

Taking the Girl out of New York: An Autoethnography of Cultural Realizations and Changes in

College

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### **Abstract**

In this autoethnography, I explore the changes and realizations that occur when becoming a first-year student at a university far from home. After having little to no experience being away from home and being raised with a controlling parenting style, I had many hindering effects as a first-year college student. I use research on parenting styles, mental health, social differences, social media FOMO, and all of their connections to analyze my college experience and the causes of some of my challenges. My research explores the obstacles first-year college students face. Using data from various studies, I continue to explore how first-year students' mental health at college is negatively affected by controlling parenting styles and social differences these students have with their peers. Later on in this paper, I conclude by offering suggestions for students that are experiencing feelings of homesickness.

### **Autoethnography**

Living in a small town on Long Island, New York for 17 years was very sheltering. Little did I know the state I was from impacted my identity as much as it did. Coming to Florida for college was a big step in my life; I was moving over 1,000 miles away to be without my family and living with people I had just met. It was a very nerve-wracking experience picking up and going to Florida on move-in weekend in fall 2017. I'll never forget when my parents finally finished helping me move into Morsani Hall, and I had to say my final goodbye to them. This was the first time I had ever seen my dad cry, which was a very emotional event for all of us. At that moment, I was realizing this would be one of the last days I would be able to see my family. I remember when they left I was hysterically crying, and then my mom called me telling me to look out my dorm room window. I looked down to see my mom, dad, and younger sister waving at me from outside with tears in their eyes. It was the first day of a brand new chapter of my life.

This essay is divided into eight sections where I describe my college experience of cultural realizations and emotional changes in college. I explain the realizations that I had when I began attending UT and analyze my experience from the angle of my family's parenting style, using research from different studies. I then go on to examine my social differences while exploring self determination, cultivation, and "build and broaden" theories. I later examine how my mental health as a first-year student was affected and talk about the social outlets and routines I developed to help. "Social Media FOMO" is another section where I inspect more research that connects the concept to homesickness. Finally, I conclude with future advice for students and parents struggling with similar experiences, along with how I overcame these obstacles.

## **Transition to College**

I began to have some realizations at the very start of college. I was shocked to find out I must complete tasks on my own, instead of my parents doing everything for me. I wouldn't have anyone making sure I sleep enough, eat enough, or complete all my schoolwork. Having to balance academics, my social life, and taking care of myself all at once was a lot harder than I thought. I had to implement a new system in my life, learning time management skills, budgeting money, and prioritizing different things over others. Since college is such a big bubble, I would be able to mold myself into anything I want. I also realized this meant I started changing different aspects of who I was, such as the way I acted around others, the way I spoke, and even the way I thought. This definitely contributed to the culture shocks during my transition to college. Coming to college so far away from where I'm from made me find myself and discover who I really am today.

Deciding to attend the University of Tampa was a major leap for me; it absolutely made me go outside of my comfort zone. I applied to fifteen different universities all over the country. I could've attended school very close to home as a commuter student, living with my parents for all four years. I was a very sheltered child before coming to college. I never left the state without my parents before, and I never had a sleepover until my first night away at college. Research suggests that "generally, individuals with more experiences away from home are less likely to become homesick than those with little experiences" (Sun, 2015, p. 19). My dad has always been very strict throughout my life, almost to a point where it's controlling. That being said, when it came to making my own decision and being able to decide for myself the college I wanted to attend, it was a big deal for me. My dad was not very happy when he heard about how

badly I wanted to go to the University of Tampa, since that meant he had to let go of the reins a little.

