

EXPERIENCING UNIVERSITY LIFE AWAY FROM HOME: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON HOMESICKNESS IN OFF-SITE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Enrolling in university marks an important step toward adulthood, yet for students moving away from home, the experience can be daunting and challenging (Nghiem et al., 2021). Homesickness, a typical reaction to this separation, is frequently experienced by off-site students, particularly among younger individuals and particularly females, and can sometimes lead to negative effects like depression, loneliness, anger, and sleep problems (Biasi et al., 2018; Stroebe et al., 2015). Numerous studies have analyzed contextual, individual, and family factors linked to homesickness, usually through questionnaires. This study, however, aims to explore the psychological experiences of a group of off-site students, focusing on areas where they experience homesickness, using a narrative approach. A sample of forty-seven off-site students (33 female; average age 23; SD=2.6) completed a socio-demographic form and wrote a narrative text about their university experience. They focused on changes in their relationships with family and friends, their emotions, the difficulties they face away from home, and their academic and social lives. Through thematic analysis and Bruner's self-indicators, results revealed that while physical distance does not sever ties with family and friends, students often struggle with adjusting to university life and to the new city without the support of these relationships. Their moods tend to be predominantly negative, with an associated fear of losing friendships due to distance and a feeling of missing out on shared daily experiences. Many students report a strong nostalgia for their "homeland" and feel overburdened by having to manage organizational responsibilities previously dealt with by their parents. Bruner's social self-indicators appeared frequently in the narratives, with female students emphasizing the value of new friendships for adjustment, while male students highlighted the importance of family ties in relation to homesickness. The findings confirm existing research on homesickness in off-site students and shed light on the specific areas it affects, such as family, friendships, and life adjustment. They also suggest that the difficulties tied to the university transition are part of a broader shift toward adulthood. Although limited by sample size, the study contrasts with existing research in finding that female students in this sample tend to use social resources to adapt to the university environment.

Keywords: *Off-site students, homesickness, transition to university, narrative approach.*

1. Introduction

The transition to university occurs in a particular developmental stage, that of "emerging adulthood," in respect to which the literature (Arnett, 2015; Lapsley & Hardy, 2017) has identified both resources and constraints:

- explorations of identity
- sense of possibility and optimism
- increased self-esteem and perception of self-efficacy
- refocusing on self
- instability
- feeling of being "in the middle"
- internalizing and externalizing problems.

It is within this developmental context that the transition to university takes place, a time in which the above-mentioned aspects find ample space and are intertwined for all, but especially for off-site and female students, that is, those who live far from home and their families for study reasons. Entering university is seen as a milestone in the transition to adulthood, but it can be particularly challenging for those leaving home (Nghiem et al., 2021).

For those studying away from home, the transition to university involves leaving old friendships and creating new ones, changing family relationships, and the need for reassurance and social support.

Homesickness is a normal reaction of those who move away from their living environment, (Firmin et al., 2009; Nghiem et al., 2021; Nijhof & Engles, 2007), but it can lead to negative outcomes such as difficulties in concentration and problem-solving, nervousness, anxiety, sadness, obsessive preoccupation with thoughts of home, sleep disturbances and physical health, and academic difficulties (Biasi et al., 2018; Stroebe et al., 2015; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010).

Research, mainly conducted through questionnaires, has highlighted individual, contextual and family factors that may influence the perception of homesickness: lack of coping strategies (Ting et al, 2020), temperamental and personality variables (Asendorpf, 2000), social skills and social connectedness (Almocera et al, 2020), parenting styles and parenting support (Uchenna, Onuoha, Opeyemi, & Segun-Martins, 2013), and gender differences (Al-Qaisy, 2010).

2. Objectives

Based on these premises, our study aimed to explore the experience and the homesickness of a group of out-of-home students with respect to:

- Family and friendship relationships
- Emotions and moods
- Difficulties encountered
- Advantages and disadvantages
- Social life
- University experience
- Future job prospects.

3. Methods

To this end, we followed an exploratory and narrative approach, since writing about oneself induces self-reflection, helps bring order to events, and give meaning to the events in one's life. In addition, producing a narrative account allows the emergence of indicators of the Self (Bruner, 1998), such as action, commitment, resources, social reference, localization, evaluation, quality, reflexivity, and coherence.

3.1. Participants

Forty-seven university students living away from home were recruited through a convenience sample (F=33; M=13; Other=1):

- Age 18/28 years (M=23 years)
- Average distance between residence and university: 342 km
- Time away from home: (6<1 year; 41>1 year)
- Field of study:
 - 11 humanities
 - 10 sciences
 - 10 economic-legal
 - 4 technical subjects
 - 12 medical health

3.2. Narrative tool

After collecting general personal data such as age, gender, distance from home, field of study, time away from home, we proposed writing a short text according to the following cue:

“Try to narrate something about yourself and your life about your experience as a university student away from home. You have a minimum of 10 lines and a maximum of 30 lines available. I invite you to focus the narrative on the following points:

- How have your relationships with your family and friends changed?
- What are your emotions and moods?
- What difficulties have you encountered living away from home?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages?
- Has your social life changed?
- How do you evaluate your college experience academically?
- Where do you imagine looking for a job after earning your degree?”

