Privileged Dependence, Precarious Autonomy:

Parent/Young Adult Relationships Through the Lens of COVID-19

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Abstract

Objective: This article identifies how social class differences in undergraduates' relationships with their parents shaped their responses to educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: The mechanisms through which parents transmit class advantages to children are often hidden from view and therefore remain imperfectly understood. This study uses the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to examine how young adults from different social class backgrounds expect, negotiate, and attach meaning to parental support.

Method: This study draws from in-depth interviews with 48 Black and White upper-middle and working-class undergraduates from a single elite university, along with 10 of their mothers.

Results: Facing pandemic-related disruptions, upper-middle-class students typically sought substantial direction and material assistance from parents. In contrast, working-class students typically assumed more responsibility for their own—and sometimes other family members'—well-being. These classed patterns of "privileged dependence" and "precarious autonomy" were shaped by students' understandings of family members' authority, needs, and responsibilities.

Conclusion: Upper-middle-class students' greater dependence on parents functioned as a protective force, enabling them to benefit from parents' material and academic support during the transition to remote instruction. These short-term protections may yield long-term payoffs denied their working-class peers. Beyond the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concepts of "privileged dependence" and "precarious autonomy" offer scholars a set of theoretical tools for understanding class inequality in other young adult contexts.

Key Words: higher education, intergenerational relationships, parenting, privilege, social class, young adulthood

The social processes underlying the "invisible transfer of privilege" (Swartz, 2008) from parents to children are often hidden from view and remain imperfectly understood. Research identifies substantial class disparities in parents' involvement in higher education (Hamilton et al., 2018) and financial assistance to young adults (Rauscher, 2016). However, we know less about the cultural understandings that facilitate these forms of support. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought inequality into sharp relief, providing a novel opportunity to examine hidden social processes. Using in-depth interviews with 48 upper-middle-class (UMC) and working-class (WC) undergraduates, this study examines students' classed understandings of the parent/young adult relationship through their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two questions drive this study. First, how do young adults expect, negotiate, and attach meaning to parental support? Second, how does social class shape these processes?

The interviews revealed striking class differences in young adults' strategies for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting classed understandings of the parent/young adult relationship. Specifically, students expressed different understandings of parents' authority, needs, and responsibilities. These understandings, which I conceptualize as the "locus of authority" and the "balance of needs and preferences" among family members, informed the possibilities that students considered when deciding where to live and how to interact with their parents. UMC students displayed *privileged dependence*, accessing substantial direction and assistance from parents. WC students displayed *precarious autonomy*, assuming more responsibility for their own well-being and sometimes their family members'.

These findings advance our understanding of the relational mechanisms underlying the transmission of class privilege from parents to young adults (Swartz, 2008). The ability to depend on parents' resources protected UMC young adults, sheltering them from financial and

academic disruptions and potentially yielding longer-term payoffs. On a theoretical level, the underlying patterns of dependence and autonomy observed during the pandemic offer a set of theoretical tools for scholars to understand class disparities in other young adult contexts.

BACKGROUND

Emerging Adulthood in Life Course Perspective

The timing and sequence of many adult role transitions—completing school, finding a job, leaving the family home, marrying, and becoming a parent—have been increasingly delayed and uncertain for young adults today. In the early 2000s, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined the term "emerging adulthood" to describe the prolonged liminal phase that now bridges adolescence and full adulthood (typically defined as 18-29). In subsequent decades, the study of young adulthood has developed into a major research paradigm.

Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood, which characterizes young adulthood as a time of self-focused exploration and discovery, has been criticized by sociologists for failing to acknowledge race and class inequalities. Jennifer Silva has argued that Arnett's emphasis on "exploration, choice, and possibilities" fails to recognize the structural constraints faced by lower-SES young adults (Silva, 2016, p. 239). Stephanie DeLuca and colleagues describe an "expedited path to adulthood" that disadvantaged youth experience as they take on adult roles at an early age (DeLuca et al., 2016, p. 126). Indeed, Arnett (2016) has acknowledged that his description of emerging adulthood is not "universal" (p. 246). Yet the degree to which socioeconomic inequalities result in significantly different developmental trajectories for advantaged vs. disadvantaged young adults remains contested (Furstenberg, 2016).

The present study refines scholarly understandings of young adulthood by illuminating class differences in young adults' relationships with parents. This focus on parents is motivated

by the life course concept of "linked lives," which emphasizes the interconnected nature of family lives (Elder, 1994), suggesting that family relationships evolve but remain consequential across the life course. This perspective underscores that understanding young adults' trajectories requires understanding their evolving relationships with parents and the broader structural and cultural contexts in which both are embedded.

Parents' Roles in Higher Education

Class inequality has been a central focus of recent sociological research on higher education. A substantial body of research illuminates class disparities in myriad dimensions of the undergraduate experience, including extracurricular involvement (Stuber, 2011), social integration (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015), and the college-to-work transition (Roksa & Silver, 2019). Such research foregrounds parents' unequal financial resources (Rauscher, 2016) and cultural knowledge (Hamilton et al., 2018), suggesting that higher-SES parents' class resources facilitate greater educational and professional attainment (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021; Roksa & Silver, 2019; van Stee, 2022).

