

Exploring Relational Turning Points Between Family Members of Differing Political Identities

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Abstract

Much research has been done into the creation and maintenance of social identities, including political identities. With a perceived exacerbation of political polarization, there may be a greater concern for how a person's political identity and their expression of that identity impacts relationships with those who are societally considered closest to them. This research focuses on how closeness between members of the same family is impacted based on the experience of the participants. After interviewing students who described their experiences, I found that students felt a decrease in closeness and a greater sense of apprehension to engage in communication with family members who do not share their political identity, but also learned how to mitigate these interactions to maintain the relationship.

Keywords: political communication, family communication, communication apprehension

Introduction

The popularity of political discourse has skyrocketed over the past twenty years. Since the creation of CNN in 1980, but especially since 9/11, the public's exposure to political opinions has exponentially increased. Because of this, it is much more common for political communication to become inflammatory and polarized, though the cause of this is multifaceted (Boxell et al., 2017; Gabler, 2016; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Most scholarship focuses on political discourse in online spaces, like Twitter and Facebook, as social media is still a relatively young space and one that reinforces selective exposure, a factor that is attributed to higher polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Garrett et al., 2014; Robles et al., 2022). More and more frequently, Americans are forming political identities alongside the other ways they identify themselves and rooting themselves and their values in these identities. Identity creation typically begins in adolescence, between ages 11-17, and, while initially influenced by one's environment and the relationship between parent and child, may change as a child ages (Golish, 2000; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007; Morgan, 2021). A common trope among college-aged people is the dread associated with returning home for a holiday and engaging in a political conversation with a family member who no longer shares a political identity with the student, and it is this phenomenon that I am interested in exploring. There seem to be similar experiences surrounding the dissonance created by differing political identities between family members and the impact this difference has on the closeness the student and their family member may feel in their relationship (Johnson et al., 2019; Schrodt & Scruggs, 2021). Researchers (e.g., Bangerter & Waldron, 2014; Golish, 2000; Miller-Day, 2004; Wang & Nuru, 2016) suggest that closeness is a key aspect of fostering strong relationships with others, but the focus tends to be specifically centered around parent-child relationships and extended family relationships, like the grandparent-child relationship. This research study builds upon the existing literature to include differences in experiences, while still focusing on familial interactions. These familial relationships and interactions are vital, because, especially during development, they are what children use to help form their identities (Gehman et al., 2021; Golish, 2000; Harvard Family Research Project, 2007; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004).

Identity and Politics

Identities form throughout our lives, but, during college, students are exposed to complex ideas and situations that will often lead to a change in worldview (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). Although these developments do not occur in a vacuum, and no student enters college as a blank slate, many students find themselves creating a more nuanced sense of self (Magolda, 2008; Morgan, 2021). Through exposure to a diverse range of people and concepts, college students may alter their beliefs and values in such a way that they are distinctly different than they were prior to enrollment. Students tend to begin their journey towards self-authorship in college, a process that is fostered by the introspection and self-discovery commonplace during that time period (Magolda, 2008). This can result in an alteration of how a student expresses themselves and how they feel about themselves to be more aligned with the vision they have for themselves. And, through a combination of homophily and selective exposure, students are then able to create a group of close relational others who share similar views and have similar values, that gives these students the space and comfort needed to engage in political disagreement (Morey et al., 2012). Because college experiences tend to be particular and exclusive to the setting, students are often able to connect very deeply with their peers and create a shared felt identity (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). Of course, much of the early foundational scholarship focuses solely on the experiences of traditional college students, which can lead to an absence of literature that centers nontraditional, nonwhite, and queer students (Baber et al., 2015; Chica, 2019; Porter, 2013; Rowlands, 2010). More recently, this expansion of identity has led to a greater understanding of how an intersectional approach can provide a wider, more nuanced understanding of how identity is developed, especially among college students (Chica, 2019; Collins, 2015; Porter, 2013; Rowlands, 2010; Wang, 2014b). This expansion is paramount to understanding how political identities are formed and how people relate to others with similar or differing political identities, especially as politics becomes more culturally relevant and polarized (Garret et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012).

Political Polarization

Political polarization, traditionally, has been focused on how political policy preferences have moved over time. However, over the past decade, the focus in the literature has shifted towards the level of dislike partisans hold towards the opposing group, known as affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012). This is typically deemed as incredibly negative, equally practiced on both sides of the political aisle, and harmful towards the very construct of democracy, with the blame usually pointed towards modern news media and social media (Bail et al., 2018; Kim & Zhou, 2020; Robles et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2021). There is contention within the literature as to whether polarization is symmetrical and if the internet has a heavy impact on polarization (Boxell et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2021). However, researchers agree that selective exposure can reinforce and proliferate political polarization, both on- and offline (Bail et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2021; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021). This then connects to how students create, manage, and express their political identities, as the in-groups students form can serve to further polarize them against those with differing political identities, including family members. While the expectation is that polarizing communication comes strictly from mediated sources, like broadcast media, word of mouth is consistently a strong source of political information. Recently, researchers have shown that affective polarization and interpersonal communication, “the strategic process of message transaction between people to create and sustain shared meaning”, work to reinforce the other in a constant spiral (Beam et al., 2017; Hutchens et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012; West & Turner, 2017, p. 6). In this research, I aim to clarify potential reasons as to how and why this phenomenon occurs within the family.

Family Communication, Politics, and Identity

Family is considered the fundamental institution of society and central to a child’s socialization. However, the assertion that family is a strictly biological construct between parent and child or romantic partners has been challenged (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Floyd & Morman, 2013; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Soliz, 2007). In addition, communication within the family influences family relationships and

family member behaviors (Fowler et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2018). The conceptualization of a shared family identity illustrates how members of an in-group, like a family, are able to diminish their differences and focus on their commonalities (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Soliz, 2007; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). This idea extends to political discourse as well, especially within a family. Political socialization, notably on a micro-social level, is defined as “patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning” (Sapiro, 2004, p. 3) and initially occurs within a person’s preschool years, but persists throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Koerner & Schrodts, 2014; Sapiro, 2004; Weintraub Austin & Pinkleton, 2001). Recently, with the increase in political polarization and hostility, there has been an increase in reports about how divisive elections affect familial relationships, and this is reinforced by the research done around this issue (Associated Press, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Schrodts & Scruggs, 2021; Tavernise & