Written Narratives Show Negative Family Themes for Regional Campus Students When Compared to Residential College Students

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The purpose of the study was to illustrate and classify formative thematic narratives to explore differences between Appalachian/rural non-residential college students with traditional/urban residential students. Participants from two different university campuses, one a regional and the other a large main campus, wrote open-ended essays about formative family context. The narratives were scored according to negative and positive themes and compared across groups to explore meaningful differences stemming from the family of origin. Results of the independent samples t-test indicated significant difference between groups with the regional campus, Appalachian/rural group scoring higher for negative themes. Implications are discussed.

 "You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you."
– Frederick Buechner

Understanding one's students is good pedagogy. Researchers have thoroughly examined the idea that educators can better serve college students when they can address their specific needs and across a variety of factors. For example, robust literatures have explored a wide range of student issues such as student success (Nickerson, Diener, & Schwarz, 2011), motivation (Lench, 2011), academic load (Szafran, 2001), and policy (Antonio et al. 2004; Tam & Bassett, 2004). Benner and Crosnoe (2011) found that socioemotional well-being of children and adolescents was contingent on a demographic ''fit'' with their schools regarding ethnicity and diversity. Crosnoe and Benner (2012) have called for "better understanding of the *family-school connection*." This investigation assumed that understanding undergraduate students is critical in the educational process and attempts to advance the discussion by identifying general patterns of family experiences in two distinct college samples. Themes were

used to explore the family-school connection by identifying general patterns of negative and positive family experiences of young adults in very different university settings. The open-ended nature of the task insured that themes were representative of important, formative student histories.

The current research expands on previous findings by Toepfer and Horner (2013) which showed family-focused narratives of Appalachian/rural non-residential students contained highly negative themes. To better understand the negative themes this study included a comparison-group of non-Appalachian urban/residential college students at a large Midwestern University. The original study by Toepfer and Horner (2013) showed a high percentage of the Appalachian, regional campus young adults reported family experiences as 50% negative. This was particularly surprising given the large volume of research which shows that positive events tend to be remembered better than negative ones (Matlin & Stang, 1978; Skowronski, Betz, Thompson, & Shannon, 1991). Matlin and Stang (1978) found the *positivity bias* was a real phenomenon when it came to long-term memory of life events while the *negativity bias* played a stronger role during the event. The high frequency of negative memories should be mitigated by the positivity bias in the 2013 study as it required participants between the ages of 19-62 to recall familial events in their family of origin. It warrants further examination.

A History of Differences

The unique characteristics and heritage of Appalachian history and cultural heritage are well documented on numerous fronts (Abramson & Haskell, 2006; deMarrais, 1998; Drake, 2001; Jones, 1994; Obermiller & Maloney, 2002; Toepfer & Dees, 2008; Williams, 2002). A variety of unique qualities no doubt exists which make Appalachian and even rural and non-residential students a distinct culture with different goals and needs. As a regional campus faculty member the author of this study can report that differences are regularly discussed in a formal capacity by professors, staff, and administrators in an attempt to better understand and serve undergraduate students. Some evidence suggests Appalachian/rural groups have resisted attempts to classify them (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999), making this study a unique foray into a difficult-to-penetrate cultural domain. The goal of this investigation is to quantify whether or not there is a difference in this otherwise unexamined area.

The Narrative and What It Means

The narrative was the index used to assess family context. *Family context* was defined for the participants as a set of formative circumstances and conditions generated by the environment and the people within it. To qualify as *formative* the context had to be influential enough to change the people within it by providing some level of self- and/or family change that was meaningful and enduring (Sarangi, 2006). By definition it is therefore non-trivial. Furthermore, family context could dictate life chances. *Life chances* were defined as opportunities to improve social mobility through education, economic advancement, to secure medical care and preserve health, to marry and have children without undo financial burden, and to have fundamental material goods such as housing (Steinberg, 2011). These factors contributed, as found by Johnson and DelPrete (2010), to long standing patterns of interaction among family members which exist on a wide spectrum of shared history and engagement.

Family context research is sprinkled among various literatures to address a broad spectrum of issues ranging from hostile familial interactions and children's subsequent problems solving (Forgatch, 1989; McColloch, Gilbert & Johnson, 1990; Rueter & Conger, 1995; Vuchinich, Vuchinich & Wood, 1993), to child compliance and dependency issues within family context (Wahler, 1997), to the impact of overall family affect on preschoolers' motor development (Venetsanou & Kambas, 2010). Broader environmental research has examined neighborhood contextual factors on parenting behavior and demonstrated significant impact (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). Other studies support the importance of context in the attachment literature (Bowlby, 1958, 1969, 1973, 1980), problem solving research (Cassidy, 2009), the effects of the maltreatment of children (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, & Atwood, 1999; Main & Hesse, 1990), and the transmission of culture (Yoshida & Busby, 2012; Semenova, 2002). The research provides important support for the value of family context but for a theoretical framework with distinct application of contextual narratives we employ Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory.

