with her mom over her more advantaged life in the future.

Luna, a Latina woman from a large city in a neighboring state, has a more complicated relationship with her parents, even though she feels they are supportive. She's been surprised by how much she's adapted to college life, as she used to feel like she had no idea what she was doing in college and really struggled to adapt to the academic environment. Throughout college, she's leaned on her mom for both emotional support and strategic advice as she was failing courses and her depression worsened. Despite her mother's support, however, her relationship with her parents has suffered as she feels they don't understand her struggles in college and

being away from home. Her parents tend to brush aside her concerns, and she sometimes does not feel like her hardships are being taken seriously. Luna maintains that although there are existing tensions in their relationship, attaining a college degree is not just for her, but for her parents and family.

Throughout the course of college, Luna has progressively felt more integrated on campus, and her affinity for the college environment has started to create some tension with her parents, whose house no longer feels like home to her. Although she didn't always feel comfortable on her college campus, she now shares:

> I feel like I'm at that point where it's like all of those challenges that I've endured are finally, it's like I'm at the resolution point, the turning point of, I'm finally adapting to things. I'm finally understanding, you know, just the mechanisms behind being a college student and being first-gen...And just being comfortable with it, finally, for once. Which is something that I never really was for the past few years. And so that cultural shock has finally, it's like *this* is my culture. Because now it's like when I go home, I feel more culture shock when I'm home now rather than here.

Because she feels a stronger sense of belonging at Midwestern U than she does at home, Luna has felt some underlying tension when she goes home to her parents, who sometimes feel she is talking down to them now that she has experienced a life so different from the one they gave her growing up. She finds herself having to reassure her father that "I'm not trying to belittle your experiences or your educational background, just more so recognize the differences, and it's very important to highlight them because they're very, very different."

Despite the challenges she's faced in her relationships with her parents, Luna does not expect future tensions with her parents because she is very intentional in maintaining her ties to

her family and her roots. She finds it shameful when people who are able to pull themselves out of poverty, like she expects to do for herself, “forget about where they come from….Personally for me, I hope I don't forget about where I come from, I don't want my success to make me lose touch with my morals and who I am.” Her parents help her keep this focus, as “I feel like my parents are going to be the ones that keep me in lockdown and making sure I don't, don't forget where I come from because our culture and family is so, so big to them. I think that they really keep me tied and connected to that.” Although Luna anticipates that there will “be differences,” she also feels confident that her parents “would only celebrate my achievements and nothing less than that.”

Both Lena and Luna are appreciative of their parents’ support throughout their lives, including their time in college, and expect that this encouragement will continue in the future. Like the other students who don’t expect tension in their relationships with their parents because their parents are supportive, Lena and Luna feel confident that their parents will continue to back their life and career decisions, while still granting them autonomy and treating them with respect. Lena and Luna, along with many other students who indicated their parents are supportive, hope to repay their parents by providing for them financially and emotionally in the future.

### Parents are Well-Off

Some first-gen students, when asked if they expect tensions with their parents based on their expectedly more advantaged futures, indicated that they do not expect tension because their parents are already financially well-off or have powerful positions at their jobs. Rather than asking students to imagine what their relationships with their parents might be like if they were making more money (or less money) than their parents, students expanded on why they admire

their parents' financial and career success and their hopes that they would be able to mirror their parents' trajectories themselves.

Sophia, a white woman from the East Coast, has always been close with her family, and it was a difficult adjustment when she moved to the Midwest and had to take a plane in order to see her family. She eventually found her footing and particularly thanks to her sorority, feels like she belongs at Midwestern and is enjoying her college experience. Sophia is majoring in finance, and although she doesn't have a clear picture of what her future career will look like, she's heavily involved in a business fraternity that provides professionalization opportunities to undergraduates. Despite the uncertainty, "I feel positive about my future because I think that literally, since I was in kindergarten, I've been a hard worker. I've just always been so driven." Sophia elaborates, "But looking into this summer with an internship, I'm struggling a little bit to find one…It's just hard when I'm part of an organization like [the business fraternity], where I, I'm also surrounded by so many overachievers." While she understands "the timelines are different for everyone," she stresses over not having secured an internship yet. Overall, though, Sophia feels confident in her future: "I can't not see myself being successful."