### **Parenting Style**

Experts say that there has been a shift in the ways of parenting; a parenting style many are using is called “helicopter parenting.” My parents have been extremely involved in my life, and many would consider my dad a “helicopter parent.” This term is defined as “a parent who is overly involved in the life of his or her child” (Merriam-Webster). Studies about helicopter parents and the relationship with the well being of college students were completed. The results found that “helicopter parenting behaviors were related to higher levels of depression and decreased satisfaction with life” (Schiffirin, 2013, p. 14). Students like myself who are the children of “helicopter parents” have thoughts and feelings about our psychological needs not being met while away at college. Since so many parents become overly involved in their children’s lives, they have inserted themselves between the Universities and students. There has been an increase in the interactions between parents and universities, whether it is the parents of prospective students or currently enrolled students. Judith Hunt explains in her study that “helicopter parents are influencing the entire university from the prospecting stage before the application process, campus housing, relationships with academic advisors and faculty, and at the exit stage with career services and even on to graduate school, and beyond into employment” (Hunt, 2008, p. 3). The dean of students at University of South Florida named Tom Miller, was quoted in the *St. Petersburg Times* saying, “Where parent behavior becomes a challenge for us is when they encourage dependence, and they become too involved because they are afraid their son or daughter will make a mistake” (Hunt, 2008, p. 3). These helicopter parents

clearly cause a lack of independence, leading to a lack of self confidence within students when they try to go on and achieve things themselves.

I absolutely was able to relate with patterns found in students who have parents who hover over them. When I was younger, my dad and I were not that close at all. He was always busy working. Our only interactions would consist of saying “good morning,” having dinner together, and then saying “good night.” Other than that, he would only really talk to me to make sure my grades in school were high, or question me about what I was doing. My dad would not get me a phone until I was in 9th grade, even though everyone else already had one for years. I also was not allowed to have a Facebook account or Instagram account for a while. He had a very controlling parenting style, which is another trait of helicopter parents. When my friends went places to hang out, sometimes I wasn’t allowed to go. I wasn’t allowed to have sleepovers with my friends, and would have to get picked up from places early. Whenever I would ask why I’m not allowed to do certain things he would just say, “because I am your dad and I say so”. Once he got me my new car in high school, he put a tracker on it to see where I was and how fast I was driving. If I was not home before 11:00 PM, I got in trouble, which was very frustrating because my friends were allowed to stay out late.

My mom and I were a lot closer, and she basically did everything for me. She was always on my side and let me do things I wanted to, but she did not have as much say as my dad. At restaurants when the waiter would ask for my order, my mom would talk for me and give them my order. Between my dad’s strictness and my mom babying me, I was unsure of how I would survive at college. My lack of independence growing up contributed to the way I acted when I was living on my own at school. Schiffirin suggested “children of over-involved or over-

controlling parents may feel less competent and less able to manage life” (Schiffrin, 2013, p. 3). I did not have faith in myself to make certain decisions on campus. It was even a struggle to decide what I wanted to eat on certain days, since my parents always made those decisions. I had so much freedom out of nowhere that I didn’t even know what to do with it. I had trouble making many different decisions because my parents constantly made every decision for me prior to college. Universities try to have students grow and be able to function as mature adults, setting them up for the real world. Helicopter parents, similar to my dad, tend to hinder the process of growing as an adult for us students.

In exploring research about helicopter parents, the self-determination theory is extremely useful because parents may impede our needs by being so involved. The self-determination theory was talked about in the study Schiffrin conducted about helicopter parents from “*Helping or Hovering?*” This theory is focused mainly on three psychological needs that are innate and universal. These three needs are competence, connection, and autonomy. With these three needs, people are able to become self determined. In many cases, Schiffrin said that the controlling aspect of “helicopter parenting” could totally go against these psychological needs. A great takeaway from this article that I closely related to was that “helicopter parenting behaviors may also interfere with feeling a sense of competence because such parental actions can convey the message that parents do not have faith in their child’s abilities. Furthermore, when parents solve problems for their children, then children may not develop the confidence and competence to solve their own problems” (Schiffrin, 2013, p. 16). Whenever I had an issue, my parents would handle it for me, which is another reason why being on my own was such a challenge. They always called to make my doctors appointments; now it was a big adjustment having to call the

health center by myself. I had to learn how to do laundry for the first time without my mom. I also had to learn how to cook for myself and eat on my own schedule. Obviously, now these seem like such simple things we do in our everyday lives, but to the college freshman, it seemed like the end of the world. This made me realize I had a lot to learn, not just in the classroom.