Parents' financial support may function as both a facilitator of educational attainment and a safety net for young adults in times of crisis (Swartz et al., 2011). The literature depicts middle-to-upper class college students as beneficiaries of parents' cultural knowledge and social connections while WC and poor students navigate college on their own (Kurz, Forthcoming; Lareau & Cox, 2011). For example, recent research describes more educated parents monitoring students' academic progress, giving academic and professional advice, and providing hands-on assistance with job searches and graduate school applications—forms of assistance not available to students whose parents did not attend college (Hamilton et al., 2018; Roksa & Silver, 2019). Together, such studies underscore that parents' class resources shape young adults' educational

and career opportunities. However, we know less about how young adults themselves expect, negotiate, or attach meaning to these forms of parental support.

Reciprocal Support

While many studies investigate how parents provide support, small but growing research suggests young adults—primarily those from low-SES backgrounds, minority racial/ethnic groups, and immigrant families—provide financial and practical assistance to parents (DeLuca et al., 2016; Mazelis & Kuperberg, 2022; Napolitano, 2015). Most research on expectations and interactions that facilitate young adults' support to parents has focused on Latinx and Asian families. Some scholars have offered cultural explanations, pointing to "individualist" versus "collectivist" cultural traditions (Fuligni et al., 1999). Others have emphasized the structural conditions and experiences associated with immigrant adaptation, framing family interdependence as part of the "immigrant bargain" (Louie, 2012) and as a manifestation of children's "economic empathy" for their parents (Estrada, 2019). Scholars have also theorized that African Americans feel an obligation to family and co-ethnics rooted in a perception of their "linked fate" (Dawson, 1995; Lanuza, 2020). By comparison, there has been less attention to White young adults' assistance to parents (but see Napolitano, 2015), possibly because child-to-parent assistance is less common in White American families (Lanuza, 2020).

Class Disparities in Childhood Socialization

Research involving younger children reveals class differences in children's expectations and strategies for seeking help from adults. This literature examines how parenting styles shape children's help-seeking behaviors in contexts such as schools and doctor's offices, illuminating class-based socialization patterns (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011). Lareau (2011) found that MC children developed an emerging sense of "entitlement" to assistance from adults whereas WC

students developed a sense of "constraint." Extending Lareau's work, Calarco (2018) found that MC parents coached children to negotiate extra attention, assistance, and accommodations from teachers while WC parents tended to emphasize respect and responsibility. Such findings indicate that children are trained—both implicitly and explicitly—to expect and negotiate assistance differently across class. Although both Lareau and Calarco focused on minor children, Lareau also conducted follow-up interviews with the *Unequal Childhoods* cohort at 19-21 years old that hint at evolving class differences in help-seeking behavior during the young adult period. Lareau reports that middle-class parents continued to monitor and intervene throughout college, whereas working-class and poor families expected young adults to be independent after high school (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Cox, 2011).

This literature offers insight to the present study because it indicates that classed parenting styles shape children's feelings of entitlement to and strategies for gaining assistance. Yet because researchers have focused on young children seeking assistance from adults outside the family, we know less about how feelings of entitlement or help-seeking strategies manifest in young adults' relationships with parents. In sum, while there are theoretical reasons to expect class differences, this issue requires further empirical attention.

Psychological Perspectives on Parenting Young Adults

Whereas the sociological literature suggests parents' knowledge and material resources facilitate socioeconomic attainment (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2018), studies of psychological outcomes often emphasize the negative impacts of "overparenting" or "helicopter parenting." Highly involved and risk-averse parenting approaches have been linked to depression, narcissism, entitlement, and lower self-efficacy among young adults (Mortimer et al., 2016; Schiffrin et al., 2014; Segrin et al., 2012; Winner & Nicholson, 2018). Research also suggests

negative effects for family relationships, including lower-quality parent/child communication and lower satisfaction with family life (Segrin et al., 2012). Yet other research links intense parental involvement to positive psychological adjustment, life satisfaction, and feelings of closeness to parents (Fingerman et al., 2012; Johnson, 2013). Together, these literatures suggest that extended reliance on parents' resources and direction (or lack thereof) has diverse, complex, and contextually dependent implications. They underscore the importance of considering developmental and relational outcomes alongside measures of status attainment—an insight that guides the present study.

Case and Research Questions

Addressing the limitations of existing scholarship, I leverage the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to examine social class disparities in young adults' relationships with parents. Like other crises (Klinenberg, 2003), the large-scale disruptions of this pandemic offer scholars a valuable opportunity to examine social processes that are otherwise difficult to observe. This exogenous shock amplified the context of risk, uncertainty, and structural constraints that characterize the transition to adulthood, bringing social class disparities into sharp relief. Thus, I use this case to answer the following questions: First, how do young adults expect, negotiate, and attach meaning to parental support? Second, how does social class shape these processes?

METHODS

I draw on in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 48 young adults who attended "Elite University," a highly selective research institution on the U.S. East Coast, and 10 of their mothers. The polarized economic distribution of this campus provides an ideal context to examine class variation within a single student body: Although almost 20% of the university's students come from families in the top 1% of the income distribution, it also has a growing

population of lower-SES students who benefit from the university's policy that fully covers tuition and living expenses for students whose family income is below approximately $66,000.

Following others who study social class in the context of family life and education, I identify students' social class by their parents' educational attainment, occupational status, and income (Calarco, 2011; Lareau, 2014). I maximize analytic leverage by comparing students from two social class groups, WC students and UMC students (Stuber, 2011) and minimize heterogeneity within social class groups by including only non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White students who have at least one American-born citizen parent (see Appendix A).