Sophia's idea of success is "making a lot of money and being, holding leadership in my organization." When asked if she suspects there will be tension with her parents over her future status and class position someday, Sophia swiftly refutes the possibility, elaborating on how her parents already work and live the way she aspires to. Her father is a union electrician, and as he's been working for the same company for his entire career, he's worked his way up to a leadership position. Sophia admires her father's long career and hopes to "get to the position where my dad is" someday: "My dad is the boss, where he works, and obviously he's worked there for so long and he's so skilled at what he does now. He knows everything like the back of his hand… I

would hope to get to the position where my dad is, but in a different field." Sophia's understanding of success is based off her father's example of leadership:

> …Just being someone that people come to look to, because you're so good at your job. Like if you think of someone that…in your field that you just, like, if you had a question, you just know this person would know the answer because they're so experienced and they've just done it before and they just know what they're talking about. You would go to them. That's the kind of person I want to be.

The major difference Sophia sees between her future career prospects and her father's occupation is that she is consciously developing skills to make her more adaptable to different workplaces, as opposed to a "specific trade," where she can't "just get up and leave." Her mom has modeled this adaptability she hopes to have herself, as her mom worked as a travel agent before pivoting to real estate and opening her own business. Sophia sees her mom's path as more similar to her own, and thinks that she will be able to "relate" to her mom's career trajectory more than her father's. Not only are Sophia's parents supportive of her aspirations, she largely does not expect to have tensions with them in the future because she hopes to emulate their career paths.

Thomas, a white man from a large and very religious Christian family, hopes to become a high school Italian teacher someday. He's enjoyed his time in college so far, particularly his job as a Resident Advisor for university housing. Working with other students has affirmed his desire to pursue teaching, and he even hopes to be able to return to his hometown to teach someday so that he can be closer to his family. Thomas's father works in agricultural insurance, a relatively small, but very lucrative field. His father's income is enough to support the whole family, and his mother is a stay-at-home mom. Although neither of his parents went to college,

"they understand the value of education." Not only have his parents helped pay for his education, "something I've never had to even contemplate," they've also been "incredibly helpful advocates" for him as he's navigated college. Thomas admires his dad's career, as despite not graduating college, "he's doing well for himself" and his family, and he "absolutely loves what he's doing."

Although Thomas acknowledges that his educational and career path will "differ" from his parents', he does not expect this to create tension, particularly as his dad's occupation is high-paying. Thomas aims to get a job straight out of college, but recognizes that "life is very unpredictable." He hopes that if he isn't able to find the job in teaching that he desires, he'll be able to pivot to another career, and his dad is "a perfect example of that." Overall, Thomas does not expect that his class or status position will be all that different from his parents', rendering the question of whether or not there will be tensions over this moot.

Both Thomas and Sophia have high expectations for their future careers and success. They grew up relatively comfortably, despite neither of their parents having attained bachelor's degrees, and hope to somewhat emulate their parents' financial circumstances and career ladder climbing. Notably, students who indicated their parents are already well-off are more likely to be white, possibly reflecting long-recognized wealth disparities between white and non-white families. Because these students aim to replicate their parents' class and status positions, they don't expect to have tensions with their parents in the future over their education and career paths.

## Discussion

This study contributes to family research and the sociological study of future thinking by investigating first-generation college students' expectations for future tensions with their parents over their upward mobility. The 39 first-generation college students in this study are nearing graduation and were asked to consider whether or not they expect tension with their parents over their expectedly more advantaged futures. The parent-child tie is one of the most important and longest-lasting ties throughout the life course, and thus is an important venue of study. I find that for first-gen students who expect to experience tension with their parents in the future given their upward mobility (n=17), the most common reasons students cite are (1) jealousy and resentment, (2) changing worldviews, and (3) parents lack understanding. Yet, these students do not expect to sever ties with their families, indicating that they anticipate some aspect of solidarity to simultaneously be present in their relationships—in other words, they predict ambivalent parent-child ties (Lefkowitz 2003; Birditt et al. 2010; Connidis 2015; Reczek 2016; Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020). The students who do not expect tension with their parents over their expectedly more advantaged futures (n=22) cite their parents' ongoing support (primarily mental and emotional) or point out that their parents are already relatively well-off.

