

Different Perspectives on the “Boomerang”: How Adult Daughters and their Parents
Experience the Move Back Home

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Different Perspectives on the “Boomerang”: How Adult Daughters and their Parents Experience the Move Back Home

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Abstract

Though the phenomenon of young adults moving in with their parents is not a new one, it is one that has certainly become more common in recent decades. A new life stage of “emerging adulthood” has become the norm, in which young adults delay marriage and career jobs in order to pursue other goals. This stage is, in part, marked by fluidity in residence. Yet even as a growing number of “boomerang kids” move back in with their parents, there is a gap in the research regarding this phenomenon’s effect on various parts of the family system. This study set out to address this gap by comparing separate interviews from young adult boomerangs and their parents. Findings suggest a disparity between parental and young adult opinions on a variety of topics, most notably: expected household responsibility, parent/child closeness, loss of autonomy, and appreciation. However, similarities emerged regarding the parental home as a safe haven, the arrangement as providing financial security, and the fact that all adult children reported being ready to move out. Ideally, the findings presented here will help illuminate both the similarities and disparities in the experiences of parents and their young adult children who return after launch, in order to increase empathy and promote a healthy family system.

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The purpose of this study then is to examine the growing phenomenon in which adult children—so-called “boomerang kids”—move back home to live with their parents and to explore the effects on different parts of the family system.

Chapter One: Introduction

The problem and its setting: What are boomerang kids?

“Late leavers violate cultural expectations, signaling failure in their transition to an adult role and even dysfunction of their family as a whole” (Parsons, 1949).

“I view co-residence as an adaptation to social and economic change rather than a symptom of some problem among modern American families” (Steketee, 2011).

The phenomenon of adult children living with their parents is not a new one. However, as the quotes above suggest, it is an idea that sparks diverse opinions among scholars and over time. This research will focus on the systemic impact of a trend widely known as “boomeranging,” in which a young adult launches, moving out of his/her parental home, only to later move back in (Mitchell & Gee, 2006 & Newman, 2012). Indeed, many cultures have different words for these “boomerang kids,” suggesting the universality of the phenomenon. In Japan, adult children living with their parents are referred to as “parasaito shinguru,” or “parasite singles” (Masahiro, 2001), a negative connotation that has sparked much debate among Japanese scholars (Lunsing, 2003). In England, these returning children are unflatteringly called “kippers,” which stands for “kids in parent's pockets eroding retirement savings” (Goldfarb, 2014). In the United States and Canada, less stigmatizing terms include “adulthoodescents” (Goldfarb, 2014) and “fledgling adults” (Steketee, 2011), while the home and family itself are known as a “feathered nest,” or “accordion family” (Avery, Goldscheider & Speare, 1992; Newman,

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2012). All of these terms seek to define the many aspects of the common and growing phenomenon: adult children who, for whatever reason, decide to return to their parental home.

Boomerang kids vs. co-residents

Throughout the literature, researchers often use the terms “boomerang kid” and “co-resident” fairly interchangeably. Yet there is a distinct difference: a “co-resident” is defined as any adult child living with his or her parents, while a “boomerang kid” is one who has moved out and then moved back in. The vast majority of studies have grouped these two cohorts together, choosing to study young adult co-residents in general (i.e., regardless of whether they ever left home). Some may argue that these young adults are experiencing the same emerging adulthood life stages regardless of living situation. However, many scholars are beginning to look at boomerang children and their families as a distinct group (i.e. Davidson, 2014; Goldfarb, 2014; Mitchell, 1996 & 1998; Newman, 2012). This study will follow their lead, and consider boomerang children as a distinct population.

Furthermore, for the purposes of this research, the boomeranging or co-residing young adult will simply be referred to as a “young adult” or “adult child,” while the parents will always be termed “parents” (rather than “adults”). This need for terminological clarification underscores the fact that this is time of transition for individual young adults, with great heterogeneity in roles and identities.

New trends in family life

Many scholars believe that the trend of adult children boomeranging back home is growing ever more common (Davidson, 2014). One source estimates that one in five

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people in their 20's and early 30's is currently living with his or her parents (Davidson, 2014). However, firm numbers are difficult to cite because the living arrangements of young adults are notoriously hard to track. Furthermore, a young adult's journey to independent living is generally not unidirectional: often there are multiple moves in and out of the house before an officially separate household is established (Kaplan, 2009).

Several studies, however, suggest an emerging American trend among families in which young adults are coming back home more often, marrying later, and having fewer children than previous generations (Newman, 2012). Fewer young adults now jump straight from college to a career. Globalization has made full-time employment increasing scarce and temporary, and part-time work more common, making financial independence an uphill climb (Kaplan, 2009). In cultures such as Sweden and Denmark, the burden of supporting young adults falls to the government. Here in the United States, however, material assistance generally comes from the family (Newman, 2012). Indeed, data from a 1988 survey suggests young adults receive more than \$3,000 a year from their parents and more than 350 hours of “help” (time spent assisting the young adult with tasks). This adds up to more than \$38,000 spent overall to help children establish themselves, even after society already considers them independent adults (Ross & Schoeni, 2004). Simply put, as young adults take longer to find their footing in a changing economy (Kaplan, 2009), they turn to their parents for help. Increasingly, that assistance has come to include a place to live. In keeping with systems theory, this phenomenon affects not only the adult child but the parents and the family as a whole.

Systemic connections worldwide

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Though this research will focus on the boomerang trend in America, the trend itself, as noted above, is global. Newman's (2012) large-scale ethnographic study of boomeranging and adult/child co-residence worldwide suggests that an adult child's likelihood of moving home is largely based on the amount of financial support provided by the government. Newman (2012) interviewed approximately 300 people in six countries; roughly half were young adults in a boomerang situation and the other half parents. Her results suggested a definite cultural influence on the boomerang phenomenon. Indeed, in Sweden and Denmark, where a public safety net provides significant support to unemployed adult children, it is almost unheard of for a person over 18 to be living with his/her parents. Alternatively, countries such as Italy and Spain provide almost no public support, forcing young adults to rely on the "private safety net" of their parents. Young adults in these countries co-reside for long periods of time, often until they marry. America, Newman asserts, falls somewhere between these two extremes (as does Japan).

Newman (2012) also found that the effect on the family system varied between countries. In Spain and Italy, data suggested that ties between parents and adult children were very strong. Family is considered a central priority; the term "main-moni" (or "mama's boys") has emerged to describe the close ties that children (namely boys) keep with their parents there. Whether this is a cause or effect of boomeranging is open to debate--a proverbial chicken-and-egg scenario. However, it is clear that the opposite tendency has emerged in Sweden and Denmark, where young adults operate very independently of their families. Newman found that many of her participants there did not consider family an important part of their lives; some even referred to themselves as

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“selfish” because of this. Whether this constitute the systemic effects of living separately or another third variable, it is clear from Newman's research that co-residence is correlated with stronger family ties worldwide.

Gender differences in co-residence

The term “mama's *boys*” raises the question of gender, and whether the co-residence experience is different for sons vs. daughters. According to a study by Ward and Spitze (1996), the similarities far outweigh the gender differences. Their findings suggested that daughters tended to do more housework and sons were more likely to pay rent, but both were weak correlations and did not affect the adult/child relationship. For the most part, these finding suggest that it is a very similar experience for both sons and daughters to live at home.

Stigma

A complicating factor in the phenomenon of co-residence is the issue of cultural and social stigma. There is a common stereotype that suggests young adult co-residents are lazy people who take advantage of their parents rather than working hard to support themselves (Goldfarb, 2014). Steketee (2011) takes issue with passing judgment on co-residers, particularly in academic research, which he contends perpetuates a misconception that co-residers are somehow at fault. Lunsing (2003) takes this position as well, calling attention to the negative language used by many Japanese researchers investigating so-called “parasite singles” (coined by Masahiro, 2001). Steketee asserts that the term itself places blame on the young adult, who is considered a parasite feeding off of his/her parent's beneficence. Indeed, scholars and laypeople alike tend to search for an explanation, laying blame for the boomerang phenomenon on any number of would-be

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causes: the young adult (lazy, parasitic), the parents/family system (poor parenting, failure to promote independence), the economy (in recession, weak labor market) or society in general (Newman, 2012). No matter the cause, co-residence is seldom cast in a positive light. However, the level of stigma seems to vary over time, across cultures and between families and individuals (Goldfarb, 2014; Lunsing, 2003; Newman, 2012).