The current study uses Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective, also known as bioecological theory, to frame the complexities of the narrative. Bronfenbrenner's perspective posits that the individual is a component of the environment instead of a separate entity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bioecological theory frames individual development as a process of regular,

two-way interpersonal interactions primarily between the developing child and the immediate daily environment; the formative context in this investigation. The Bronfenbrenner model accounts for a multitude of contexts layered within one another. These layered contexts delineate the interlocking systems that form both the most intimate to the broadest and least intimate environmental influences: microsystem (direct face-to-face interactions between child and others and most intimate), mesosystem (linkages between two or more microsytems), exosystem (linkages between two or more settings), macrosystem (cultural factors including values and customs), and chronosystem (the effects of time on subsequent developmental systems and least intimate). This study was largely confined to the microsystem and mesosystem levels which functioned as the guiding parameter for the student author's formative family experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) support the view that the narrative approach is more than an individualistic endeavor but the construction of meaningful stories amid relationships with others, commencing in our families and proceeding through a series of contexts of varying scope. Regional culture within Bronfenbrenner's framework would be considered a macrosystem that would include beliefs, value systems, and influences broader than the immediate family. The current investigation assumes that embedded student-participants from a regional campus located in Appalachia emulated familial and community values while those at the main campus exhibited different perspectives based on the assessment of their narratives.

The Power of Writing

As a method writing was the ideal vehicle for the open-ended model and simultaneously offered robust thematic evidence of its power to solidify and organize the author's thoughts. The highly structured nature of both writing and talking create a narrative that generates understanding and meaning (Singer, 2004; Smyth et al., 2001), provides definition and a sense of control over emotion and experience (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), and integrates memories with self-understanding (Blagov & Singer, 2004). Balocco, Carvalho, and Shepherd (2005) found that the writing process develops "contextual unity"; the very thread which binds the narrator to the family and their community. These factors make writing a strong device for getting at important familial themes but it also allowed

participants to explore and organize their own experiences in a meaningful way.

Methods

Two samples of young adults volunteered from three locations: the "main campus" and two of its regional campuses at a large Midwestern University. The main campus sample comprised the residential/urban group and the regional students formed the non-residential/Appalachian group. All participants were students enrolled in the Interpersonal Relations and Families course in the department of Human Development and Family Studies. Consent forms were signed by all participants.

The Family Context narrative started as a class paper in the Human Development and Family Studies course, *Interpersonal Relations and the Family*. The concepts necessary for the writing assignment were explained extensively during a class lecture and with written instructions. The assignment was intended to help students understand context through the prism of Bronfenbrenner's contextual perspective by applying personal life experiences to course content. The open-ended writing assignment allowed students to choose any context they desired with the additional task of explaining why their chosen context was important and formative. *Family context* was defined as a non-trivial and formative set of circumstances and/or conditions, often generated by the environment, family, or individual family members which in-part defines the people within it. Numerous examples of positive and negative context and family context were provided (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, historical events, family vacations, the home court advantage, substance abuse, athletics, cohort effects, the Great Depression, vacation, etc.) during a lecture; the emphasis being on perception of the context and that it qualified as formative. The related concept of *life chances*, as an important antecedent or product of family context, was thoroughly defined and explained. The related concept of *life chances* was defined based on the course textbook's definition: Opportunities to improve social mobility through education, economic advancement, to secure medical care and preserve health, to marry and have children without undo financial burden, and to have fundamental material goods such as housing (Steinberg, 2011). The assignment was a minimum of two to three single spaced pages. They were given a week to complete the assignment.

Participants

Participants in the original sample (see Toepfer & Horner, 2013) were undergraduate college students at a regional campus of a large Midwestern University located in Appalachia. They were asked to participate by volunteering essays written for a class assignment. The assignment required they write about a *formative family context*; a concept discussed within the curriculum of the course. Participants received extra credit at the end of the semester. An alternative assignment was offered for those who did not wish to submit the writing assignment. Participants were informed about the nature of the study including confidentiality procedures and the option to withdraw.