### **Social Differences**

Being from New York, I brought many customs and habits to Florida with me. There were also a lot of different assumptions people such as my classmates and roommates made about me because of where I am from. Florida is a melting pot of people from all over; I came across many people from far away states and even countries. Many students who attend UT are from the northeast, and my freshman year roommates were from upstate New York and Massachusetts. I always had a very strong Long Island accent while talking to everyone, and when I arrived at college, my roommates made fun of me for my accent. I pronounced words differently than others and thought that since my parents spoke that same way that it was normal. The way I pronounced words was with the “AW” sound and usually dropping the “R” from certain words. My roommates continued to make fun of my accent and mimic all of the things I said. This made me feel like I needed to succumb to the social influence I was feeling and talk how everyone else did. Students change their hobbies, habits, etc., due to increased interactions with others. The influence of adolescents in this transitional period of being away at college “plays a major role in the behavioral changes of the students and more so when there is a fear of conformity and social acceptance by their fellow peers” (Mistry, 2019, p. 63). I definitely began to conform and start masking my accent later on in the year, due to what everybody else said and because I was sick of getting made fun of. My accent still came out sometimes, but really only



while on the phone with my parents and sister. I felt like I had to fit in with social influences and try to be like the other members of my new friend group at school. At home, I wasn't exactly the biggest social butterfly, but meeting so many new people at once, I felt that I needed to change myself to be like them. In college, there is absolutely a "higher need of social acceptance and hence peers pressurize each other to do certain things and in a way influence each other" (Mistry, 2019, p. 63). Since I was constantly getting made fun of by my roommate about my strong accent, I felt pressured that I had to change it and talk in a "normal" way like the others. This made me extremely homesick because I would not have gotten made fun of for this at home, and I also missed talking with my family like how I used to.

Going from not having any social experiences without my family to now meeting people from all walks of life was a contrasting experience as opposed to what I was used to. Some would describe going away to college to be similar to a sleep away summer camp, which I also never had any experience with going to. Homesickness is considered the "distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home" (Thurber, 2012, p. 1). I felt a very strong separation from home, having to make so many adjustments at once was scary for me. I was scared my relationships with friends and family from home were going to not be as strong and connected. I was afraid of change and felt like I had been thrown into something I wasn't ready for. I found it very interesting and valid that Jie Sun stated that "the results of the study confirm two constructs underlying homesick scales: separation and distress. Females, out-of-state residents, students living on campus and first-generation college students reported a significantly higher degree of homesick separation" (Sun, 2015, p. X). This perfectly applied to me considering I was an out-of-state female living on campus, being the first one in my family to

go away to school. When moving far away to college, students are forced to almost put their old life at home behind them. Students don't have the privilege of getting to see their families or friends from home as much anymore. Due to this, "grief and emotional distress may go along with this adjustment process. Moreover, the feeling of loss, the self-doubt and disappointment can emerge in students' encountering the unfamiliar environment at college, potentially triggering self-defeating habits" (Paul, 2001). I felt like I was about to fail in this new environment and wasn't confident in myself, which led to a very rough patch of trying to adjust.

### **Mental Health**

During this time of experiencing homesickness, I felt the need to go home to Long Island constantly, extremely insecure, and disoriented in my new environment of the Morsani dorm Hall. I struggled to feel accepted by others, and felt that I wasn't able to make many new close friends like the ones I had back on Long Island. According to an article from Health Alliance Plan of Michigan's Balanced Living, "over 30 percent of college students experience low-level homesickness. And about 69 percent of first year college students experience severe homesickness" (HAP Balanced Living, 2018). I was definitely in the category of experiencing severe homesickness. Throughout grade school, I was always a straight A student, took pride in academics, and studied very hard. I took college level courses in high school, so academically I was prepared for the workload I was about to receive at UT. When I was homesick, I struggled to concentrate on any of my work, and in the first semester, I became extremely stressed out about even the littlest task I would get assigned to complete at school. Brewin's study on "*Demographic and Psychological Determinants of Homesickness*" found "significant positive

relationships between homesickness and cognitive failures, poor concentration, decreased work quality, lower academic performance and higher scores on anxiety and depression measures” (Brewin, 1989). My grades did not necessarily drop a great amount during the first semester, but I definitely realized that I needed to put more effort in to focus on studying and completing my work. I would be trying to write a paper and all of a sudden hit a writer's block, get anxiety and break out in hives out of nowhere. It was a struggle trying to concentrate on schoolwork and other tasks while developing anxiety.