Emerging adulthood phenomenon

This stigma may be tempered, however, by the commonality of both boomeranging and what researcher Jeffery J. Arnett (2000) has coined “emerging adulthood”-- a new developmental stage that has taken its place between Erikson’s (1968) hypothesized “adolescent” and “young adult” stages. Arnett postulates that this new developmental chapter is qualitatively different from the stages before and after it-- one marked by change, exploration, and fluidity. Indeed, this fluidity applies to living situation, employment, and general goals. Furthermore, in his interviews with young adults (age 18-25) regarding their subjective feelings of being an adult, Arnett supports the idea that emerging adulthood is a distinct stage. Adulthood, he found, is marked less and less by concrete accomplishments such as marriage, having children, or buying a house, and instead begins, in the view of those experiencing it, with “accepting responsibility for one's self” and “making independent decisions” (p.473). “Becoming financially independent” is often cited as a marker as well (Arnett 2000; Lowe, Dillon, Rhodes & Zwiebach, 2013). The qualitative interviews of Newman (2012) supports these claims, finding adulthood to be more a state of mind than a string of milestones. Indeed, instead of working towards the traditional goals of marriage and career, the emerging

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adulthood stage is distinctly marked by its heterogeneity of goals, statuses and living situations (Arnett, 2000).

The idea that a new life stage exists between adolescence and adulthood, marked by transition and fluidity, fits well with the increase of boomeranging and adult/child co-residence. Indeed, because the emerging adults are not often holding down a full-time job, it falls on the parents to provide for them (Goldfarb, 2014). These “adulolescents” (coined by Goldfarb, 2014) are supported through the emerging adulthood stage by their parents, viewing financial transfers to their emerging adult as a substitute for inheritance later on. The impact of this trend on the parental dyad will be discussed later on in this section, for it is clear that the emerging adulthood phenomenon is a trend with a distinct systemic impact.

Theoretical Framework: Family System's Theory

The idea behind system's theory (Guttman, 2001) is neither specific to families nor psychology in general. The systemic point of view holds that parts of an overarching “system” are connected so that they impact one another in a reciprocal way. Rather than a linear model, one of the basic tenets of systems thinking is that causation is circular. That means that one event/part/occurrence does not cause another, but rather is a part of a greater sequence that involves a variety of factors and a bidirectional impact. This manner of thinking pays great attention to context, focusing on the functioning of the system as a whole (rather than on an individual part or problem). This theory also posits that a system is continually in flux, receiving and adapting to feedback both within and outside of itself (Winek, 2010).

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Indeed, family systems theory likens the family to a machine, made up of its parts (people) and functioning as a whole within the context of society. When a force or issue affects one of the people, the entire system is affected. The family as a system is constantly changing from internal and external input, using circular feedback in order to maintain homeostasis. Any change has a systemic effect as the family adapts (Hecker, Mims, & Boughner, 2003).

In the context of boomerang children, the family as a system must adapt to the new arrangement and each member must change in order to re-establish homeostasis. Considering the research on the subsystems (parent-child relationship in Mitchell 1998; spousal relationship in Mitchell & Gee, 1996) it is clear that boomeranging effects change at different levels of the family system. The act of a child moving back home impacts the family system and naturally causes it to change. It is the purpose of this study, and the use of targeted interview questions, to explore this adjustment and determine which parts of the system are altered in the return to homeostasis.

Furthermore, family systems theory pays careful attention to the boundaries between different subsystems (i.e., parts of the machine). These subsystems could include the individual family members or groups of individuals (such as the parent-child dyad or the marital relationship). The boundaries between the subsystems, according to family system's theory, fall into three categories: rigid, diffuse, and normal. This study will address how family boundaries are impacted by an adult child's return home, through inquiries that explore the amount of emotional closeness and instrumental support present between family members.

Significance of the study

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This is an important study to undertake for a number of reasons. As globalization and the electronic age give rise to more part-time, temporary jobs and fewer lifelong careers (Newman, 2012), young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds often struggle to become established. Furthermore, the rise of an emerging adulthood stage of life (Arnett, 2000) has led to an “exploration” stage for young people still figuring out what to do long-term. As they go through this stage, young people are more frequently moving back into their childhood homes than in the past. Indeed, what was once looked at as deviant (Parsons, 1949) is now almost a normative part of the life trajectory. Since it has become so common so recently, scholars are still grasping to understand the phenomenon. The literature has yet to explore how this phenomenon affects the family, rather than just the respective individuals. This study will help make sense of the systemic impact of boomeranging. As Steketee (2011) asserts:

Previous research fails to reveal a detailed descriptive picture of co-residing. This oversight has led to simplistic models of co-residence that are likely to produce misleading findings (p. 101).

This study sets out to paint a descriptive portrait of the boomerang child phenomenon and its systemic effects. Qualitative interviews will attempt to capture the complexity of the arrangement and illuminate our understanding of its impact on the family.

Ideally, this study will also be useful in the clinical sphere of family therapy. Through a study of the boomerang phenomenon, this researcher hopes to increase understanding about co-residence in ways that can be helpful to families experiencing it. If this study is able to give clinicians a more complete appreciation of the effects of

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boomeranging, perhaps they can use the information to normalize the client's experience or provide useful feedback. Indeed, as the plethora of self-help books on the topics suggests (see: “Mom, can I move back in with you?” by Gordon & Shaffer, 2004 and “Boomerang nation: How to survive living with your parents the second time around” by Furman, 2005, among others), there is a market for advice about how to handle this increasingly common life event. With a fuller understanding of this phenomenon, scholars and laypeople will be better equipped to help families navigate the challenge and maximize the satisfaction of all involved.

Rationale

As asserted previously, this is a growing phenomenon among American families. Currently there is a need for scholars and clinicians to be able to understand it in a more multi-dimensional way. Indeed, many existing studies focus on only one aspect of the arrangement, namely parental satisfaction, financial effects or stigma. This study aims to capture the overall effects and focus on a more broad-based, systemic understanding. Furthermore, this study intends to fill a gap in the existing literature by capturing the perspectives of different family members as they describe the same situation. This format will allow the researcher to compare and contrast the opinions of the respective family members. The seldom-employed technique of using members of the same family to gain different perspectives of a single event will give this study depth and illustrate the phenomenon in a richer, more textured way.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of boomerang children and adult/child co-residence. The aim

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is to address the research question: How do young adults and their parents experience the move back home? This will be evaluated with open-ended questions in a loosely structured qualitative interview with parents and children separately. The questions will be based on factors that previous research suggests might influence the arrangement, including the parent-child relationship quality before the move back home, the child's helpfulness around the house, level of conflict, etc. However, the open format will also encourage the participants to introduce their own ideas of what factors are important. Overall, this study seeks to understand the adjustment process that the family experiences during the boomerang arrangement, through the eyes of the family members involved.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This section will review the existing research regarding the process of boomeranging and adult/child co-residence. The number of published studies regarding adult/child co-residence has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, but is still skewed more toward measuring parental satisfaction. Theories of how the process of boomeranging works, from the initial move back through the readjustment period, are so far lacking in the scholarly literature. This review will begin with a discussion of this parental satisfaction, and expand to include parental marital satisfaction during co-residence. The existing research that gauges both parent and child views of the relationship will also be discussed. This section will conclude with a discussion of the adult child's satisfaction with co-residence and the practical implications of this satisfaction.

Parental satisfaction in the boomerang process

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Contrary to traditional stereotypes, the majority of studies suggest that both parents and children tend to be satisfied with the living arrangements when an adult child returns home (e.g. Leopold, 1996; Mitchell & Gee, 1996; Mitchell, 1998). The data on this is limited, however, and much of the work focuses on parental satisfaction in particular. It bears noting the possible selection bias here, because children who have a dis-satisfactory relationship with their parents are less likely to move back home in the first place.

Researcher Barbara Mitchell has published numerous studies regarding parental satisfaction in the boomerang arrangement, notably her 1998 analysis using both qualitative and quantitative methods through phone interviews with families containing a boomerang child. Though she interviewed both parent and adult child, the dependent variable in this study was the parental assessment of the living arrangement. Mitchell contends that “the great majority of parents thought the living situation was working out well or very well” (p.41), with “companionship/friendship” as the number one positive aspect. In these satisfactory arrangements, parents and children were able to connect on a more equal footing as companions and friends.

Several other factors relating to a successful boomerang arrangement also emerge from Mitchell's 1998 research. From the parent perspective, gender appeared to play an important role, with mothers more likely to be satisfied with the arrangement: “The likelihood of parents being very satisfied (versus less than very satisfied) with co-residence is almost twice as high (odds ratio = 1.87) for mothers compared to fathers (p. 31).”

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Also related to parental satisfaction is the relationship status of the parent(s) who take in the adult child. Mitchell found that parents whose marriages remain intact tended to be twice as likely to rate the boomerang arrangement highly than were their divorced or widowed counterparts. In other words, a mother still in a committed relationship with her adult child's father was the most likely to rate the boomerang arrangement as highly satisfactory.

Factors on the adult child's side also impact the satisfaction of his/her parents, according to Mitchell. Not surprisingly, parental satisfaction is correlated positively with the amount of time the adult child spent helping around the house, and the amount of time parents and child spent doing enjoyable things together. Furthermore, the intensity of arguments/conflict between parents and adult child was negatively correlated with parental satisfaction. Finally, the main activity of the adult child while at home related to parental satisfaction: parents reported being happier when the adult child was engaged in full-time work.