The "rural- and non-residential Appalachian" data was collected from 32 students between 2009 and 2012. The greatest return was in 2009 with 11 of the 32 final cases included in the final analysis. To get a snapshot of the subject pool much of the demographic data was drawn from the 2009 University's Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness database. The regional campus resided in an Appalachian county. A total of 6.25% (2 cases) were male and 93.75% (30 cases) were female. Participant age ranged from 18 to 62 with a mean of 24.5-years. The total sample was composed of 92% Caucasian, 6% African-American, 1% (n=3) Hispanic, and 1% (n=2) who self-identified as "other." Data for first generation college students was collected only in the final 21 cases, after the initial wave of data collection in 2009. Of those twenty-one cases fourteen self-identify as first-generation college students for a total of 66.6%.

The "urban-residential" sample consisted of 45 cases. In this later sample all data was collected directly from student-participants at a large mid-western land-grant university in an urban center. The university is not in an Appalachian county and no students self-identified as Appalachian. Data for the urban-residential comparison group was collected in 2013. Twenty-seven percent (n=12) of participants in this group reported being first-generation college students while 73% (n=33) said they were not. Of the 45 cases 89% were female (n=40) and 11% male (n=5). Participant age ranged from 19 to 35 with an average age was 20.4 years. The urban-residential sample was comprised of 87% (n=39) Caucasian/white, 9% (n-4) African-American, and 4% (n=2) who reported "other" for ethnicity/racial background.

Instrumentation and Scoring

The *Scoring Rubric for Family Context Stories* (SRFCS) instrument was constructed in-house to qualitatively score the essays for thematic content (see Appendix A). The instrument provided 22 potential themes, 19 predetermined, and 3 for "other" options, all of which could be scored as positive, negative or neutral. The rare neutral scores were dropped from the analysis as determined by the two raters. Categories included job/career, life chances, various relationships, socio-economic status, War/Military, Winnings, Family tradition/influence, abuse, loss, poverty, substance abuse, enjoyment, growth, and success.

Each essay was assigned a case number by the primary investigator while identifying information (e.g., cover page, name, names of persons within the body of the essay, names of towns and high schools) removed, and thereafter assigned to two raters for blind review. The raters were trained by the primary investigator to use the SRFCS. Practice cases were scored prior to the assignment of the essays. Raters read the essays, placed context themes in the appropriate category, assessed the themes as positive or negative, and listed key words for each case. Scores were checked by the primary investigator and reassigned to raters if, for example, a category was left blank or mistakes found.

Inter-Rater Reliability Analysis

A Cronbach's (1951) alpha coefficient analysis was conducted in SPSS for inter-rater reliability; the result was .88. The reliability analysis focused on the case-scores for positive versus negative themes as scored by the two trained raters. The reliability coefficient was .88. The score indicates a very high level of agreement between raters.

Limitations of the Methodology

A potential shortcoming of methodology is the high reliability score based on the in-house rating scale. The reliability score of .88 is slightly less than the .90 Cronbach Alpha used as a benchmark for potential redundancy of an instrument. Tavakol and Dennick's (2011) warned that scores above .90 may be due to items that are redundant, essentially testing the same fundamental question repeatedly. This may be the case in this study for two reasons. First, the themes are broad and repetitive; either positive or negative. It should be noted that this is by design and as a function of the absolutely open-ended procedure in order to allow participants to define

and build upon their themes of choice). Second, the SRFCS is a so-called "in-house" instrument. Future studies would benefit from an item-analysis, improved instrument scrutiny, or the inclusion of a validated instrument created for such purposes. The SRFCS was used because such an instrument was not available.

A more rigorous writing procedure could be implemented as a means to better target meaningful themes. It would include separating the writing assignment from the class, guided themes, more thorough background information, a more diversified sample, and more robust demographic data.

Results

Results indicate there is a meaningful difference between the Appalachian/rural students at the regional campuses when compared to the non-Appalachian/urban and residential students at the main campus (hereafter referred to as "Regional" and "Main" for ease of illustration).

A total of 77 participants (regional campus=32, main campus=45) took part in the investigation. One main theme was recorded for each participant resulting in a "leading theme" which comprised the main narrative of the essay. Secondary or ancillary themes were not included, resulting in one theme per essay or one for each participant. The overall themes by quality (positive vs. negative) for the regional group were 47% (n=15) positive to 53% (n=17) negative. For the main campus group it was 66% (n=30) positive and 33% (n=15) negative. An independent samples t-test was performed to examine the hypothesis that regional and main campus students would show a difference on overall positive and negative themes. According to results, regional and main campus groups differed significantly t(75)=10.270, p<.04 on positive and negative themes, indicating that regional campus participants reported higher negative content in their written narratives.