The present analysis demonstrates how even just the prospect of upward mobility post-graduation can create strife in family relationships, underscoring the importance of social forces in family conflict (Connidis 2010). Expectations for the future are shaped by past and current events (Mische 2009), and thus students' forecasts of their relationships with their parents are inherently rooted in their existing experiences with their parents. For some students—like Oceanna, Meena, Patrick, and Taylor—predictions of future tension are clearly connected to existing conflict; for others—like Madeline and Lauren—merely noticing "differences" between themselves, their lifestyles, and their goals compared to those of their families is enough to

suspect there will be tension in the future. In many ways, most of the families of the FGC students in this study have demonstrated intergenerational solidarity by being supportive—they've encouraged their children to go to college, visited them on campus, checked in on them from afar—so what sets these students apart from students who do not expect tensions with their parents over their upward mobility?

I suspect that, in line with Robinson (2018), financial precarity and family instability leave the parent-child tie more vulnerable to tension in the future. For example, Madeline, whose family is supportive and has always encouraged her to further her education, has experienced family instability throughout her life as a result of her parents' deaths when she was a child. Madeline does not herself make the connection between her parents' deaths and her expectations of future tension, but because she can't point to any particular examples of existing conflict over her upward mobility, it is possible that the uncertainty she has experienced throughout her life in regards to her family influences her anticipation of future tension. Oceanna is a notable example of an unsupportive family, and perhaps not surprisingly, she expects the existing tension in her family to continue. Given her family's low-income status and instability, her experiences provide more evidence that poverty and fragile family ties are more susceptible to further fracturing (Robinson 2018), especially given that familial support is particularly important for first-gen college students (Tate et al. 2015; Capannola and Johnson 2020).

It is less clear how parental support can protect against the vulnerabilities of financial precarity and family instability, though this support is a clear indication of intergenerational solidarity. Luna, for example, has had significant conflict with her family over her education already because her parents often think she belittles them for not achieving a college degree. Yet, she does not think there will be tension in their relationship over her upward mobility *because*

her parents are supportive of her. She is motivated to achieve academic and career success by the prospect of doing it for her family members, who have not been afforded the same opportunities she has been able to access, and claims her plans to uplift her family in the future as a moral obligation and identity (Frye 2012). This sense of obligation to finish college and be successful for her family is another driving force of intergenerational solidarity (Silverstein and Bengston 1997; Silverstein, Gans, and Yang 2006). Future research should explore how parental support can be a protective factor against tension in parent-child relationships.

For students who don't anticipate tension with their parents over their expectedly more advantaged futures because their parents are already well-off, their expectations suggest that higher income compared to one's parents is a required feature of their understanding of upward mobility. These students don't picture their eventual status and class as different from their parents, and thus they see the question over possible tensions with their parents over their upward mobility as moot. Returning to Robinson's (2018) argument that financial precarity leaves family ties more vulnerable, though, these students' parents' socioeconomic status may itself prevent or ease future tension.

Although this study is specifically focused on the role of first-generation college-going status, race and gender of course play a role in students' expectations for their future relationships with their parents. While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the role of race and gender in shaping predicted parent-child relationships, I did notice some differences in students' narratives along these lines of identity. For example, for those who expect tensions in the parent-child relationship, students of color were more likely than white students to indicate that they plan to live geographically close to their parents when they are settled in their careers. While there were not clear gendered patterns in plans to live close to parents in the future, the

women in this sample who plan to move far away from their families seemed to stress over this decision more and express more guilt over it than the men who plan to move far away. As mentioned above, students who indicated that they do not foresee tensions with their parents over their upward mobility because their parents are already well-off were much more likely to be white. Given that there were no clear patterns by race or gender for expecting tension or not expecting tension, it's possible that the way the question was phrased to students—"Do you think your future position and status will be different from that of your parents, and do you foresee any tensions balancing out the place you came from with the place you end up in?"—primed students to consider their first-generation status more saliently than other aspects of their identities. Future research should interrogate the role of race and gender in shaping students' expectations for their relationships with their parents as they consider their post-graduation possibilities.

Given that expectations for the future shape current decision-making behaviors (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische 2009), students' anticipation of future tensions influences how they act and plan to act towards their families. Even though these students may never communicate these negative feelings (Birditt, Rott, and Fingerman 2009; Lefkowitz and Fingerman 2003), many students, like Meena, Patrick, and Oceanna already alter their behavior in ways that they think will prevent conflict or preserve their own wellbeing—Meena hides her critical views of her family's religion; Patrick keeps his social life a secret from his mom; Oceanna sets boundaries with how much space her parents can hold in her life.