Students are considered upper-middle class if (1) both parents have a four-year college degree, (2) at least one parent has an advanced degree and a job that requires highly complex, educationally certified skills, and (3) the family's household income exceeds $100,000 (Calarco, 2011; Lareau, 2014; Stuber, 2011). The income threshold excludes students from families whose educational and occupational profiles matched my upper-middle-class criteria but whose lived experiences are not typical of their social class (Calarco, 2011). Five students have parents who are corporate executives and would be considered by some to be "upper class" (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015). For brevity, and because I did not find substantial differences in their parent/child dyanmics, I include these students in the upper-middle class.

Students are considered working class if (1) neither parent has a bachelor's degree, (2) both parents work in manual labor or low-level service sector jobs or are unemployed, and (3) the family's household income was below $100,000. In practice, nearly all students who met the working-class criteria fell far below this threshold: 19 out of the 23 WC families reported incomes below $50,000. Working-class students commonly described parents moving through periods of underemployment and unemployment—both before and during the pandemic. Five

students could be considered poor, as no parent was employed in a full-time job at the time of the interview. However, I found that these five students differed from the others only in the magnitude of parents' financial need and thus refer to these students as working class.

Twenty-five students are from UMC families, 23 are from WC families, and each group was split about evenly by race. Five multiracial students reported one Black and one White parent. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and were enrolled as full-time students. The student sample includes 30 women, 15 men, and three non-binary students.

Elite University had completely virtual instruction throughout the study period, and until January 2021 the only undergraduates living on campus were those granted emergency housing placements or who worked in residence life. Most undergraduates did not live on campus during recruitment or data collection, although many considered getting off-campus apartments in Fall 2020. After securing IRB approval, I contacted potential participants through various university networks, including department listservs, social media pages, student organizations, and personal contacts. I also used snowball sampling, asking participants for referrals. I told potential participants that I wanted to understand how undergraduates were navigating the pandemic and offered a $25 honorarium. I used a short web-based survey to collect contact information from interested students and assess their eligibility to participate.

All interviews took place over Zoom or phone (depending on participants' preference) between June 2020 and February 2021. Prior to each interview, I secured written consent, including permission to record. After the interview, respondents completed a short demographic questionnaire. The interviews, lasting around two hours, focused on family relationships, college experiences, housing, remote learning, and family interactions (Appendix B). My goal in this study was theory development: I aimed to clarify debates about class differences in young

adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2016; DeLuca et al., 2016; Silva, 2016) and illuminate mechanisms that facilitate the intergenerational transfer of privilege (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Swartz, 2008). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were appropriate because I wanted to understand the cultural meanings that young adults attach to relationships with parents (Lareau, 2021).

I am a White woman from an upper-middle class background, pursuing a PhD. My age (mid-20s) and student status seemed to facilitate a sense of connection with the participants, as we shared the experience of navigating adult transitions during a pandemic. I emphasized these similarities to build rapport (e.g., mentioning that I was staying with my parents, commiserating about Zoom lectures). I checked my understanding during the interviews by articulating my interpretation of the participant's account and asking whether I had understood correctly.

To gain further insight into family dynamics, I selected 10 students and interviewed their mothers (Appendix C). Research indicates that mothers are more involved in college students' personal and academic lives than fathers (Hamilton, 2016), and my participants' accounts suggested they also experienced this. I used theoretical sampling, seeking to interview the mothers of students whose accounts best exemplified the classed patterns of autonomy and dependence observed across the full sample. I increased the honorarium to $50, knowing that many mothers would have greater time constraints and that I had a limited pool of mothers to draw from. I did not discuss students' responses in my conversations with the mothers or vice versa, following the approach outlined by Hamilton (2016). Interviewing mothers also provided an opportunity for data triangulation, enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. While there were temporal discrepancies between students' and mothers' accounts (e.g., which month a student arrived or left), the descriptions of relational dynamics, including negative interactions, were consistent within dyads. Due to space limitations, this article prioritizes students' accounts.

Table 1. *Summary of Sample Characteristics*

		Black	White	Multiracial	Total
Upper-Middle Class	Students	9	13	3	25
	Mothers	2	2	1	5
Working Class	Students	12	9	2	23
	Mothers	3	2	0	5
Total		26	26	6	58

Verbatim transcripts were generated using otter.ai, then proofread and corrected by trained research assistants and imported into ATLAS.ti. I coded the data using an abductive approach, meaning prior research informed my approach but I looked for unexpected patterns that could enhance existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). For example, unanticipated differences in respondents' decision-making processes illuminated class differences in perceptions of parental authority little acknowledged in scholarship on parenting, higher education, and the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Hamilton, 2016; Stuber, 2011).