Three other child characteristics that affect parental satisfaction were less self-evident. Mitchell (1998) found that the adult child's gender influenced satisfaction, in favor of boys returning. Qualitative explanations for this are lacking, but Mitchell hypothesizes that perhaps there are greater expectations for women to follow the cultural mandate of marrying and starting a family early. Or perhaps parents tended to impose more rules upon their daughters, leading to an increase in conflict and a decrease in mutual satisfaction. More research is needed to further understand this connection.

The reason the adult child moved out in the first place was also relevant, Mitchell found. Parents were more likely to report satisfaction with boomeranging if the child was

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returning home after attending school. The explanation for this connection is likewise unclear.

Finally, the number of times the adult child returned home was positively correlated with parental satisfaction. While it seems counter-intuitive to think parents would be more satisfied the more their children returned to the nest, Mitchell posits that parents begin to expect this and their satisfaction goes up because of the relative normality of another move home. While parents experiencing boomeranging for the first time might face some perceived stigma, parents of adult children boomeranging multiple times seem immune to this (Mitchell, 1998).

Systemic effects of boomeranging on marital satisfaction

A related article by Mitchell and Gee (1996) suggests the boomeranging process affects not only the parent-child relationship but the marital satisfaction of the parents themselves; marital satisfaction remained high while harboring a boomerang son or daughter, with 73% of parents self-reporting they were “very satisfied” with their marriage. Indeed, ratings of marital satisfaction varied depending on two parental variables during adult child boomeranging, including marital status (first or second union of the parents) and the parents' respective health status. Parental marital satisfaction ratings were also dependent on certain adult child characteristics, including whether it was the initial or subsequent move home, the primary reason for moving home, and the adult child's relationship with his/her mother (Mitchell & Gee, 1996).

Indeed, the fact that variables of an adult child's boomeranging process affect parental marital satisfaction indicates a clear systemic impact. The move home affects

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more than just the adult child's quality of life or the parents'-- it impacts the system as a whole.

Measuring both parent's and child's perspectives

Aquilino (1999) used quantitative methods to analyze the question: does the source (parent or adult child) matter when judging the quality of the relationship? In other words, do parents and adult children view the quality of their relationship differently? Using 1992-1993 data from the longitudinal National Study of Families and Households (NSFH), Aquilino's participants consisted of paired sets of parents and adult children who completed questionnaires assessing the quality of the parent/child relationship. Aquilino based the measurement on two constructs, which he called "closeness" and "control." Closeness questions asked about factors such as overall relationship quality, shared leisure activities, shared humor, etc. Control questions were based on frequency of fights/arguments, parental desire for influence, parental (perceived) disapproval, etc. Aquilino concluded there was indeed a disparity between the parent's and adult child's respective judgments of the relationship. In general, parents tended to report more positively, though high parental education (matched with low child education) or high religiosity/conservatism tempered this. That is, highly educated parents with less educated adult children rated the arrangement less positively than their child did; highly religious parents did the same. On the whole, however, parents tended to be more satisfied with the adult child's return home than was the child.

Interestingly, co-residence only affected the *parental* reports of closeness in Aquilino's (1999) study. Parents reported a closer relationship to adult children who lived at home, while co-residence did not affect the adult child's judgment of their

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closeness. More research is needed to understand this disparity. Aquilino (1999) makes a plea for more studies to employ the paired-report design, saying that “there is a strong case for making the collection of equivalent data from both generations a standard practice in designing research on parents and adult children (p.869).”

Agreement or disagreement in parent/child perspectives

In a similar vein, Veevers and Mitchell (1998) analyzed the types of perceived support given from both parent to adult child and from adult child to parent in boomerang child relationships. They interviewed both the adult child and a member of the parental dyad in order to measure their perceptions of emotional and instrumental support. Each of the 218 respective dyads answered a quantitative verbal questionnaire regarding how often they gave and received help in a variety of categories (meal preparation, groceries, laundry, transportation, and emotional support). The researchers then asked the children only about the amount of help they gave cleaning the house. Answers ranged between “daily,” “at least once a week,” “at least once a month,” “never” and “not applicable.” The researchers then analyzed how closely the parent and adult child's answers aligned.

Overall, parents and children were in general agreement about the amount of support given and received. Both parents and adult children recognized that the parents gave frequent (daily or weekly) help to the adult child. This help came mostly in the realm of meal preparation, grocery shopping, and emotional support. Adult children did help in return, to a lesser degree.

Perception-wise, parents--mothers especially--tended to rank their support given as similar to what the adult child reported receiving. Discrepancies appeared mostly in the perceptions of what the adult child contributed. Indeed, parents tended to report that

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the child provided much more support than the adult child acknowledged providing. This was especially true in the case of emotional support. Though this may be an issue of different definitions of “emotional support” (as suggested in the qualitative portion of the study), it is interesting to note that parents gave the adult child much more credit than the adult child gave him/herself.

Adult child satisfaction

The question remains, then, as to the satisfaction of the adult child in the boomerang arrangement. Wister, Mitchell and Gee (1997), interviewed 218 families that had a boomerang child residing at home either currently or for at least six months within the previous five years. Their findings supported the fact that the majority (78%) of adult child co-residents called themselves “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the arrangement. Again, it should be noted that the “unsatisfied” adult children were less likely to have moved home (or not stayed very long), making them ineligible for this study.

As for the factors that did influence satisfaction, the authors identified four. Parental income, the focal variable of the study, was found to be inversely correlated with the adult child satisfaction in co-residence. This disproved their experimental hypothesis, that increased parental income would increase adult child satisfaction. The authors hypothesize several reasons for this result. Parental expectations for the adult child could be higher in high-income families, and more well-off parents may be able to exert more control over the child in order to lead them to meet those expectations. On the other hand, in low-income families, the economic capital the adult children bring to the table could lead them to possess higher social capital within the family. The link between this (social control/capital) and adult child satisfaction is still unproven.

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The other variables found to affect adult child satisfaction in boomerang child living arrangements were religiosity of the parents, marital status of parents (intact marriage, remarried, etc) and the number of returns home. The authors suggested that the religiosity of the parents may lead to more constraints on the adult child, lowering his/her satisfaction with the arrangement. Remarried or step-families could impact satisfaction due to higher levels of conflict in the home, and multiple returns could reduce satisfaction by failing to meet the child's own expectations for independence (Wister, Mitchell & Gee, 1997). Clearly, the variables affecting adult child satisfaction with the boomerang living arrangement warrant further study.

One interesting aspect of this research is the fact that the adult child's satisfaction does not necessarily predict continued residence at home or away. Indeed, a longitudinal study by Ward and Spitze (2007) found that prior parent-child relationship quality had an *inverse* relationship with the likelihood of children living at home. Adult children who left and returned tended to have a poorer relationship quality with their parents upon first measurement, but the parents allowed them home nonetheless. Though adult child satisfaction with boomerang living arrangements is an important variable to study, it is worth noting that there remains no clear link between adult child's satisfaction and where he or she decides to live.

Overview of research

Thus, previous studies have looked at many aspects of the parent and adult child relationship during boomeranging and co-residence. In particular, the satisfaction of both the parent and adult child have been measured in respective studies, in addition to the impact of co-residence on the marital dyad. Of particular interest, Aquilino (1999) and

Veevers and Mitchell (1998) have compared the answers of parent and adult child, while other studies have likewise employed both perspectives. This study will employ these methods of interviewing both parent and adult child, while using a family systems lens to shape the questions and analyze the results.

Chapter Three: Methods

Design of the study

This phenomenon was investigated through semi-structured qualitative interviews. This flexible structure allowed the researcher to gain rich data based on each participant's subjective experience. Through the qualitative format, the researcher was able to enhance general understanding of the different ways in which people experience this phenomenon.

Furthermore, this study employed the matched-set design of interviewing both young adult and parent from the same family in order to gain rich detail and different perspectives on one scenario. This would allow the results to be analyzed using a within-group comparison to identify and compare common themes brought up by participants from the same family.

Study Participants

As noted, the researcher interviewed both the young adult and one parent from the same family in three respective families (for six interviews total). During recruitment the researcher attempted to interview both parents from each family in order to maximize data. Unfortunately, though each family consisted of a two-parent household, only one parent from each was available.

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The young adults and parents were interviewed separately so that the two different subsystems (parents and child) would be able to speak more candidly about the situation. This gave each party the freedom to be open and honest about any conflict or dissatisfaction with the arrangement. Furthermore, separating the two eliminated any bias that might result from conflict-avoidance or self-censuring.

In order to ensure a matched set, the researcher asked for verbal confirmation upon initial contact that the other party (adult child or parent, respectively) would be interested in completing the study as well. Families in which only one member was interested or available would not have been eligible for this study. Each initial participant was able to confirm the interest of his/her other party, and then pass along the message for the other party to contact the researcher to set up a date/time for an interview.

