

Turning Point Narratives of University Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic among Emerging Adults from Sociodemographic Minority Groups in the United States

Jocelyn Maeyama

Faculty advisor: Royette T Dubar, Ph.D.



Sleep & Psychosocial Adjustment Lab

WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY

Introduction

- Marginalized students face unique challenges and opportunities in adjusting to college life (Syed 2010) and have also been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Czeisler 2010).
- Few studies have examined the subjective experiences of emerging adults from sociodemographic minority groups who attend university.
- The present study examined turning point narratives within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, among a sample of emerging adults at university.

Method

- **Baseline Characteristics (N = 32; Mean age = 19.98, SD = 1.28):**
 - **Racial-ethnic minority:** 62.5%
 - **First-generation:** 43.8%
 - **Religious minority:** 25%
 - **LGBTQ+:** 53.1%
 - **Low-income:** 40.6%
 - **3+ minority identities:** 45%
- Participants completed a 50-minute online interview, via Zoom at the end of their 2nd and 4th semesters at university.
- Interview question: *“Think back on your previous year at Wesleyan. Please describe an experience that stands out as a turning point. This is an event or experience that marked an important change in your life.”*
- Narrative responses were subsequently analyzed using ‘process coding’ and ‘thematic analysis’.

Discussion

- The degree of agency narrated by participants varied across themes.
- Emergent themes illustrated aspects of both ‘self-focus’ and ‘interdependence’, with implications for emerging adulthood development.
- Future research should employ an intersectional approach to analyze the interconnected systems of power that impact students’ college experiences.
- Universities should explore various strategies to provide opportunities for increased student interactions and provide support for students as they navigate interpersonal challenges and conflict.

Results

1. Navigating Interpersonal Relationships

“And then I was like, oh my God, there’s people, there’s still people here that I can enjoy and like hang out with stuff. And it definitely changed just like my perspective on Wesleyan because it became less negative, I guess.” [14]

2. Self-focus, Self-appreciation, & Personal Values

“I did like break up with like my boyfriend at that time...at the end of the day, I just feel like I prioritized someone else’s feelings over mine, and then just slowly like realizing that like I could do a lot of things like outside of that too, you know?” [9]

3. Changing Behaviors & Taking New Actions

“So I got a midterm back or something and was just like screwed <laugh> and it just kind of like, was the straw that broke the camel’s back ... Like, there’s obviously something wrong. Let’s fix it. So at that point, like I really started like working really hard ... [at] like organization and planning for school, which was a big thing that I was struggling with...I made a lot of adjustments and stuff.” [3]

4. Feeling Emotionally Overwhelmed

“I had a friend who was having issues with her roommate. ...So I guess just being looped into their, their drama, um, had, had like a slight effect on my mental health. It was like, you had to decide between like which side to support, um, and just trying to mediate tension too...” [18]

5. Confronting Reality

“I came into college thinking that ... it was gonna be really different and more difficult academically than high school. And I was really worried about how I was gonna handle all the work and the level of intensity. And then once I kind of got through it, um, I realized that it wasn’t as difficult as I thought it was gonna be. And that maybe sometimes I just set things up to seem more difficult in my head than they might be, but there’s a difference between reality and, um, my perception of things.” [22]

6. Giving Themselves Grace

“I learned to just like enjoy and live. I still worry a lot more than I should, but at least, I feel like I’ve done some progress when it comes to like being in the moment and enjoying life and just some of my values changed.” [30]

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