Trying to cope with anxiety during freshman year not being home with my parents was extremely difficult. I struggled with feelings of self doubt, and trying to independently manage my life was overwhelming at times. Having social anxiety, along with separation anxiety was a major obstacle getting in the way of a transition I had once been very excited about. I struggled with adapting to this new environment I was in and constantly compared it with how my home life was, whether it was the dorm room, food options, or methods of transportation. In a study completed by Loyola University Chicago about homesickness in socially anxious first-year college students, it was reported that students who are homesick have a tendency of viewing their home environments in a more positive way compared to their current situations at school. This suggested that when the students had positive experiences from where they came from, it was much more difficult to leave it all behind (Urani, 2003). I did not have my usual support system with me, and would have to call my parents if I had another mental breakdown. It was hard not being able to see my parents, but they came down to visit as much as they could. Family cohesion is a major factor that contributes to homesickness.

Since I was so dependent on my parents for everything, it greatly contributed to the emotions I was feeling longing to be home. Kazantzis and Flett researched the correlation between homesickness and family cohesion to see if there really was a relationship between the two factors. Family cohesion was in fact a significant predictor in the homesickness experience that university students deal with during their first year. Having a dependency on others was weighing heavily on the students participating in this study (Kazantzis, 1998). I was so dependent on my parents that it became very hard for me to be without them every day. After my constant FaceTime calls to my mom crying, she suggested I go to a therapist to try and relieve the stress and anxiety I was feeling.

I began going to therapy over at the University of Tampa's Dickey Health and Wellness Center on campus, and it started to help me more with dealing with my anxiety and homesickness. Similar to an article from *US News*, the therapists at the health center were giving helpful advice to cope with the problems I had. The article states that the director at Loyola University Maryland's counseling center, Jason Parcover speaks about homesickness saying it is actually "a normal response to being separated from the people, places, things and overall culture that give you a sense of belonging. In this way, homesickness is about attachment. When we feel homesick, we're feeling insecure or uncomfortable with where we are. We're longing for something that is known, predictable, consistent and stable" (Moody, 2019). This quote is very valid, and similar statements were said by my counselor. The Dickey Health and Wellness Center at UT made me understand homesickness is a normal feeling, and that it happens to many of us. My counselor gave me a line of notable advice that stuck with me through the years. She said

“you are not alone in any of this”. It was crucial that I remember I’m in the same boat as many other first-year college students with this feeling.

### **Social Outlets**

I was guided in a good direction by my counselor when she advised me to start new traditions that would make me feel more comfortable on campus. I began to go on walks near the river every day, sit on the dock by the water, and go hammocking to enjoy the beauty of the campus and relax. I also paid attention to the different events UT had to offer on campus, whether it was in Vaughn courtyard or even at the pool. Another great piece of advice she gave me was to find an opportunity to connect with more people and put myself out there, which I was nervous about doing. My one roommate told me she signed up to go through sorority recruitment because she wanted to meet more people and feel like she belonged to something more. I was very hesitant at first to make this decision. I thought being in a sorority was very intimidating and actually thought of it as the stereotypes we see in the media today. As much as I was open to meeting new people, I just did not think being in a sorority was for me.

The media’s portrayal of Greek life as a whole made me think I could never see myself in one; the impact media has on public perception has been researched extensively by many scholars. Media affects the way people think of certain social concepts, and the cultivation theory comes into play here. The cultivation theory was developed in the late 1960s by George Gerbner. Gerbner argued that there were different meanings mass produced through different forms of media which would foster, or cultivate public beliefs (Potter, 2014). Ever since I was young, I believed that not only Greek life, but college as a whole was going to be partying and drinking which I never was a fan of. I was extremely intimidated to come to college, I found myself

thinking my roommates were going to be big partiers and that they would distract me from my studies. Gerbner stated, “the world of television drama is a mixture of truth and falsehood, of accuracy and distortion. It is not the true world but an extension of the standardized images which we have been taught since childhood” (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). This statement is extremely accurate, considering the portrayal of college on certain shows such as *Blue Mountain State*, *Greek*, *Gilmore Girls*, etc. helped the public form these beliefs that college is nothing but partying and heavy drinking. I decided to step out of my comfort zone and challenge the stereotypes of Greek life. I gave it a chance, and signed up for recruitment the following week. I met many different girls during recruitment and wound up joining Delta Gamma, where I gained 150 new opportunities of friends and a support system. Once I joined the sorority, it was overwhelming at first having an outstanding number of people to meet. I found myself now having all these new plans, making my schedule a lot busier.