3.3. Analysis of texts

Qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify emerging themes, both in respect to the suggested areas and to others not expected and to search for Bruner's "indicators of the Self".

Analysis was carried out with a step-by-step procedure. We independently read the narratives several times and have reported all the content that we have considered to be significant; then we compared our ideas about the content that had emerged, identifying recurring themes.

Below is an example of the text produced:

"My life as an off-site student has enriched me greatly because it has changed the way I see life and perceive myself. I have understood my parents and their difficulties more. With my lifelong friends not much has changed but the difficulty is to be present despite the physical distance. However, it happens that I feel lonely, misunderstood and homesick. Academically it is definitely a disadvantage because you have concerns about housing and roommates." (26-year-old girl, only child, sciences, 7 years away from home, 550 km away, home every 2 months).

4. Results

Table 1 and Table 2 show the main themes and Self indicators emerging from the narratives.

Table 1. Main themes emerging from the narratives.

PARENTS AND FRIENDS RELATIONSHIPS	EMOTIONS AND MOODS	DIFFICULTIES	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	SOCIAL LIFE
<p><u>Weakened</u> because we see little of each other (both parents and friends)</p> <p><u>Unchanged</u>, compared to family</p> <p><u>Improved</u> (family) One appreciates ties more</p>	<p>Loneliness</p> <p>Guilt</p> <p>Nostalgia for the homeland</p> <p>Lack of friends and relatives</p> <p>Desire to return</p> <p>Restlessness/anxiety</p> <p>Perception and fear of loss of relationships</p> <p>Anger toward institutions</p> <p>Ambivalent feelings (happy/tristful; enthusiasm/distrust; pride/fears)</p>	<p>Living alone</p> <p>Not knowing anyone</p> <p>Organization (time, home, study)</p> <p>New responsibilities</p> <p>Self-management</p> <p>New habits</p> <p>Roommate cohabitation</p> <p>Adjusting to new city alone</p> <p>Not knowing how to deal with new situations</p>	<p>Freedom/independence</p> <p>Time (for study and being alone)</p> <p>Autonomy in self-management and self-care</p> <p>Getting away from unpleasant situations</p> <p>More efficient academic facilities and services</p> <p>Gaining new experiences</p> <p>Developing new skills</p> <p>Responsibility</p> <p>Sense of self-efficacy</p>	<p>Doing things on your own</p> <p>Household management</p> <p>Not having opportunities to cultivate one's passions</p> <p>Not finding "warmth" upon returning home</p> <p>New relationships superficial, old ones weakened</p> <p>Economic problems</p> <p>Psychological problems</p> <p>Disorganization</p> <p>Lack of home comforts</p>	<p><u>Improved</u> (new socializations, maintaining old relationships, more opportunities)</p> <p><u>Worsened</u> (isolation, little time, roommates only, difficulties with fellow students)</p>

Table 2. Main Self indicators emerging from narratives.

EVALUATION	SOCIAL REFERENCE	REFLEXIVITY	RESOURCES	COMMITMENT
It is the most frequent indicator (90) It emerges especially in girls with respect to consideration of the difficulties encountered, advantages and disadvantages of living away from home.	Very frequent indicator (88) It emerges mainly with family members, but also with old and new friends. More frequent in girls, who seem to be more willing to build new social networks.	Very frequent indicator (63) Greater tendency in girls to reflect on their moods, come to terms with advantages and disadvantages, and seek a compromise between positive and negative aspects.	Fairly common indicator (49) It emerges equally among males and females, such as with respect to new skills or conditions acquired off-site, which can then be used in various areas.	Fairly frequent indicator (38) It emerges mainly in relation to plans for the future, whether related to continuing studies or looking for a job.

Summarizing the themes that emerged in general, almost all off-site students have experienced or are experiencing negative feelings related to being away from home. Despite the problems and disadvantages noted, however, most are able to identify resources and a spur to engage in study and future work, while the university experience is largely seen as good and satisfying. Only a few narratives appear to be entirely negative, suggesting individual problems.

5. Conclusions and limitations

The narrative tool provided insights into the experiences of off-site students facing new challenges and encouraged participants to work on introspection. Some of the aspects emphasized in the literature about emerging adults were revealed from the narratives, such as self-efficacy, sense of possibility, exploration in the social, but also ambivalence, instability, being in the middle, and the search for re-centering and coherence.

Our study has some limitations. Data were collected via an online platform, so there was no opportunity to meet and interact directly with the students involved. This is an exploratory study with a limited number of participants, unbalanced by gender, recruited by convenience sampling and therefore not representative of the population. However, it has provided insights that encourage us to continue the research in this direction.

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