Top themes as scored by frequency are ranked in Table 1. It represents the most popular themes or groups of themes. In reality Table 1 does not provide much useful information because many of the themes contained both positive and negative themes. For example, both groups reported parental/family themes with the highest frequency; some of those narratives were about divorce and the subsequent dismantling of the family while others within the same category told stories about family vacation.

Generally, these themes are also too broad to be helpful in the hierarchical format.

Table 1: Hierarchy of Themes by Group

Regional Campus	Main Campus
Parental/Family	Parental/Family
Depression	Work
Work	Education
Money	Depression
Children	Athletics

Discussion

The results show a clear difference in how regional campus students from an Appalachian/rural area write about formative family themes in their lives when compared to non-Appalachian/urban college students. The Appalachian/rural sample showed a significantly higher frequency of negative themes compared to their residential/urban counterparts. It supported the hypothesis that thematic differences would be found based on family and regional background. What this means is impossible to know given the design of this comparative study but it lights a path we can explore further. It indicates that defining familial memories remain strong in adulthood and provides a basic topography of that psychological landscape. That landscape shows Appalachian/rural students at regional campuses report 53% of important familial themes as negative. In comparison the residential/urban sample report 33% of their family memories as negative. To put this in perspective we invoke research on married couples that shows successful partners must maintain a 1:5 or getter ratio of negative-to-positive interactions, respectively, in order to remain stable and avoid divorce (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, & Carrère, 1998). The 1:1 ratio of familial themes found in this study is far higher and potentially more deleterious. What that means for the adult children from these families is beyond the scope of this investigation but in terms of relational health it calls for further attention. The results also illuminate related issues of overall health, post-traumatic growth, and interpersonal factors that can be isolated as important areas of impact.

Health

The family's impact on psychological well-being can be profound. Various literatures use the positive and negative paradigm. Many studies show that supportive and neutral or negative family behavior are observed in outcomes such as higher blood pressure (Ewart, Taylor, Kraemer, & Agras, 1991), immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1993), and a major contributing factor to depression (Fu & Parahoo, 2008). The effect of family distress on young children has been shown to last well into adolescence and adulthood (Wickrama, Lorentz, & Conger, 1997). Based on the results of the current investigation it is possible that some regional campus students have subsequent health issues due to familial experiences that reduce health or resiliency. A general recommendation is to alert campus mental health professionals to the negative familial trend, conduct health fairs, and provide resources to support students from challenging backgrounds. Populations that exhibit negative family themes would benefit from targeted programing that focuses on family issues.

Trauma & Growth

Post-traumatic growth is a phenomenon that describes individual improvement after traumatic experiences. Aldwin and Sutton (1998) describe the context of stress as the foundation for increased coping skills, self-confidence, and self-knowledge. Others have suggested goals develop as a result of hardship (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998). If this is the case two things are evident. First, future studies of this kind might want to examine concepts such as strengths, resilience, and goals. The regional campus participants in this study might have described more negative and formative memories but they were also enrolled in college, a testament to their ability to set goals and rebound. Second, university campuses might offer ways to capitalize on the opportunity for increasing qualities such as resiliency in students through outreach and programing.

Interpersonal Issues

The interpersonal domain dominates massive real state in a verity of literatures. It may be too board a domain to glean specific information from. However, with the "Parental/Family" theme being the strongest in both groups it warrants attention. The concerns and programs that could help on this front would be similar to dealing with health issues. The

difference being that interpersonal issues extend beyond family boundaries and affect relationships with peers, faculty, and staff.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The current investigation is the first to compare formative familial themes of regional campus students in Appalachia to non-Appalachian students at an urban main campus. It was the first to quantify that Applalachian/rural students at a regional campus look into their family histories and draw more themes of hardship than their counterparts. This study provides insight into potential issues of family hardship. This could be important in differentiating the etiology of student issues from those that might otherwise be attributed to other causes, i.e., motivation or amplitude.

Additional inquiry in this area can contribute much if it considers factors such as post-traumatic growth, goal setting behavior, dropout rates, support systems, retention, and a host of other factors such as personality characteristics and, simply put, whether or not the negative family narratives have made them better or not. This study has arranged only a couple pieces of a complex puzzle about family context. Here we need some new ideas but we have someplace to start.

Personal Biography

Dr. Steven Toepfer is an Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Kent State University Salem. He enjoys teaching and researching well-being, family cohesion, and whatever strikes his fancy. He lives in North-East Ohio with his wife and two irrepressible but stalwart boys.

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