With the sorority, I was able to attend charity events and help out the community as well. Once I began to volunteer, I noticed I was becoming a lot happier. It definitely had a positive effect on my mental health. According to a journal article called “*The Effects of Volunteering on the Volunteer*,” volunteering has a positive connection with mental health. Community service activities are a type of social participation, and social integration had positive mental health effects rather than being isolated. Another reason why there is a relationship between volunteering and mental health is because of helping behavior. This helps make a difference in your community, give a self validating experience, and increase self esteem and self efficacy (Wilson, 1999). As I felt myself belonging to a community more, it definitely made it easier for me to stay in Tampa my freshman year. However, I still continued to get upset

and occasionally depressed while missing special events at home that I usually would've been there for.

### **Social Media FOMO**

Not being home on Long Island 24/7 anymore was a major adjustment when it came to birthdays and occasions that I had to miss. My mom and I are very close; we Snapchat each other consistently throughout the day and FaceTime almost every day. It will get frustrating when she calls me on FaceTime from a family party that I won't get to be at or Snapchatting me from my favorite restaurant back at home. This tended to give me fear of missing out, also known as FOMO. FOMO is also a psychological trait. It is described as a "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski, 2013, p. 1841). In the media today, the fear of missing out is a very popular thing to see and experience. There are many associations between FOMO and increased use on social networking platforms. "The popular media has suggested that FOMO is likely amplified by the proliferation of social media, making it easier than ever to be aware of experiences on which one is missing out" (Milyavskaya, 2018, p. 726). Social media definitely made me struggle with having FOMO. For me, it was an out of sight out of mind thing; if I didn't see the fun everyone was supposedly having, I would not have been as upset about missing the occasion. People also obviously only post things on social media that people want them to see. For example, if I am out having a great time, then I would probably post a story on social media. If I'm having a boring time, I'd be less inclined to post anything, since there would be nothing exciting to show. People only really show the good in their life on social media, which is why FOMO happens more often than not. Obviously, I wanted to stay as connected with my family and friends as possible, but doing so

also made me miss out. Seeing my cousins at a family party at my house, or seeing friends out to dinner posting together on social media would upset me occasionally. In a study, experts took samples from first-year university students to assess if they were experiencing FOMO throughout their week: “Results showed that FOMO was prevalent for these students throughout the day, particularly later in the day and later in the week” (Milyavskaya, 2018, p. 730). This is the timing of when I would also experience FOMO. It usually was during my down time when I wasn’t busy doing homework or when I wasn’t in class on the weekend. I fit right in with the results of this study because “more frequent FOMO experiences were associated with increased negative affect, increased fatigue, greater stress, more sleep problems and physical symptoms, while unrelated to positive affect and vitality” (Milyavskaya, 2018, p. 729). Experiencing FOMO really took a toll on my daily routine; sleep problems and stress were contributing to my difficulty with adjusting.

### **Future Advice**

From my experience in the beginning of college, I learned a lot of lessons. I set my mind to conquer my fears, insecurities, and other hindrances. Many students who come to their first year of college may find themselves in the same boat as me. Despite other students seeming like they have it all figured out, they actually may not. The American College Health Association conducted a study in fall 2018 assessing the health of 26,181 college students across the nation from their past year at school. The results were that 85% of college students felt they were overwhelmed, 63% felt lonely, and 62% felt overwhelming anxiety (ACHA National College Health Assessment II, 2018). Some people are able to hide their fear and problems better than



others. There is hope for these feelings, and it is important to know you are not alone in this situation even though it may feel like it.