I used a flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2018), indexing the transcripts into broad descriptive categories based on preexisting themes and interview questions (e.g. "K-12," "College") and applying additional descriptive codes based on themes in the literature (e.g., "economic impact," "health impact"). I developed and applied more detailed analytic codes based on themes that emerged inductively in the data (e.g., "housing decision," "help to family"). Throughout the interviewing and coding process, I wrote analytic memos that I shared with colleagues (along with anonymized transcripts) for feedback. A case-by-attribute matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) helped me identify patterns and look for disconfirming evidence by comparing students' decisions, family dynamics, and remote learning environments across individuals; across social class and race overall; and by race within the class groups. I did not observe racial differences in students' understandings of parental authority or in the factors considered in pandemic decision-making processes. Thus, I focus on class differences. There

were dramatic racial disparities in young adults' experiences of racism during the pandemic; these findings naturally warrant separate discussion and are beyond the scope of this article. The matrix also included other student-level attributes that could explain the patterns of autonomy and dependence that I observed (e.g., on vs. off-campus housing, parents' state of residence). These alternative explanations were not supported by my data.

RESULTS

Upper-middle-class students exhibited greater dependence on parents' direction and assistance, whereas working-class students navigated disruptions with a greater sense of autonomy. Classed understandings of what I term the "locus of authority"—who makes decisions about young adults' actions—and the "balance of needs and preferences"—how family members' interests are weighted in family decisions and routines—shaped these responses. Together, these understandings shaped students' actions by leading them to envision different possible strategies for dealing with disruptions. Some quotes have been modified to improve readability (e.g., omitting false starts and repeated words), and all names are pseudonyms.

The Locus of Authority

Upper-middle-class students typically understood their parents to have authority over major decisions, such as where the student would live during remote learning. In contrast, WC students typically saw such decisions as their own. These understandings were rooted in two factors: parents' financial leverage and perceptions of parents' knowledge.

Parents' financial leverage. All UMC students relied on parental assistance for tuition, and many received additional support for housing and other living expenses. For some, their parents' financial leverage was largely implicit and did not appear to produce tension, bitterness, or resentment. For example, Claire (UMC, Black) jokingly explained that her mom gave her

money for textbooks, birth control, Uber rides, and groceries to incentivize these purchases. Claire was glad to accept. Similarly, Alice (UMC, White) noted that she did not resent her mom's authority over her budget: "It's really just her prerogative and I go along with whatever because it's her money—I'm going to follow what she wants to do with it."

Other UMC students experienced their parents' financial power as overly controlling, and COVID-19 precautions and fall housing decisions were common points of contention. When Bradford (UMC, Biracial) was forced to vacate his dorm in March 2020, he looked forward, he said, to "[b]eing taken care of, cooked for, and not having to pay for or do anything myself" in his parents' home. But when his parents would not let him order take-out through Uber Eats or spend time with his high school friends, he grew frustrated. As the fall semester approached, Bradford wanted to find an apartment near the university, which his parents considered unsafe. A 36-hour negotiation period ensued. His parents told him he could live in the family's second home (which they perceived to be safer than living near the university) and they would pay him a monthly stipend. If he lived near school, he would be responsible for rent and living expenses. Bradford had enough money to cover these additional expenses, but he decided it would not be worth the financial cost or relational fallout. He moved into the second home. Bradford explained that his parents "had all the power to dictate what I could and couldn't do" because of their financial leverage: "One of the major things that I realized is... the power my parents have over me. Even though legally they can't do anything to dictate my life, they're paying." In a more extreme illustration of this power dynamic, Esty (UMC, White) reported that her parents threatened to stop paying her tuition and living expenses if she didn't return home. "I honestly think they enjoy the perks they get from funding me," Esty claimed, referring to their control.

In contrast, the gap between WC parents' and young adults' financial power was much

smaller than their UMC counterparts—even if parents were contributing to college expenses. Some WC students reported that they were in a better financial situation than their parents. Overall, they experienced more decisional autonomy. As Taylor (WC, White) said about her dad, "It all just comes back to this incredible thing, which is: if you don't give me money, then I don't have to listen to you." Many WC students realized their more affluent peers did not share this freedom. Elise (WC, White) said, "Taking my own financial responsibility means that I'm responsible for my own actions. I will call [my parents] for advice, but if they disagree, and I want to do something else, I'll do it. I know that's different from a lot of my peers."

WC students also recognized the cost. Jayla (WC, Black) explained that although her affluent peers were "missing out on having full independence," they had the security of knowing that their parents could take care of them if needed. "If it's a good relationship and they know they can ask [their parents] for money," Jayla explained, "Then they [don't] have to stress about, 'Oh, I can't afford this meal, or deodorant, or pads, or new clothes.'" These comments capture a key tension between freedom and security that participants from both class groups recognized.

Perceptions of parents' knowledge. Young adults from UMC families also described seeking parental advice or complying with parental demands because they perceived that their parents possessed more information than they did. For example, Margot (UMC, White) described the relief she felt on returning to her parents' home:

> I remember getting home and feeling such a weight taken off of my shoulders because I was like, "This is such a controlled space. I'm very happy weathering it out here because I feel like my parents know what's up." It was kind of scary, it was sort of weird [in my off-campus house] being like, "We're literally six 20-year-olds in a house, debating what is safe and none of us have any idea." And obviously neither of my parents [a college

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dean and a humanities professor] are doctors or anything but, I just like got home and felt

like, "Okay, I can do this. I know how to function at home, this will be fine."

Indeed, the dynamic was especially strong among children of medical professionals. Noah's (UMC, Black) parents are both physicians. He said that his parents wanted him home so that if he contracted the virus, they could ensure he received proper care. "I understood it. I wasn't pissed off. I'm like, 'You guys are the experts, I'm not gonna go against [you],'" Noah said.

With very few exceptions, WC students did not expect their parents to tell them what was "safe" or think it was necessary to gain parents' approval for their housing decisions. As a group, they pursued a broader range of housing options than their UMC peers. For example, Hannah (WC, Black) decided to stay with her cousin where she knew she would have more privacy, fewer disruptions, and faster WiFi than at her parents'. Hannah said:

> [My mom] was kind of hurt that I decided to not stay at home…Sometimes it feels like
> she doesn't understand why I need to be in a quiet space or why it's a big deal that people
> are running and screaming [in the background] while I'm in class [on Zoom].

Hannah consulted with her parents in the decision-making process, but it was more common for WC students to update parents after plans were finalized, either to avoid unwanted input or save their parents stress. For example, Shelton (WC, Black), explained he did not consult his parents about housing decisions because he knew they were already very stressed:

> I feel like I've become very autonomous…I don't want to add more stress to [my parents]
> because they're already very stressed out. I didn't want to add more to that. I usually
> handle everything on my own, and I have done so pretty much since I started college.

Unlike UMC parents, WC parents typically lacked institutional connections or social networks that provided advance warning of the campus shutdown, which made it easier for their children

to strategically withhold information. The WC group frequently indicated that their parents'

challenges, such as unemployment, financial struggles, health concerns, substance abuse, and

care for other family members, were larger than their own troubles with remote learning.

The Balance of Needs and Preferences

In UMC families, students generally assumed that their comfort and safety while learning

were of central importance and that their parents would ensure their protection. The criteria

weighted in UMC households typically centered on the young adult's interests. In contrast, for

WC students awareness of parents' needs and vulnerabilities played a role. These patterns shaped

family interactions throughout remote instruction, as I describe in the following sections.

Material resources: Whose house? Whose bills? Students' narratives about returning to a

parent's home revealed striking class differences in terms of feelings of entitlement to parents'

material resources. Many UMC students were already completely financially dependent on their

parents and remained so while living at home. Some who had been responsible for some personal

expenses while living at college mentioned that their savings had increased due to living with

parents. For example, Claire (UMC, Black) explained that although she was expected to put

personal take-out orders on her own credit card at college, while living at home she could charge

food for the family to her parents' card. "I try to always leverage that," she said. Bella (UMC,

White) described a similar arrangement, explaining that in deciding to return home, "[i]t didn't

hurt that [my parents] were going to pay for all of my food and stuff for that time."

WC students felt far less entitled to parents' more limited resources, and some avoided

going home to avoid creating such a burden. In addition to choosing to keep his parents out of

his decisions to save them stress, Shelton (WC, Black) was working two jobs to pay for his own

living expenses. He lacked WiFi and was struggling to afford rent and groceries. Shelton was

relying on food that other students left behind when moving out of their apartments and walking to campus when he needed an internet connection. Until a teaching assistant loaned him her spare laptop, Shelton had been joining Zoom classes and even writing research papers on his phone. Yet he was determined to avoid causing his parents financial strain: "I didn't want to put an undue burden on my mom by going home and having her financially provide for me."

WC students who returned to a parent's home were conscious of the cost to their parents. For example, Elise (WC, White) explained that she "felt really bad and guilty" for her impact on the family's utility bills. Elise paid for much of her own food and contributed to the family's grocery budget while living at home. Elise's mother, Sandy, mentioned noticing her daughter's concern and explained that that she thought Elise was "very aware [of the increasing bills]…because we've always kind of been paycheck to paycheck." Sandy also sensed (correctly) that Elise would be reluctant to ask for financial assistance. "I don't know if she would [ask us for money] because she'd think she'd be hurting us or something," Sandy said.

Another student, Ariel (WC, Black), similarly described paying for her own food while living with her mom during the pandemic. Ariel's mother, Misty, described Ariel as "self-sufficient," saying that Ariel never asked her for any money. Ariel explained that she always worried about being a "burden" to her family but that this fear had been "amplified times 50" during the pandemic:

> I just got another job as a TA, because I'm like, "Maybe that will reassure my mom that she doesn't have to help me out so much"...Anytime a financial thing comes up with me, I'm like, "Don't worry about it. I can go without. It's fine. I don't care." Any way I can lift up her mood or make her feel less of a burden.

Some WC students who did not return home sent their parents money as well. For

example, Sophie (WC, Black) continued to pay her dad's phone bill and Deja (WC, Biracial) was helping her mom save for a car. Although this study was not designed to analyze child-to-parent financial assistance, my data tentatively suggest that this form of support was more common among racial minority students than White students.

In sum, WC students employed a variety of strategies to protect parents from financial strain—living independently, paying for personal expenses while living at home, contributing to household expenses, and providing financial assistance from a distance. These actions were motivated by an underlying awareness of students' own financial impact and parents' financial constraints. Overall, these accounts underscore that awareness of parents' financial vulnerability and sense of responsibility to protect parents from financial harm deeply shaped WC students' approaches to navigating life during the pandemic.

Who needs protection from COVID-19? WC students often saw their parents as in need of protection from COVID-19, but UMC students emphasized that their parents would protect them. Bella (UMC, White) could have remained in her off-campus apartment, but, as she explained, "Because it was such a scary virus, I was like, 'OK, I'll just come home and let you guys take care of me.'" Other UMC students voiced confidence in their parents' ability to ensure their physical health, saying they could rely on parents to assess risks, minimize exposure, provide care, and ensure access to the best medical treatment. Madelyn (UMC, Black) explained how thankful she was to have "a place to run to when the world is ending and I don't feel safe." UMC students did not describe parents' vulnerability to the virus a barrier to returning home.

By contrast, it was more common for WC students to list concern for parents' health as a factor when deciding where to live. For example, Sophie (WC, Black), who moved to her partner's off-campus apartment, explained, "I couldn't go back home because my mother would

be a vulnerable person to this virus. She has two lung diseases." Lexie (WC, White), a junior living on campus before the pandemic, similarly explained:

> My parents are 75 and 63. They both have every single health condition you could think of...Once quarantine started in March, one of my first thoughts was, "Shit, I'm not going to see my parents for a long time." Because even if I get tested... I'm paranoid about bringing it into my house…My mom is just gonna keep asking me [to come home]. I don't know what [she's thinking], because my mom knows that I'm a very stubborn person. When I make a decision about something, especially when it regards her safety, I'm not going to budge on that. I can't.

Lexie gave her parents' vulnerabilities and needs significant weight, and she felt she had the authority to make decisions to protect her parents from harm, even when her parents disagreed.

A handful of UMC students also expressed concerns about parents' vulnerability to the virus, yet none described this as a reason to avoid returning home or to be more cautious than their parents wanted them to be. For example, Aubrey (UMC, White) shared that she was worried about her father, a cancer survivor on immunosuppressant medication: "If he got it, I think he would survive, but it's always a question because it's such a severe virus. So, we're really protective of him." She said she was "having to think about" quarantining from her boyfriend who had been traveling, but that she had decided she probably wouldn't.

Academic responsibilities. Finally, there were class differences in family dynamics surrounding undergraduates' academic responsibilities. These differences included the extent to which students and parents prioritized students' academic performance and the extent to which parents were involved. UMC students described learning environments in which their entire family emphasized their comfort and achievement. And although many of these students

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mentioned that it was more difficult to focus while at their parents' homes, they rarely described family-related disruptions. Reflecting this prioritization of academic achievement, Chelsea (UMC, Biracial) explained that since she was in middle school her parents had not required her to do her household chores if she had a major assignment due the next day.

For many UMC students, life at home felt "easier" and more "comfortable" than living independently at college. Levi (UMC, White) captured this when he said: "Life is comfortable here. Life's a lot easier here... I mean, the food is better. I definitely just have to work less hard, not living independently [at college]." He went on to explain that his mom did his laundry and cooked dinner for the family. This left ample time to focus on his college classes: "My schedule right now is just: work until you're called down [for dinner], and then don't."

UMC students also described requesting and/or receiving academic advice from parents. For example, Kyle (UMC, White) recalled showing his parents his current grades and asking them if he should switch the class to pass/fail. "It was good because we talked about that, we went through every class, and then [my parents] helped me decide that I didn't want to pass/fail anything." Others similarly described seeking parents' advice in academic concerns, both during and prior to the pandemic. For example, Noah (UMC, Black) explained that his parents provided a great deal of hands-on support. His mother, Patricia, recalled that she "spent a lot of time helping him organize himself and get up on his assignments and everything." When Patricia decided that Noah needed more help than she could provide, she employed a tutor to meet with Noah multiple times per week and manage his remote schooling. Patricia explained:

> I kind of diagnosed that he needed much more close, frequent touchpoints...And so that's really what [the tutor] was—she was a human interaction. She used to come to the house once a week...I know he's a trooper, but just focusing on your screen every day, I think

it's a lot. And so I just—as a mother—made an executive decision on that. This scenario aligns with Noah's description of his parents' "hands-on" approach to his K-12 schooling. Noah viewed his parents as capable of and responsible for providing academic resources, and he relied again on his parents for academic support during the pandemic.

In contrast, WC students did not typically expect family life to revolve around their academics or to receive academic advice or assistance from their parents. Hannah was not the only WC student who expected their parents' homes would not be conducive to remote learning. Ainsley (WC, White), for example, explained that going home was "never an option" because she would have significant caregiving responsibilities. She said that being home made her feel a duty to take care of her brothers, to drive them places such as sports practice, to cook them dinner "with vegetables" and to organize the house. "I have not yet found a good balance," she said. WC students who stayed with parents often indicated that parents were either unaware of their academic needs or had more important issues to deal with. For example, Diamond (WC, Black) explained that although she felt fortunate to have a relatively "fit learning environment" at her mom's house, family members' interruptions and requests made it difficult to focus on schoolwork. "They don't understand, so I can't blame them for bothering me."

WC students sometimes willingly put family needs above their own academics. For example, though Ashley (WC, Black) had initially tried to secure emergency housing to avoid household responsibilities, she realized in retrospect how important her presence had been. Ashley ran the household while her mom worked—shopping, cooking, and managing her siblings' remote schooling. "It wasn't necessarily a bad thing that I was here to help, but it definitely impaired my studies—if we're going to put those first," Ashley said. Ashley was acutely aware of the contrast between her experience and that of her more privileged peers. She

described her shock at seeing parents clearly cater to UMC students' needs in the background of the Zoom screens. Ashley explained that she saw herself as a "side character" in her family whereas it seemed like her more affluent peers were the main characters in theirs. She said,

> [My UMC peers are] still considered kids...It's still very much a position of like, "I'm your parent, what can I do to help you?"...There are other people [like me] who are like, "What can you do to help your parents?" Because *they're* the ones experiencing the difficulty, and all you have to do is log onto this online class and do X amount of reading or whatever it is you have to do for your class.

WC students like Ashley did not expect parents to be involved in their academics. Although they reported asking parents for advice on topics such as romantic relationships and friendships, many laughed at the idea of asking their parents for advice about an assignment or career path. Ashley joked that she could tell her mom that she was majoring in "strawberries" and her mom would be happy, explaining that she felt a strong "separation of school and home." Similarly, when asked if she sought advice from her parents during college, Lexie (WC, White) replied:

> If I were to call [my mom] right now and ask her, "Hey, do you have any advice for how to get As in all my classes?" she would have no idea. Or, "Do you have any advice for what career I want to do?" She would just say, "Do what makes you happy, you'll be successful."...I already know that, you know what I mean?

These findings demonstrate how differences in parents' educational backgrounds shaped students' understandings of the parent/young adult relationship over time, ultimately producing different relational expectations and patterns of interaction.

DISCUSSION

Like other crises (Klinenberg, 2003), the large-scale disruptions of the COVID-19

pandemic offer a novel opportunity to examine often hidden social processes. Although prior research documents class disparities in parents' educational involvement (Hamilton et al., 2018) and financial assistance (Rauscher, 2016), scholars have not focused on how young adults expect, negotiate, and attach meaning to support from parents. This oversight is significant because understanding how young adults activate parents' class resources is essential for understanding the intergenerational transfer of privilege (Calarco, 2018; Swartz, 2008). Addressing this gap, this study leveraged the novel context of the COVID-19 pandemic to illuminate how social class shapes young adults' relationships with parents.

Summary of Findings

Across social class, young adults employed different strategies to deal with pandemic-related challenges. Classed understandings of the parent/young adult relationship guided their responses. These understandings shaped what students felt they deserved from or owed to their parents, how they perceived their parents' level of control or vulnerability, and whether the family home was "never an option" or "the only option."

UMC students generally assumed a privileged position of dependence as they sought direction and material assistance from parents. In these families, parents' greater socioeconomic resources and the shared assumption that students would continue to rely on parents during college made dependence seem not only possible but natural. They typically understood their parents to possess authority over their actions and saw parents as responsible for ensuring all family members' well-being. These relationships were child-centered, as both parents and students prioritized students' learning, comfort, and safety.

In contrast, WC students' responses to the pandemic displayed precarious autonomy. Compared to UMC peers, they typically assumed more responsibility for their own well-being,

and sometimes other family members'. WC students frequently indicated that they had the authority to make their own decisions. Overall, they demonstrated greater awareness of parents' needs and sometimes provided financial and/or practical assistance to family members.

Students' immediate circumstances at the onset of the pandemic constrained their options for dealing with pandemic-related disruptions. The availability of parents' resources was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the dependence observed among UMC students. The direction and assistance that UMC young adults received from parents during the pandemic required both parents and young adults to see dependence on parents as natural, desirable, and/or necessary. These findings advance sociological understandings of the intergenerational transfer of privilege (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Swartz, 2008) by illuminating the relational understandings that led UMC young adults to activate parents' class resources.

WC students typically did not have the option to be dependent on parents—at least, not to the extent of their more-resourced peers. Already economically vulnerable, many WC families experienced further financial strain during the pandemic. Furthermore, WC parents' lack of familiarity with higher education meant that they were less equipped to assist in these areas. Relational understandings of authority, needs, and responsibility also shaped students' decision-making processes in ways that cannot be reduced to economic calculations based on immediate resource constraints. WC students typically saw themselves as having the authority to make decisions and felt more responsibility for other family members' well-being.

The patterns of privileged dependence and precarious autonomy described above extend prior research by illuminating the relational understandings that facilitated classed patterns of parental support and control. In doing so, these findings advance theories of class stratification in two ways. First, the findings illuminate mechanisms of inequality during the immediate context

of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, this study makes a broader theoretical contribution to

scholarship on class stratification in parenting (Hamilton et al., 2018; Lareau, 2011), higher

education (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015; Stuber, 2011), and the transition to adulthood (Arnett,

2000; Silva, 2016). By illuminating the meanings that shaped young adults' responses to this

crisis, the findings offer a set of conceptual tools for examining class differences in young adults'

responses to other crises and challenges—as well as the implications for inequality.

Implications for Inequality during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This study extends scholarship on class stratification in parenting (Calarco, 2018; Lareau,

2011), higher education (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015; Stuber, 2011), and the transition to

adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Silva, 2016) by offering a novel empirical description of inequalities in

college students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings illuminate how

the pandemic exacerbated class divides during the transition to remote instruction.

There were clear short-term benefits to UMC students' dependence on parents during the

pandemic. Many UMC students were maintaining or even building savings while parents

covered the cost of food and other living expenses. UMC parents also provided academic support

by ensuring that chores did not interfere with academics, purchasing new learning technology,

advising on course selection—and in one case, even hiring an in-person tutor. In contrast, WC

students typically paid more of their own expenses. Some described financial independence as a

way to avoid being a "burden" on parents, others contributed to household costs, and still others

paid for parents' expenses. In each of these scenarios, WC young adults were spending money

while many of their more affluent peers were saving money. Regarding academics, WC

respondents described more caregiving responsibilities and environmental distractions that posed

challenges to remote learning. Such disruptions may cumulatively affect students' academic

outcomes—for example, by lowering grades or straining relationships with faculty. These findings suggest mechanisms of financial and academic inequality that could be fruitfully explored using longitudinal data on students' savings, grades, and post-college outcomes.