The researcher recruited families in which one of the adult children moved out for a period of time. This could have been to attend college or to simply live independently. The researcher only recruited young adults who lived separately for at least six months, and then lived back home for at least six months. These restrictions ensured that the participants had adequate time to adjust to both living away from and returning to the parental home.

Traditional methods of recruitment (i.e., notices at Starbucks and local businesses, word of mouth) were used, along with social media. Recruitment was sought mainly in a small town in the suburbs of Washington, DC. Though the researcher personally knows a large number of families with boomerang children, acquaintances were not interviewed in order to maintain the data's integrity. However, the researcher welcomed these

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acquaintances to refer unknown participants, and all of the families that did participate were as a result of these referrals.

Procedures

The researcher began by obtaining IRB approval of study procedures and materials. Next, fliers were distributed and the study advertised via social media. Interested parties were contacted through telephone. Initial contact focused on eligibility, obtaining verbal consent, confirming the interest of the other party and arranging a venue for the interview. The researcher then emailed the interested respondent with a consent form, in order to give him/her time to review it prior to the interview. After the interview with the first responding member of the family, the researcher requested that he/she ask his/her parent or child to contact the researcher to arrange an interview. Each participant did pass along the message and the researcher was able to set up the interview with the other party within the week. After obtaining verbal consent and arranging a time/date, the other party was also emailed with a consent form.

Upon first meeting, the researcher administered a short demographic questionnaire, followed by the verbal interview. All participants were assured confidentiality, and the researcher picked an alias for them. All identifying information was kept in a locked file cabinet, and all computer files containing information were password protected. There was no compensation for participating in this study.

Instruments

A brief questionnaire was distributed initially to collect demographic information. This included the age of participant, ethnicity, income level, marital status, etc. Results of the questionnaire are listed in Appendix A. Then the interviews were conducted using a

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short, semi-structured format to allow the interviewer to probe each participant's experience of the boomerang phenomenon. There were different questions for the parent(s) and the adult child, in order to tailor the interview to each person's respective role. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour 45 minutes; the average was approximately 50 minutes. Reflective listening was used to ensure validity.

Analysis

With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed into digital word format and reviewed by the interviewer again for accuracy. Interviews were then coded according to the model of thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through this model, the researcher followed the six steps in order to find repeated patterns of meaning throughout the data. After first transcribing and reviewing the data, the researcher coded liberally for any themes or patterns noticeable throughout. The researcher discovered approximately 15 codes, including terms such as “safe haven” and “regression to childhood.” Next, these codes were organized into potential themes, or broader patterns of meaning, such as “child’s expectation of parent.” A discussion was held with an additional coder to reach consensus and refine themes. Data were then reviewed again with these themes in mind. After making the decision to analyze the data through a matched-set comparison in order to focus on each family’s unique issues, the codes were revisited by looking at the situations separately. Indeed, themes were then established by focusing on the cases individually, and finding patterns and disparities across the two separate interviews from the same family. This allowed for the researcher to focus on how each individual party expressed feelings about each idea, and compare/contrast it with his/her parent/child. Eliminating the need to only draw

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similarities between all of the parents and all of the adult children allowed the researcher to focus on the uniqueness of each case. Finally, the themes were refined by the researcher illustrating which themes were common or controversial across families. These salient themes, which included expected household responsibilities, parent/child closeness, loss of autonomy, and appreciation, were the focal point of the analysis. Because of her personal experience with this phenomenon, the researcher kept a journal in an attempt to bracket biases towards the data. Though complete impartiality is unrealistic, the researcher made every effort to see the data from an unbiased and open-minded lens. As explained by White (1994), “The nature of the link between residence patterns, family relationships, and dependence is an empirical question that, for the most part, has not been answered (p. 230).” The goal of this qualitative study was to help in the quest to answer it.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

The participants consisted of two daughters with their mothers and one daughter with her father, for a total of six interviews. All of the young adult participants had lived back at home for at least a year, with one child having lived at home for more than seven years. Two of the participants moved out initially for college, while the third moved out “for love” (in order to live with a boyfriend). Participants in this study were between 22 and 29 years old.

As this section will describe, the families interviewed in the course of this project were an extremely heterogeneous group in terms of their experience of the “boomerang” living situation. Though certain similarities existed (and will be discussed), each

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parent/child dyad reported a different experience of the phenomenon, along with different circumstances that led them to it and varied levels of satisfaction. Indeed, both the circumstances between families varied and the experience of each member within each family differed. As such, drawing overall conclusions about the boomerang phenomenon as a whole is unlikely via these particular data, because of both the limited information and the vast heterogeneity of situations described. However, some similarities across cases will be outlined in the beginning of this section.

Furthermore, valuable information can be gleaned by examining each family situation separately through the respective lenses of parent and adult child. This study will focus on within-family comparisons, in order to allow the reader to gain a more accurate picture of the varied and particular dynamics of each. More information regarding the demographics of each family is listed in Appendix A.

Despite the differences in experiences, a variety of common themes did emerge within the interviews. These themes—namely, household responsibilities, loss of autonomy, parent/child closeness, and appreciation--will be discussed within the context of each case in this section. Ideally, future readers and clinicians will be able to use these data to help families in the boomerang situation focus on areas of potential conflict, and create a more complete dialogue surrounding the respective experiences of parent and child.

Similarities across Cases

Despite differing circumstances that brought adult children home in the cases examined here, some similarities emerge from the experiences reported by each participant. First, and not surprisingly, every parent and child cites financial constraints

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as a primary reason for boomeranging. As outlined in the research cited above, the financial implications of a move home for a young adult are sizeable—it allows for a more comfortable lifestyle and a chance to get established and financially stable before striking out alone. Similarly, many parents and young adults refer to the arrangement as a “safe haven,” for the young adult. As the daughter from Case 3 contended, “it was the best support system that I could put my child and myself into.” Indeed, all parents interviewed agreed that they would be happy to help their children out of a crisis situation by providing refuge. As the mother in Case 1 asserted, “We’re unwilling to let you fail. You know, I mean, because... it sounds pretty cold, but it really isn't. We have invested too much in you to let you fail.” For the parents and young adults interviewed, moving home was the logical step to save money and regroup in a safe place.

In another interesting similarity, the young adult in each case expressed being “ready” to move out and optimistic that the move would happen in the very near future. One participant actually had a planned move-out date, and the other two were actively hunting for a place to live. Though they all express appreciation for their parent’s safety net, all said it was “just time” to be on their own. As the daughter from Case 2 asserted, “it’s just time, you’re ready to have your own life and kind of start your own life.” And each parent unequivocally agreed.

Themes

Through knowledge of existing literature, the researcher did focus the interview questions on specific aspects of the living arrangement, such as household chores, stigma, satisfaction, etc. Naturally, in response to the researcher’s questions about these subjects, certain themes arose. However, the participants had the freedom to expound upon the

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issues that they deemed most important, and so had control over the content of the interview. Through this process, the issues of expected household responsibilities, loss of autonomy, parent/child closeness, and appreciation emerged as most prevalent. These themes will be interpreted in the context of each family, but first must be given a basic overall definition.

The idea of expected household responsibilities was mentioned repeatedly in every case. Household responsibilities were defined as chores such as cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking meals, and doing laundry. It also included financial responsibilities, such as rent payments, car/cell phone payments, etc. The term “expected” household responsibilities is used here because parents and adult children had varying conceptions of what each other should be doing. For instance, an adult child may think it is her own responsibility to cook dinner but her mother’s responsibility to cook breakfast, while mom may report very different expectations. This paper will focus in on the similarities and differences for each party within this the theme of expected household responsibilities.

Likewise, the theme of loss of autonomy stood out in the context of the interviews. This theme is multi-pronged: it includes the adult child’s independent decision-making and freedom to come and go as he or she pleases, without parental limitations. It also encompasses parental freedom, including the ways in which a parent must alter how he/she lives and experiences privacy in the home. In general, this theme encompasses the way in which autonomy is maintained or lost in this new family situation.

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With respect to relationships, the third theme to be discussed is parent/child closeness. This theme was explored in the context of the interview questions, and highlighted by the participants as something that is specifically affected by the boomerang experience. Parent/child closeness in this case refers to emotional connection, which the participants talked about in terms of quality time spent together. Closeness seemed to be influenced by the subjective maturity level of the adult child—In other words, parental concern about the child’s actions and decisions affected closeness. Thus, parent/child closeness includes emotional support given and received from each party, along with shared activities and communication about their respective lives. In addition to discussing this theme throughout the interview, the participants each rated their level of emotional closeness to the other from a scale of one to 10.

Finally, the theme of appreciation is also prevalent within the responses of the participants. It is interesting to note that the interview questions never mention “appreciation,” “gratefulness,” or any such synonym, but the construct was raised by nearly every participant, nonetheless. Appreciation is defined as thankfulness expressed by either the adult child or parent towards the other or in regard to the situation; for instance, an adult child may be appreciative of the opportunity to save money, and of the food that the parent provides. On the other hand, a parent might be appreciative of the ways in which a child helps around the house, or of the opportunity to spend more time together. Linking the themes, a parent/child may *appreciate* the added *closeness* that the boomerang arrangement affords their relationship. Indeed, the themes that will be discussed are often intertwined and multifaceted concepts. Each theme will be

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investigated and interpreted within the context of each respective family system. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Case One

In this case, the adult child, Wanda, is a 22-year-old female who had moved back home with her parents more than a year before the interview took place, during her last year of undergraduate college. Her mom was interviewed without Wanda's stepdad present. Wanda transferred to a college closer to home but says it was her parent's decision for her to actually reside at home. Her mom states that she and Wanda's dad were unwilling to help pay for rent if Wanda lived elsewhere, and that they wanted her home in order to "push her towards the next maturation point." Wanda's mom reports worrying about her daughter's immaturity. She says she feels as though keeping Wanda at home would discourage her from staying out late, partying, and not focusing on school. Wanda reports feeling appreciative of living at home in general, though suffocated at times. Her mom reports being happy to have her back and proud of some maturity she has noticed, but still disappointed when Wanda is unwilling to rise to her expectations. At the time of the interviews, Wanda had just landed a job in another part of the state and was planning on moving out within the month. As such, both parties expressed happiness at seeing "the light at the end of the tunnel."

Expected Household Responsibilities

Through Wanda's eyes, household chores are a "necessary evil" of living back at home. She reports that she listens to her parent's requests of what chores need to be done, and generally obeys them without arguing. Though she claims she was a "rebel kid" in the past, she admits that now she helps out around the house so as not to upset her

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parents. She sees her responsibilities around the house as a function of her maturing; she recognizes that her parent's expectations of her have increased the older she gets. Now, she says she cleans her bathroom, does the dishes, and cleans the floors at her parent's request, though she concedes that they generally only request it when they themselves do not feel up to it. She acknowledges that she has to pay for her own gas and car insurance, though no rent or living expenses. Conversely, she has grown to expect a good deal from her parents. She acknowledges that they bear the responsibility of keeping the house running, and she appreciates the sizeable burden they carry: "They do everything...I mean I have to give them props. They do dishes, they take out the trash, the recycling, they clean the house, they really keep up with everything, so...they really only ask me to do stuff honestly when they're tired." Furthermore, Wanda says she depends on her parents for help with life decisions, though she does not go into detail about which decisions she needs help making. In general, Wanda paints a picture of a system in which the parents are in charge, but she helps upon request to avoid making them angry. Indeed, it is clear that from Wanda's perspective, she expects much more in terms of household responsibilities from her parents than they expect from her.

Wanda's mom paints a different picture. Her mother agrees that she and Wanda's father are responsible for all of the household chores, but not by choice. She grudgingly admits that if they want anything done by Wanda, they have to ask; they cannot count on Wanda to step up. Indeed, mom reports that she expected Wanda would take care of her own breakfast and lunch, but that was not to be. Mom soon realized it was Wanda's expectation that mom would be responsible for making her meals, and though she

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expressed disappointment, she complied. Mom reports that Wanda was acting like a guest in her household of origin, rather than a resident adult who would take care of herself:

...When she came back to live for her senior year, she would wander downstairs in the morning and sit at the table, and you know, of course her father had already eaten and left for work, and I was already onto other things throughout the day, and then all of the sudden I would have to stop what I'm doing and say, you know, "Do you want some breakfast?" "Yeah...could you fix me some blah blah blah" like she's at a restaurant. Yeah, it's an interesting thing, I don't know if it's that they don't feel like it's their home, or they feel like they're guests, or they feel like they want the best of both of those scenarios.

Furthermore, when she noticed that Wanda consistently ran out of time to pack a lunch, mom began packing lunch every day for her. Indeed, mom now expects all of the household responsibilities to fall to herself and Wanda's stepfather, but the tone in which mentions it seemed to convey irritation and frustration. She is clearly not happy with the situation, but Wanda does not seem aware of this. Indeed, there seems to be communication failure between the two parties, where Wanda doesn't know or doesn't care that mom and dad don't enjoy their overarching responsibilities and would appreciate more help from Wanda. Indeed, mom reports that she expected Wanda to at least pick up after herself, but that Wanda often falls short. Wanda, on the other hand, does not mention this shortfall at all during her interview. The question remains whether she is unaware of her mom's disappointment, or simply unconcerned.

Loss of Autonomy

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The issue of Wanda's freedom often arises during both her and her mom's interviews. She mentions that she feels she had "no more freedom," after her move back, because her parents required that they know her whereabouts at all times. She also states that they want her home before midnight, a rule she occasionally ignores, making them unhappy. In fact, she cites time management/spending too much time with her friends as the most common conflict with her parents. Wanda seems to want the same freedom at home that she had when she lived away, when she could come and go as she pleased without her parents' permission or judgment. In her words, the worst part of living at home is "feeling suffocated sometimes." Although she tried explaining to her parents that she was older and would not be out partying or at bars every night, the fact that she lives under their roof and that they own her car were the deciding factors in the conversation. She hopes, "Once I get my car in my name, there won't be an issue!"

As for her own effect on her parent's autonomy, Wanda simply says that it probably stresses them out to have to worry about where she is at all times. She understands that it puts pressure on them to have to keep up with her, but at the same time she feels, "I'm an adult now, so you've got to kind of just chill out with the rules."

Wanda's mom echoes the idea that it is stressful for her and Wanda's dad to have to keep tabs on her. She emphasizes that her need to know comes from a place of concern, rather than a desire to be controlling. When Wanda was living elsewhere, she notes, this stress was gone. Only when her child's life is unfolding before her eyes, under the same roof, does she feel the need to know where she is:

If I can't see you, I don't know what time you're leaving, what time you're coming back, who you're spending time with or whatever. So I kind of have

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to...take a leap of faith and trust in her choices, right? But when she moved back into my house, and I do know when you're leaving or coming home, and it concerns me or worries me.

Furthermore, mom cites that it is a safety issue for her to know Wanda's whereabouts. She states that she would like to know where to send the police if Wanda did not come home. Thus, it seems the issue of freedom for her adult child is bound together with her long-held parental need to keep her child safe.

As for the issue of mom's own autonomy, she mentions that Wanda moving back disrupted the routine that mom and her husband had established when she was living elsewhere. Furthermore, caring for Wanda added more responsibilities to her mom's day, diminishing her ability to spend her time doing other errands and/or helping out Wanda's father. As she said, "It becomes difficult when she moves back home, because then it's like, we have a pattern to our, a rhythm to our life, and then when she moved back home the rhythm was upset." Thus, both the parents' and the adult child's freedom to do what they pleased was upset by the move back home.

Parent/Child Closeness

On a more positive note, Wanda and her mom agree that their relationship has improved through living together again. Indeed, Wanda reports that she is closer now with both her mom and stepdad than she was living separately or when she initially moved back, rating her emotional closeness to each as a nine out of ten. Wanda mentions that the best part of living at home is "always having someone to come home to." She listed many things that she and her mom enjoy doing together, and notes that they spend time together every day. However, though spending some time with her parents is

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enjoyable, she also realizes that there is such a thing as too much time together: “I like spending time with them, but it’s just like, some nights I just want to come home from work and go straight to my room and not come out, you know? And other nights I’m ok spending time with them... it’s just... that two-edged sword.”

Mom agrees that she and her daughter are emotionally closer living together than when they lived separately. She rates her emotional closeness to Wanda at a 7, currently. She clearly cares very deeply for her daughter, stating that “she’s my baby,” and “she’s my golden child.” However, more than the mother/daughter affection, mom mentions that their relationship has evolved as Wanda has matured. Indeed, “As she’s gotten older, you know we are mother and daughter, so it’s still child and adult, but there is an aspect of our relationship that’s more friend.” Mom states that having Wanda around has allowed her to enjoy this part of their relationship, and allowed them to spend more quality time together. On the whole, this family has clearly always had a fairly strong emotional closeness, but living together as Wanda matures has allowed her and her mom to develop a new kind of “friend” relationship.

Appreciation

Very salient in the interview with Wanda is the idea of her appreciation towards her parents. She mentions that she appreciates them letting her live at home, appreciates them helping her with big decisions, and even appreciates their concern. As she states, “When you get older you start to look back and you know you’re like, ‘that was really cool of them to care.’ ” Though she admits she and her parents have conflict, she is careful to assert, “I appreciate them more than that stuff getting on my nerves.” Overall, Wanda is clearly aware of sacrifices her parents have made for her and grateful to them.

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This comes as a contrast to Wanda's mom's appraisal of Wanda's appreciation. Indeed, she says she knows that Wanda likes being taken care of, and enjoys being cooked for and cleaned up after. However, she does not believe Wanda truly understands how much her mom and dad do for her. As she explains:

Hopefully when she gets out on her own, and we're not there with safety net over everything, she'll come- she'll think, "Crap, I wish mom was here to do this." Or "mom really, she carries the load for everything," you know. But I don't know if that epiphany will come. You know, or how soon it will come.