In this study, despite FGC students' anticipation for tension with their parents in the future, these students typically resolve to monitor their own behavior and actions in order to keep the peace with their parents. Although many students expect to have tension with their parents in

the future, and some even expect to have significant conflict, no students in this study indicated that they intend to leave their families. Clearly, given that conflict is expected, there is also some aspect of solidarity that students expect will exist simultaneously and will keep these families together (Silverstein and Bengston 1997; Silverstein, Gans, and Yang 2006), indicating these students predict they will experience intergenerational ambivalence (Lefkowitz 2003; Birditt et al. 2010; Connidis 2015; Reczek 2016; Fingerman, Huo, and Birditt 2020). While it is beyond the scope of this study to empirically narrow down what kind of solidarity motivates these emerging adults to maintain relationships with their families (e.g., emotional closeness, social norms, feelings of obligation, etc.), the students' stories suggest that they don't even really consider leaving their families as an option. Future research should interrogate first-gen students' resolve to maintain family ties more deeply to get a fuller picture of how intergenerational ambivalence functions and keeps the parent-child tie intact.

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**Chapter 4.**

**Table 2. Expectations of Tension**

| Pseudonym | Race | Sex | Expect tension? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andrew | White | Male | Yes |
| Paula | Black | Female | Yes |
| Melissa | Latino | Female | No |
| Shaina | Black | Female | No |
| Lyona | Black | Female | No |
| Lena | Black | Female | No |
| Luna | Latino | Female | No |
| Josie | Latino | Female | No |
| Meena | Black | Female | Yes |
| Alex | Latino | Male | Yes |
| Taylor | Black | Female | Yes |
| Shanice | Black | Female | No |
| Ashley | Black | Female | Yes |
| Jean | Black | Female | No |
| Alejandra | Latino | Female | Yes |
| Zach | White | Male | Yes |
| Ian | White | Male | No |
| Oceanna | Black | Female | Yes |
| Adrianna | Multiracial | Female | No |
| Danni | Multiracial | Female | No |
| Lauren | Multiracial | Female | Yes |
| Jason | White | Male | No |
| Ethan | White | Male | No |
| Leah | Multiracial | Female | No |
| Sophia | White | Female | No |
| Madeline | White | Female | Yes |
| Ben | White | Male | Yes |
| Bristol | White | Male | No |
| Thomas | White | Male | No |
| Patrick | White | Male | Yes |
| Becca | White | Female | No |
| Anna | White | Female | No |
| Justin | White | Male | Yes |
| Jake | White | Male | Yes |
| Damien | Black | Male | No |
| Isabella | Latino | Female | No |
| David | White | Male | No |
| Isaac | Black | Male | Yes |
| Minnie | White | Female | Yes |

# Chapter 5. Conclusion

The college years are a period of intense self-exploration and transformation, but although such personal growth is almost universally seen as positive, we know less about how the changes students make or experience can have negative consequences for their existing relationships. First-generation college students, whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree, may experience particularly dramatic changes in themselves and their outlooks as they are enmeshed in the middle-class milieu of universities. While research has established that the parent-child tie is often strained for first-gen students as they attempt to balance their college journeys with their parents' lack of firsthand knowledge of college, we still know relatively little about how students experience this careful balancing act. In this dissertation, I sought to fill this gap by investigating how students experience their changing understandings of themselves and the world and how that impacts their relationships with their parents at three pivotal junctures: after the first year of college, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as students are considering the transition from college to career.

In the first empirical chapter, I sought an understanding of how first-generation college students perceive their relationships with their parents changing over the first year of college. The first year is particularly pivotal, as attrition rates for first-gens are highest at this point. First-gen students' perceptions fell into four overarching categories: positive, negative, changed but neutral, and no change. Although the small comparison group of continuing-generation students' perceptions fall in these same categories, the reasons first-gen students cite for why they perceive the relationships changing are distinctly "first-gen." These findings complicate the prevailing observation that the parent-child tie tends to remain relatively stable or improve throughout

college, and provide a needed contribution to the literature by focusing specifically on first-generation college students. As I am particularly interested in the unique challenges first-gen students face, and ways that universities can alleviate some of the difficulties of being a first-gen, I identify a clear avenue in which universities can prevent some of the discord in the parent-child relationship throughout college. As much of the negative change in first-gen students' relationships with their parents stems from parents' lack of understanding about the college experience, universities can proactively engage in outreach to first-gen students' parents to help them gain a better understanding of their children's lives and college journeys. Offering information sessions to parents about things that parents who have gone to college take for granted—like knowing what it means to major in a subject, being aware of how demanding coursework can be, or the pressure of maintaining a certain GPA to hold onto a scholarship—could help fill in the gaps for some parents that might prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding between first-gen students and their parents.