Based on my research, I found valuable information that should be shared with future students who have feelings of homesickness. Change should be expected, which I was not ready for. I thought I was expected to grow up all at once and it was extremely overwhelming. It's a different environment that requires making adjustments in a daily routine; therefore, taking care of yourself is crucial. Some first-year students may paint a picture in their head of how college is supposed to be and it may not be meeting their expectations. Since there are many assumptions made about what college is and the different relationships people have with each other, it is key that students realize everything takes time. The previously established relationships at home with friends and family were built over time; therefore, the relationships at college will not happen overnight either. Students should not get discouraged by everything the first year at college throws them.

The first year away at a university could be emotional, intimidating, and flat out uncomfortable. More beneficial tips I've learned over the course of my college career would be to make sure to explore the different resources the campus has to offer. At UT, there are so many helpful resources academically, emotionally, and socially that greatly benefit students. Campus has so many opportunities to get involved in activities, events, and organizations. Becoming involved helps create a sense of belonging that is a comforting and accomplished feeling for first-year students. It is important to not just stay in the dorm room sulking, although many of us feel like doing so. Getting out there and seeing everything college has to offer is a way to live your college experience to the fullest. Change is inevitable during the college years. Everyone is

constantly learning, growing, and exploring; therefore, it could be a scary time. This is completely normal to feel unsettling feelings while so much is happening at once. Many students tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves to make sure they are doing everything correctly. Staying relaxed and going with the flow is a major part of adjusting to so much change. Grades are a major part of college, but some students put way too much stress on themselves to get the best grades. I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to get high grades, but I struggled to stay focused while going through a rough period of time. Using the academic resources given, going to the study spots on campus, and going to professor's office hours can always assist if a student is struggling. I always was scared to let my parents down and really did not want to disappoint them. My dad cared a lot about the grades I was getting, but at the end of the day, both of my parents advised me that whatever grade is fine as long as I'm trying the best I can.

Some parents of first-year college students might be overly involved in their child's college life, or on the other hand, there are some who are totally uninvolved. It is important for parents to be there to offer encouragement and guidance to their kids, but it's also crucial that they have enough space to grow during this period of change in their lives. Setting boundaries is something parents and their children should do. Many parents, like mine, are used to solving their children's problems whenever they face one. Instead of jumping to directly solve these problems, parents should be a guide and steer their children in the right direction. While talking about parents letting go of the reins, Father David Marcotte from Fordham University said "parents need to see that their work is to help their children into 'interdependence,' where they remain connected, but the child has the ability to act on his or her own and become a full adult" (Fordham News, 2019). As a daughter of parents who have taught me so many lessons

that shaped me into who I am today, I think it's very important for parents to take a step back and realize what they've taught their children before they go away to school. Part of my parents certainly came with me to college, whether we realize it or not. The way we act towards certain people, our manners, our knowledge, our morals, etc. all stem from our parents. Parents need to trust their children after they send them off. They should have faith in the child that they raised to make their own decisions. A support system is a major thing students need from their parents in their first year, so staying in touch and checking in is something parents should do.

### **Growth During College**

Despite having a very rough start in the transition period of going to college, I grew exponentially as a person over the past 5 years in Tampa. I have become so much stronger and independent than I used to be. I developed a better mindset and began to understand myself and become my own person. I realized how courageous of a person I actually am. Tampa has become like home to me, more than New York at this point. My whole college experience I focused on building a strong skill set, while also building and maintaining my life here. Becoming a lot less reliant on my parents has been very liberating, since I now am able to function as an adult living on my own. I adopted the "build and broaden" theory of thinking, which means putting my mindset in a more positive spin. This theory is the way that "experiences of positive emotions encourage individuals to engage in their environment and try new activities" (Stevic, 2008, p. 525). My positive mindset I started to have about Tampa opened up a new way of thinking for me. I wound up loving it so much here that I decided to stay here another year to get another degree, in a place that turned out to inspire me the most.

Even though I did have many negative experiences during my transition to being a first-year student at college 1,000 miles away from my home, I did have some positive takeaways in the end. Over the years, I did grow and become more comfortable in my environment where I was able to become my own person, who I was not before. I gained independence, responsibility, maturity, formed a social life, and was able to survive being on my own. I have no regrets about attending a school so far away, and I now consider Tampa my home. These experiences taught me that... As just a young seventeen year old coming to college, I was able to conquer anything if I tried to overcome the obstacles in my way.

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