Thus, mom seems to see the appreciation piece as either missing or inadequate in her and Wanda's relationship. It seems that the appreciation factor that Wanda mentions repeatedly to the researcher may not be communicated in the same way to her mother.

Case Two

The adult child in this case is Elyse, a 28-year-old female who moved back into her parents' home after landing a job in her hometown. At the time of the interview, she had been residing with her parents for more than two years, having originally left for college and, after graduation, working at a full-time job in another state for about two years. Her dad was willing to be interviewed alone; her mom was unavailable. Both Elyse and her dad express a high level of familial closeness and satisfaction throughout their respective interviews. Though dad admits to some frustration over Elyse's sloppiness and occasional attitude, overall their responses suggest a close and happy family unit.

Expected Household Responsibilities

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After boomeranging back home, Elyse reports that the expectations regarding household chores and responsibilities have stayed roughly the same as when she was younger. She describes a system in which each family member cleans his/her own space, and take turns cleaning up the common spaces. Indeed, she reported that she has made peace with her parents' expectations, knowing that "you're here, you live here, you're going to help out... Which is understandable." However, she leaves it to her dad to take care of lawn maintenance and yard work, and her mom to take on many of the inside chores. Interestingly, when Elyse first moved back, she said her mom tried to take on even more, automatically washing and folding Elyse's laundry. Elyse saw this as a task for her to do herself, and told her mom so. Indeed, there seemed to be an adjustment period where both Elyse and her parents attempted to figure out which responsibilities went to which person. As Elyse asserted to her mother, "I already feel bad enough moving back in, you don't need to do my laundry on top of everything."

Her dad's interview illustrates a different view of the issue of household responsibility. He mentions that rather than returning to the expectations from Elyse's childhood a conversation took place in which the parents had to assert the rules. He recalls telling his daughter, "You're an adult, act like an adult. Pick things up. How hard is that?" He also remembers that her sloppiness was always an issue, and that he and her mom have long needed to remind her to pick up after herself.

The father also mentions the laundry issue, but says Elyse was expected to do her own when she moved back in. He is either unaware or does not mention that her mom automatically did her laundry at the beginning. Thus, there is an incongruence as to how and by whom expectations were established.

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Loss of Autonomy

Like the other boomerang children interviewed, Elyse reports that she must let her parents know where she is and when she is going to be home when she leaves the house. Though her parents do not restrict where she goes or whom she sees, she must still inform them of her whereabouts. Other than this, and restrictions such as “you can’t just have a party in the middle of the day,” Elyse seems to have a good deal of freedom in her choices. However, her privacy seems to be impacted by the level of openness she and her parents share. She said that the closeness with her parents has led to very few secrets, noting: “We’re very close. Sometimes too close- they know everything. Like if I’m going on a date or something one night, they know about it. So they know everything that’s happening in my life.” Though she seems amenable to this arrangement, it is clear that she feels she has very little privacy regarding life choices and romantic relationships. Conversely, Elyse does not mention any infringement on her parents’ autonomy due to her move home.

Elyse’s dad confirms the expectation that Elyse let them know where she is when she goes out, and mentions that “she doesn’t have her freedom,” and she “doesn’t quite have the flexibility...” Indeed, he reports that one of his favorite parts of her living at home is knowing that she is safe. However, he does report that she infringes on his personal privacy and freedom. He reported that his routine at his house is affected by her presence, and it was an adjustment to get used to having her around again. He mentions having to watch what he says and does, so as not to expose her to anything she should not see/hear. As he says:

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I lose my privacy a little bit. When she's a kid, you know, she's a kid. But she's a woman now and, you know, she's home and I don't quite have my privacy. I just can't, you know, pop to the refrigerator in my underwear and stuff, I've got to, when she's back I just kind of have to watch what I say, what I do, because she's around. I don't know. I don't want her to have to hear everything I say, or, you just kind of lose your privacy, you know.

Thus, the loss of privacy is a common experience between Elyse and her dad upon her move back home.

Parent/Child Closeness

As mentioned previously, both Elyse and her father report a very close familial relationship in general that seemed to be enhanced when Elyse moved home. She claims to be extremely close to both parents currently, and emotionally closer than when she lived separately. Indeed, she reported that the distance made it harder to communicate and remain as informed about each other's lives. Elyse's boomeranging back home restored a once-deep connection between her and her parents, leading her to rate her emotional closeness to mom and dad as a 10 out of 10. She speaks of Sundays spent together as a family, watching football and sharing about their lives. As she explains:

You really do experience everything together when you're living together, so you know everything that's going on, or if they're going through a hard time, you know why. And so it definitely makes you closer I think. I could understand how it would not make you closer if you didn't get along.

Elyse's dad agrees they are a close family, but talks about a factor of irritation in their relationship that Elyse does not bring up. Indeed, he speaks of being thrilled to have her

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first move back in, and the excitement he felt upon seeing her every day. But he also mentions that he has begun to get more frustrated with her, especially with her sloppiness. He seems reluctant in the interview to acknowledge his irritation, but he ultimately concedes that he is ready for his daughter to move on and move out. He reports that emotionally they have begun to grow somewhat more distant of late, rating their emotional closeness at a seven out of 10. Again, there seems to be a disparity here between parent and child's experience of the relationship.

Appreciation

Elyse stated often throughout her interview that she was grateful for everything her parents did for her throughout her younger years. She mentions that she did not feel appreciative at the time, and in fact was rather mean to her mom. However, she reports that she sees things differently through adult eyes. Furthermore, she mentions that this appreciation of how they took care of her in the past has helped bring them closer in the present.

Elyse's dad does not echo these sentiments or seem aware of her gratitude. In his view, Elyse's kindness towards him and her mom has waned since her move back. As he says, "She got a little of that [city] attitude or something. It's like, that's not my daughter that I knew when she lived at home. She was a little more, you know, friendlier, nicer." Though he does not mention the appreciation factor per se, he does not seem on the same page with Elyse's sentiments that their closeness has blossomed with her appreciation of their past efforts.

Case Three

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The adult child in this case, Kelly, is a 29-year-old female who has lived back at home for seven years. She reports that she moved out “for love,” and was living with a boyfriend, but moved in with her parents again when she got pregnant and the relationship broke up. Her mom was interviewed alone because although her parents are still married and reside in the same house, both Kelly and her mom report that they have almost a nonexistent relationship with the father. Each reports emotional abuse perpetrated by the dad in the past, and mom notes “it is a very dysfunctional family dynamic in general.” Kelly, her parents, and her daughter Allison, live in the home along with three of Kelly’s adult brothers. Kelly reports being extremely unhappy with the boomerang living situation, rating her satisfaction level at zero out of ten. The chaotic family dynamics involved in this case provides a unique lens into an unusual boomerang child situation. Indeed, in this case, the boomerang child brought home a child of her own.

Expected Household Responsibilities

The power dynamics in this family seem extremely different from the other families interviewed. According to Kelly and her mother, no conversation took place regarding expectations or responsibilities when Kelly moved back home; as Kelly said, her parents “knew better.” Indeed, other than her parents lecturing her about laundry, Kelly reports having few expectations regarding her behavior. According to Kelly, this is consistent with her siblings as well: it is an unwritten rule that they clean up after themselves or face the ridicule from the others. As she says, “If you leave your dirty dish, you are an asshole...and you will be told so.” She reports that she must also check in with her mother about where she is and when she will be home, but attributes this to having to

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coordinate childcare for Allison. Indeed, she admits that her mom is her co-parent, and that her mom is responsible for a good deal of Allison's care and education. As for Kelly's expectations for her mom, she clearly expects her mom to help out with getting Allison ready in the morning, getting her to school, bringing her home, helping with her homework, and putting her to bed. Indeed, Kelly reports being extremely busy with work, and so looks to her mom for a considerable amount of help in taking care of Allison. As she says, "My mother is my co-parent. She is like my nanny. And my daughter will at times call her mom, she calls me mommy, or vice versa."

Kelly's mom agrees no rules were established for Kelly when she moved home. She acknowledges she has a "laissez-faire" style of parenting. However, she adds that it is very frustrating for her to deal with Kelly's sloppiness, and that Kelly does not listen to her when she asks her to clean up. The mother reports that Kelly is even messier now than when she was a child and seems to feel even less obligation to pick up. Later she says that she senses a lack of respect from her daughter.

As for childcare for Allison, mom mentions that she is trying to leave more for Kelly to do, but that Kelly has grown accustomed to having mom do it all. She reports that this is another source of frustration for her. Clearly there is conflict in this family regarding household chores and responsibilities. However, these conflicts seem to stem from long ago, arguments that re-emerged when Kelly moved back in. Despite mom's reported efforts, the tensions between mom and Kelly do not seem to be changing. As mom exclaims, "I've put forth the effort to try to communicate better and she doesn't want to do it."

Loss of Autonomy

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As for Kelly's autonomy, the only infringement seems to be the expectation that she let her mom know her where she is, in order to coordinate childcare. Otherwise, Kelly seems to operate very independently in the household. Kelly attributes this to the fact that she works long hours and says even as a child, she was not the sort who got into trouble. Kelly believes her mom respects her autonomy because Kelly has proven her maturity.

It is Kelly's mother whose freedom seems to have been limited in this boomerang situation by the burden of childcare. Allison seems to be a huge part of this grandmother's life and requires a great deal of her time. Despite the time and energy that it takes, Kelly's mom does not complain outright about her involvement with Allison during this interview. Instead, she calls herself a natural caregiver, and contends that she gives her children and grandchild all that she can. Indeed, though she states that she is sacrificing her time to help Kelly with Allison, she does not express any resentment towards this loss of autonomy.

Parent/Child Closeness

When asked to characterize her relationship with her mother, Kelly uses the word "strained." She attributes the tension in part to the fact that she has lost respect for her mother over the years, in light of her decision to stay with her alcoholic father. She mentions getting frustrated with her mother often, and rates their closeness at a four out of 10. However, her comments seem to be tempered by the realization that her mom helps her so much and so often. Indeed, as she says, "it's hard to shit-talk her because she does so much for me."

For her mom's part, she said she wishes that she and Kelly were closer. She acknowledges Kelly is less critical of her now than when she was a teenager or when she

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first returned home, and says she enjoys her daughter's company when she is available. She rates their emotional connection at seven out of 10. However, when asked about what they do for fun, mom responds, "Oh my god, nothing. We watch TV? We're terrible. We watch TV, she goes out and does fun stuff with Allison and her boyfriend."

Appreciation

Despite their strained relationship, Kelly mentioned throughout the interview that she does appreciate her mom's help since she has moved back home. She attributes her ability to graduate from college while giving birth to and raising her daughter as a direct result of being able to live at home. Furthermore, because she was in a bad situation with her ex-boyfriend, she says she knows Allison is in a better situation in the parents' home. Despite the issues they have, Kelly seems to show some tenderness and appreciation towards her mom, saying "Thank God I'm here, because what if I was with that jerk who wouldn't help me at all? Thank God I am home with my mom, who knew what a cry meant, and the different cries and what they meant, and what they needed, and when-- the days that she had colic, and things like that that I had that person there."

Though it is not clear whether her mom is aware of Kelly's appreciation, she mentions briefly that she hopes her daughter knows how much she has tried to offer support: "I hope that [Kelly] has seen that I have given her what I can. As well as her daughter."

Chapter Five: Discussion

Similar to previous research that employs a matched-set qualitative design (Aquilino 1999 & Veevers and Mitchell 1998), the findings of this study support the idea that there are both similarities and disparities between the appraisals of parent and child

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regarding the same living situation. Indeed, in both the themes discussed within the results section of this study (expected household responsibilities, loss of autonomy, parent/child closeness, and appreciation) as well as in other areas particular to each case, the perceptions of parent and adult child are often quite different. For instance, when asked to rate their emotional closeness with the other party from one to 10, parents and children from the same family were up to three points apart. This is consistent with Aquilino's (1999) study which suggests a disparity between judgments of parent/child relationship quality, with parents being generally more positive. Findings from this study also support his conclusion that parents tend to be more satisfied with the adult child's return. As mentioned, one of the participants in this study rated her satisfaction level for living back at home at a "zero." The mother from this case reported that she was, overall, satisfied with the arrangement.

Furthermore, the findings from this study echo Veevers and Mitchell's (1998) conclusions that parents of adult children provide frequent help to the adult boomerang child, often cooking meals, buying food, and offering emotional support. Indeed, the adult child from Case One acknowledges the emotional support she feels from her parents when she can vent about her job to them every day. Likewise, the adult child from Case Two acknowledges the support she feels from her parents as they get together on Sundays and spend time together. Furthermore, the adult children from each case mention the food as a benefit of being back at home.

Finally, while discussing the issue of stigma and the boomerang phenomenon as a whole, the parents from all of the cases seem to allude to the idea of the "emerging adulthood phase," as described by Arnett (2000). Though unaware of the terminology,

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they call attention the new trend of young adults taking longer to live independently, instead remaining in a transition phase. The mother from Case One expresses displeasure at this, attributing it to the younger generation's failure to deal with rejection from the outside world (the type of rejection that often comes from trying to forge an independent life in the adult world). The dad from Case Two attributes the heterogeneity of goals and living situations of young people (trademark of Arnett's "emerging adulthood") as a result of the tough financial sphere in which young adults find themselves. Clearly, though the boomerang adult literature is not commonplace, parents of these young adults have noticed the "boomerang child" and "emerging adulthood" phenomena happening in both their own families and society at large.

Certainly, there are ways in which participants of this study deviate from the conclusions of previous literature regarding the boomerang child situation. For instance, the adult child in Case 3 (rating her satisfaction level at zero) certainly contradicts the assertion by Wister, Mitchell and Gee (1997) that the majority of adult children are satisfied with the arrangement. Furthermore, this study found no apparent gender differences in mom's vs dad's satisfaction ratings (as was found in Mitchell, 1998). However, the small sample size and qualitative design of this study do not justify challenging existing literature. The data presented here might, however, illustrate the wide range of experiences possible within the boomerang child phenomenon.

Limits

As mentioned previously, one of the major limits of this study is its very small number of participants. The researcher ran into difficulties obtaining participants during the recruitment portion of this study. Though the reason for this is unclear, there are a few

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possibilities for why this might be. Perhaps interested parties did not want to volunteer without first checking with his/her parents or adult child, and the time and energy needed to confer with the other party may have put off some willing participants. Alternatively, some participants may have been hesitant to come forward due to perceived stigma (whether internal or external). Finally, perhaps some families may have considered their situation too unique and not the “typical” boomerang experience (like the adult daughter who moved back with a child of her own, or the daughter who moved back while still in college). Indeed, the mothers in both Case One and Case Three suggested during their interviews that they may not be ideal candidates for the study because their situations were so unique. Other potential families may have judged their situations to be too unusual to volunteer, without realizing how varied the “boomerang” experience can be.

An additional limit to this study is that all of the participants were Caucasian and lived in the same small town. Furthermore, there was only one dad interviewed and two mothers, while all of the adult children who participated were daughters: no sons took part. Clearly, there was a level of homogeneity in terms of demographics of participants, although this study would assert that their experience of the boomerang phenomenon ended up being extremely varied.

Finally, since this study looks systemically at the boomerang phenomenon’s effect on the family, it is limiting that only one parent from each family took part. Ideally, both parents would have been willing to share their experiences in order to give the researcher a more complete picture of the new familial arrangement. Often the parent being interviewed ended up speaking for the absent spouse. In future studies, it would be

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helpful to gain the perspective of both parents, along with resident siblings, in order to obtain a clearer systemic picture.

Clinical Implications

The issues that the parents and adult children express point to useful clinical implications for this study. Indeed, the four salient themes that emerged (expected household responsibilities, freedom/privacy, parent/child closeness, and appreciation) could be useful topics for potential boomerang families to discuss in a therapeutic setting, with a clinician who could help enable families to open lines of communication and bring more mutual understanding to the family system. Ideally, clinicians might help families learn to work out points of disagreement on their own, as well as share with one another the positive feelings of appreciation and security felt by one party, but not always expressed and therefore unknown by the other.

First, discussing household responsibilities before or during the move home could be useful in clarifying expectations and avoiding future irritation and disappointment. Conflicts arose among participants in this study when the expectations for a young adult or parent did not match his/her behavior. If expectations were clarified (i.e., “I expect you to always clean your dishes immediately after use,”) perhaps certain conflicts and disappointments could be avoided. Furthermore, clarifying the expectations of the adult child towards his/her parents could reduce role strain, as a parent is unsure of when to step in and help.

Next, though discussing the limits to an adult child’s freedom is common practice (every family had the rule that the young adult must let the parent know his/her whereabouts and when he/she would return), it may be useful for a family to discuss the

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limitation on the parents' autonomy that these participants experienced. Indeed, as evidenced in this study, the adult child often did not realize how much her parent's life was altered by her move back home. Helping young adults to understand the reciprocal effect experienced by their parents, especially concerning freedom and daily rhythms, could help foster empathy between the two parties.

Furthermore, the idea that most of the parents and young adults in this study grew closer as a result of the boomerang arrangement could be a comfort to those about to experience it. These cases, especially Case One and Case Two, can serve as a reminder to others to enjoy the added time together and the emotional support that living under one roof as adults encourages.

Finally, a very salient finding of this study suggests that adult children, even those unhappy with the boomerang arrangement, are still highly appreciative of their parents and that the parents are (for the most part) unaware of this. Clinically, it could be extremely gratifying for the parents to learn of this appreciation. Furthermore, letting the parents know they are appreciated could help foster the parent/child bond and eliminate certain conflicts that can arise when parents feel unnecessarily unappreciated. Indeed, the fact that adult children hold such positive feelings of gratitude towards their parents but neglect to share them is a topic that may need to be examined in a future study. For now, the clinical recommendation is that this appreciation be shared.