In my second empirical chapter, I merged scholarship on higher education, family sociology, and natural disasters to investigate how first-generation college students' family relationships (with a focus on the parent-child tie) were impacted by the forced moves home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the framework of habitus—dispositions toward thinking, acting, and feeling based on internalized values, beliefs, and norms—I presented three longitudinal case studies of first-gen students to explore how their experiences of moving home with their parents during the onset of the pandemic collided with their continually-reformulating habituses. This work builds on previous literature demonstrating that habitus changes throughout one's life, rather than remaining static following early childhood socialization experiences. The stress of negotiating their new habituses, which incorporate the values, beliefs, and outlooks

they've internalized after being immersed in the middle-class university environment for several years, in the site of where their old habituses were formed—their parents' homes—heightened awareness of the differences and discord between themselves and their families. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated lockdown mitigation strategy, shaped the extent to which these students were subject to experiencing a cleft habitus—simultaneously holding two habituses at one time as a result of upward social mobility. While research on cleft habitus typically focuses on students' experiences in the university environment, this chapter shifts the lens of analysis by examining the experiences in the home environment. This chapter demonstrates that certain elements of upward mobility—which is almost universally framed as positive—can have negative consequences, particularly for family relationships. Furthermore, it calls attention to the need for more sociological research on the impacts of natural disasters, as climate change is expected to increase the frequency and severity of these crises.

My third empirical chapter shifts to exploring how students predict future tensions in their relationships with their parents over their upward mobility. Drawing on the framework of the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model, I find that for students who predict tension, three overarching themes of why this conflict is expected emerge: jealousy and resentment, changing worldviews, and parents lack understanding. Despite the expectation for conflict, no students plan to sever their relationships with their families in the future. By contextualizing this conflict within the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model, I conclude that some aspect of solidarity is expected to maintain the parent-child relationship, thus creating or reinforcing ambivalent ties. For students who do not expect tension with their parents over their expectedly more advantaged futures, the most commonly-cited reasons are that their parents are supportive or their parents are already well-off. Given that many of the students who do expect tension also indicate that their

parents have been supportive in many respects, I suspect that financial precarity and family instability leave the parent-child tie more susceptible to tension in the future. This study underscores how social forces—in this case, upward social mobility—can influence family conflict.

## Limitations and Future Research

The research for this dissertation is not without limitations. Some major limitations with data collection include that we sampled for only "traditional" college students, possibly excluding a large proportion of first-gens that may include older students not enrolled directly after high school, part-time students, international students, and any other number of factors that would have disqualified them from the study. Although like most qualitative research, this dissertation is not meant to be representative of a population, Midwestern University is a large, prestigious, four-year public university, and thus these students' college experiences may be very different from those who attend other kinds of institutions. This dissertation follows previous literature's characterization of universities as middle-class environments (e.g., Lehmann 2009; Lee and Kramer 2013; Lehmann 2013). As the survey was sent out during the very early weeks of the first semester of the first year of college for these students, only those who were already accustomed to checking their university email at this point were likely to respond to the survey. I personally was surprised by how many students were part of several very prestigious university scholarship programs in this study, but given that at least some of these programs bring students to campus early before the semester starts to help them adjust to college life (e.g., teaching them to check their university email), I suspect that there was some level of self-selection bias into completing the survey and agreeing to the interview.

Although we attempted to oversample for marginalized racial groups, the response rate from Asian students was very low, and none made it into the final sample of interview participants (although some identify as multiracial and may thus have Asian backgrounds). Every participant in this study identified as either male or female, so the perspectives of nonbinary students are not included in this study. Because our interview guide did not explicitly ask questions regarding race or gender, it was difficult to tease apart patterns in the qualitative data by these identities. Although this may be a limitation, it could also be a strength in that students were primed to consider their first-gen status, and thus give weight to the arguments in this dissertation that I have truly captured a uniquely first-generation college student experience. Future research should not only seek a diverse sample of first-gen students that includes more racial and gender diversity (i.e., Asian students, nonbinary students), but also ask questions that attempt to tease apart first-gen status from race and gender more explicitly.