<p style="text-align:center">Theoretical Contributions: Privileged Dependence, Precarious Autonomy</p>

Second, the findings make a broader theoretical contribution to scholarship on class stratification in families, higher education, and young adult transitions (Arnett, 2000; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021; Lareau, 2011; Silva, 2016). Drawing insight from Life Course Theory, this study extends prior sociological critiques of Arnett's emerging adulthood paradigm by illuminating how social class shaped young adults' interactions with parents—a dimension of inequality that has been underacknowledged on both sides of this debate. The COVID-19 pandemic is a unique historical moment. Yet young adults frequently encounter other challenges related to housing, finances, employment, relationships, and education. Indeed, one Korean study suggests a similar class divide regarding parents' roles in young adult women's marital processes (Kim et al., 2016). Additional research is needed to understand dependence and autonomy in other young adult contexts—as well as the implications for inequality.

On the one hand, it seems likely privileged dependence could yield socioeconomic rewards for UMC young adults in other contexts. For example, prolonged dependence may enable these young adults to activate and benefit from parents' financial assistance during periods of unemployment; social connections in the job application process; or advice while navigating graduate school admissions. On the other hand, we should not assume that greater dependence on parents' direction and resources is uniformly advantageous. While there were clear short-term financial and academic benefits to privileged dependence during the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the psychological literature suggests potential drawbacks.

Psychologists have argued that healthy development and functioning depend on the fulfillment of three basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People must feel free to make their own choices (autonomy), be confident in their abilities (competence), and be relationally close to others (relatedness). To the extent that dependence on parents' direction and resources undermine these conditions, privileged dependence may inhibit well-being even while promoting economic and educational attainment.

Yet greater dependence may also impede economic and educational attainment by limiting young adults' actual and perceived competence to navigate life after college (Mortimer et al., 2016). Already more independent from parents than their higher-SES peers before the pandemic (Hamilton, 2016; Lareau & Cox, 2011), WC young adults were forced into greater responsibility and self-sufficiency by this crisis. As they made autonomous decisions, secured new living arrangements, managed (limited) finances, and in some cases assisted other family members, WC students were learning what many would consider "adult skills." It is not clear whether developing these skills will provide instrumental gains in adulthood, however. For example, higher-SES young adults may be able to compensate for areas of practical inexperience through other social and material resources—their parents' as well as their own.

These findings are particularly relevant to scholarship on parent/young adult coresidence. Despite much scholarly attention to this phenomenon in recent decades (for a review, see Mazurik et al., 2020), we still know relatively little about how the qualitative experience of coresidence varies across social class (van Stee, 2022). Addressing this gap, the present study revealed dramatic differences in young adults' family roles and learning environments. In short, UMC students who returned home typically benefitted from parents' material and academic support while their WC peers experienced greater environmental distractions and household

responsibilities. These patterns could exacerbate class divides between young adults who live with parents beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, greater autonomy could protect coresident young adults from negative psychological outcomes associated with excessive parental control and/or reduce conflict related to parental rules and monitoring. Though measuring these outcomes is beyond the scope of the present study, my findings indicate that understanding the context and consequences of autonomy and dependence will be crucial to understanding social class disparities in the transition to adulthood.

Limitations

While this study offers novel insight into young adults' relationships with parents, there are several key limitations. First, although the polarized economic distribution of Elite University provides an ideal context to examine class variation, this site limits the generalizability of the findings. Students attending non-elite colleges have overall lower academic achievement in high school and are more likely to live off-campus, attend school part-time, have student loans, and fall outside the 18-24 age range examined here (Deil-Amen, 2015). These factors may shape intergenerational dynamics (Kuperberg et al., 2022; Mazelis & Kuperberg, 2022).

Second, this study found that some WC students provided financial assistance to parents—both during and prior to the pandemic. Consistent with prior research, child-to-parent assistance appeared to be less common among White young adults in this sample (Lanuza, 2020). However, the non-random sampling approach and limited data collected on this issue (i.e., not all students were asked explicitly about financial assistance) preclude firm conclusions.

Third, the dynamics observed within this sample may not be generalizable to immigrant families and those from other racial/ethnic groups. Indeed, prior research shows that Asian and Latinx young adults are more likely to live with, provide financial assistance to, and express

strong feelings of obligation to parents—suggesting family dynamics that may produce different patterns of dependence and autonomy (Britton, 2013; Fuligni et al., 1999; Lanuza, 2020).

Fourth, this study was not designed to assess gender differences among young adults or their parents, and I had few WC male young adults and no fathers in my study. My focus on social class was motivated by the education and parenting literatures (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2015; Lareau, 2011), and I found that the major differences among my respondents fell across class—rather than gender—lines. However, prior studies have found gender differences in young adult coresidence and financial dependence (Mazurik et al., 2020), indicating a need for further research on gendered dimensions of autonomy and dependence across social class.

Finally, although this study reveals clear class inequalities in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the data cannot speak to longer-term consequences of autonomy and dependence. Rather, the findings offer an empirical foundation and conceptual framework for future research to explore such outcomes.

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