Future Research

There are many ways in which this study can be expanded upon in future research. It would be very useful to undertake this qualitative, dyadic parent/child study on a larger scale, with a higher number and more diverse participants, in order to gain

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more illustrative data that explores socioeconomic and cultural influences in the boomerang phenomenon. Furthermore, a study in which both parents, boomerang children and their siblings are all interviewed would give an even more insightful view into the systemic effects. In the literature to date, siblings seem to be the forgotten part of the family system in the boomerang arrangement. A qualitative study taking into account the sibling's opinion could be very enlightening. Furthermore, a qualitative study that takes into the account the age of the boomerang child would be very informative, as would a study looking primarily at boomerang children returning with a child of his/her own. Since the systemic effects of boomerang children do appear to be very heterogeneous, these qualitative studies mentioned would be useful in helping the public to understand what, exactly, is going on with this generation of "emerging" adults.

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Appendix A: Demographic Information

Demographics of adult child participants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Approximate personal Income	Ethnicity	Number of Children	Reported emotional closeness towards parents currently
Wanda	22	Single	College Diploma	\$8.75 hourly	Caucasian	0	9 mom, 8.5 or 9 dad
Elyse	28	Single	Some Graduate School	50k annually	Caucasian	0	10 mom, 10 or higher dad
Kelly	29	Single	College Diploma	45k annually	Caucasian	1	4 mom, 1 dad

Demographics of parent participants

Identifier	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Approximate combined income of husband & wife	Ethnicity	Number of Children/ Stepchildren	Reported emotional closeness towards daughter currently
Wanda's mom	55	Married	Some graduate school	125k annually	Caucasian	4	8
Elyse's dad	55	Married	High school diploma	160k annually	Caucasian	2	7
Kelly's mom	58	Married	Master's degree	125k annually	Caucasian	6	7

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Appendix B: Interview Questions

QUESTIONNAIRE TO PARENT(S):

Introduction Script:

My name is Lauren Kruck and I'm conducting this interview as a part of the thesis requirement for my Master's program in Marriage and Family Therapy. The purpose of my study is to understand your perspective of the experience of your adult child living back home. There are no right answers-- I am just looking for your opinions on the experience. Of course, if you feel uncomfortable answering you can feel free to opt out of any question or withdraw from this study at any time.

My focus is on how the “boomeranging” of a young adult affects the family as a whole. *(If more than one young adult has boomeranged and are all currently living at home: For this study, if you have more than one adult child living at home, I would like you to focus on the one that has agreed to complete this interview with me as well).* Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

Interview Questions

Background:

What were the circumstances surrounding _____'s (child's name) decision to move back home?

Why did he/she move out originally?

What led to him/her moving back in?

What has it been like to have _____ (child's name) living with you again?

What was the initial adjustment period like?

How about now?

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If there have been multiple moves in and out of the home, were there any differences in how each one went?

What were the differences?

Did you and ____ (child's name) discuss what it would be like before the move?

Were there any rules or expectations set beforehand?

Do you have household rules now? How about general guidelines/expectations? Please describe.

How were these established?

Which, if any, household chores is ____ (child's name) responsible for?

Is he/she expected to pay rent or living expenses? Please describe.

Which, if any, chores do you do for ____ (child's name)?

Is ____ (child's name) living at home in any ways the same as when he/she was younger?

How?

How is it different?

Satisfaction, boundaries, and relationship questions:

What is your relationship with ____ (child's name) like now?

What was your relationship like when he/she was living separately?

What was your relationship like when he/she just moved back?

In your opinion, how has living together currently affected your relationship?

This may be a hard one. Can you scale the closeness you currently feel to ____ (child's name) from 1-10?

BOOMERANG CHILDREN

How about while you were living separately?

How about when you first moved back home?

How satisfied are you with this living arrangement?

How do you think your ____ (child's name) would rate his/her satisfaction?

What is the best part of ____ (child's name) living at home?

What is the worst?

Is there conflict between you and ____ (child's name)?

If so, what is it generally about?

How often would you say this conflict occurs?

What activities do you enjoy doing with ____ (child's name)?

How often would you say you spend time with ____ (child's name)?

How does ____ (child's name) living at home affect any siblings living in the home?

How it is looked at by any siblings outside of the home?

In what ways does ____ (child's name) living at home affect the family as a whole?

Has ____ (child's name) living at home affected your marital relationship (*if applicable*)?

In what ways?

At what point did you notice these effects?

Emerging adulthood (life stage) questions:

Do you consider ____ (child's name) an adult? Why or why not?

Has there been any stigma surrounding ____ (child's name) decision to live at home?

If so, where does that come from?

Did you yourself ever move back into your childhood home as an adult?

BOOMERANG CHILDREN

Research suggests that more and more young adults are moving back into their childhood homes. As such, what's your perception of the boomerang child phenomenon as a whole?

What do you think the cause is?

How long do you expect ____ (child's name) to live at home?

Why do you think he/she might move out?

TO ADULT CHILD:

Introduction Script:

My name is Lauren Kruck and I'm conducting this interview as a part of the thesis requirement for my Master's program in Marriage and Family Therapy. The purpose of my study is to understand your perspective of the experience of your adult child living back home. There are no right answers-- I am just looking for your opinions on the experience. Of course, if you feel uncomfortable answering you can feel free to opt out of any question or withdraw from this study at any time. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

Interview Questions

Background:

What were the circumstances surrounding your decision to move back home?

Why did you move out originally, and what led to you moving back in?

What is your average day like? For instance, are you working, in school, looking for a job?

What has it been like living at home again?

What was the initial adjustment period like, when you first moved back home?

BOOMERANG CHILDREN

How about now? Is it different?

How?

If there have been multiple moves in and out of the home, were there any differences in how each one went?

Did you and your parents discuss what it would be like before the move back home?

Please provide any examples you can think of.

Were there any rules or expectations set beforehand?

What examples can you think of?

Are there set rules for you now? What are they?

How about general guidelines/expectations?

How were these established?

Are you responsible for any household chores? If so, which ones?

Which household chores do your parents do?

Are you expected to pay rent and/or living expenses? Please describe.

Are there any ways in which living at home is the same as when you were younger?

In what ways?

How is it different?

Satisfaction, boundaries, and relationship questions:

What is your relationship with your parents like now?

How has your relationship changed since living back at home?

What was your relationship like when you were living separately?

How has living together as an adult affected your relationship?

BOOMERANG CHILDREN

This may be a hard one. Can you scale the closeness you feel to each parent from 1-10 currently?

How about while you were living separately?

How about when you first moved back home?

How do you think your decision to live at home has affected your parents?

How satisfied do you think they are with the arrangement?

How satisfied are you?

In your opinion, what is the best part of living at home?

What is the worst?

Is there conflict with your parents? If so, what is it generally about?

How often do these conflicts happen?

Has there been conflict with any siblings, either living in the home or living elsewhere, due to your move back home?

Please describe.

What, if any, activities do you enjoy doing with your parents?

How often would you say that you all spend time together?

How has living at home affected your siblings?

Has it affected your relationship with them, and how?

Do you think it has affected your parent's relationship with them?

In what ways?

Did any of your siblings ever "boomerang" back home after living elsewhere?

If so, are they still there? Please describe.

If not, how long did they stay? Please describe.

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Emerging adulthood (life stage) questions:

Changing gears a bit-- Do you consider yourself an adult?

Why or why not?

Do your parents consider you an adult? Why or why not?

Has there been any stigma or judgment surrounding your decision to live at home?

Where does that come from?

(Prompt: Any internal stigma? External? From where?)

Do you experience any hesitancy in telling others where you live?

Please describe.

How long do you expect to live there?

What would be your reasons for moving out?

Appendix C: Recruitment Flier

Attention “Boomerang” Families!

Are you a young adult living back home, either after college or after living separately? Or are you a parent with an adult child living at home again?

We need your help!

The purpose of this study is to add to the growing body of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of “boomerang children” and adult/child co-residence. The plan is to investigate the effect of the return home of a young adult on the family system.

All eligible families must have:

- A young adult (between 18 and 30 years old) living primarily back with his/her parents after a time living separately. This includes young adults who moved back home after college, or any period of independent living
- Families in which these young adults and at least one parent are willing to participate in separate face-to-face interviews lasting approximately one hour.

Please contact the researcher below for more information!

Lauren Kruck

540-222-8572

Lmkruc@vt.edu

Appendix D: IRB Approval
Letter



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
email irb@vt.edu
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 5, 2015
TO: Angela J Huebner, Lauren Michelle Kruck
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)
PROTOCOL TITLE: The Impact of the “Boomerang Child” Phenomenon on the Family System.
IRB NUMBER: 15-174

Effective March 4, 2015, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 5,6,7
Protocol Approval Date: March 4, 2015
Protocol Expiration Date: March 3, 2016
Continuing Review Due Date*: February 18, 2016

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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