Although the aim of this dissertation was expressly to understand how first-generation college students experience their relationships with their families, part of the story is of course missing, given that we do not have the perspectives of their parents and families themselves. Future research could build upon this dissertation by interviewing dyads of parents and children to gain multiple perspectives and evaluations of the relationships.

## Final Thoughts

As a first-generation college student with complicated family relationships myself, the process of collecting data, analyzing interviews, and writing this dissertation has been at certain times painful and challenging, but at all times validating and rewarding. I believe that sociological interrogation of not only norms, trends, inequality, and problems—but people's

*experiences* of those social dynamics—is essential for understanding how our world works and where it can be improved. I think at many points, there is a sense that academic work, no matter how dramatic or dire the findings, can feel like it won't materially or tangibly change anything. But the students in this study—through their bravery, honesty, strength, and hope for the future—have reminded me that our personal relationships have the power to be their own force for change.

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Appendix A. Interview Guides

Year 1:

1. [PATHWAYS]: Getting to college is not necessarily easy. When you think back, what were some of the challenges you faced in terms of getting here, and what sorts of experiences did you have that helped?
    a. Can you think of particular moments or people who helped along the way?
    b. What about barriers or difficulties? Do any come to mind?
    c. How did your family feel about you moving away to come here, and did most of your friends likewise leave to go to college?
    d. How has it been so far? Do you feel like you belong, or is it sort of strange? In what ways?
    e. How do you think it will feel to eventually go back home after being at college?

2. [INTEGRATION]: Let's talk a little bit about your experience here thus far and your involvement and activities at college. Do you feel like you've integrated well or would you say you are still finding your way?
    a. Do you feel you have good friendships here? Where did you meet these people?
    b. Do you belong to any particular groups on campus and, if so, how did you get hooked into them?
    c. What sorts of campus activities, if any, have you taken part in?
    d. Are there any barriers (e.g., need to go home, cost, need to work) that get in the way of greater involvement on campus?

e. To what extent have you been involved academically, beyond coursework? Have you met with faculty or advisors, and if so how often? Do you belong to any academic clubs or groups, or can you envision doing things eventually like study abroad, or working on a project with a faculty member?

3. [EXPECTATIONS/ASPIRATIONS]: Lastly, let's talk a little bit about the future and what a college degree might mean for you. What are you hoping to study, if you know, and what type of job do you hope to eventually land some day?
    a. Where do you see yourself in, say, 10 years?
    b. Do you feel like a college degree will help you get there?
    c. How, if at all, does this differ from your parents and what they experienced educationally or occupationally?
    d. Do you think your future position and status will be different from that of your parents, and do you foresee any tensions balancing out the place you came from with the place you end up in?

Years 2-6:

1. [INTEGRATION]: Tell me about your experiences in college so far. What's gone well? What has been a challenge?
    a. Do you feel like you belong on campus?
    b. Do you feel you have good friendships here? Where did you meet these people?
    c. Do you belong to any particular groups on campus and, if so, how did you get hooked into them?

d. What sorts of campus activities, if any, have you taken part in?

e. Are there any barriers (e.g., need to go home, cost, need to work) that get in the way of greater involvement on campus?

f. To what extent have you been involved academically, beyond coursework? Have you met with faculty or advisors, and if so how often? Do you belong to any academic clubs or groups, or can you envision doing things eventually like study abroad, or working on a project with a faculty member?

g. What has surprised you about college?

h. Would you do anything differently?

i. {For autumn 2020}: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your experiences last year? How are things going this year? What have been the challenges?

2. [EXPECTATIONS/ASPIRATIONS]: How do you feel about your future?

a. Where do you see yourself in, say, 10 years?

b. Do you feel like a college degree will help you get there?

c. How, if at all, does this differ from your parents and what they experienced educationally or occupationally?

d. Do you think your future position and status will be different from that of your parents, and do you foresee any tensions balancing out the place you came from with the place you end up in?

e. Has your mind changed since you have been at [Midwestern University]?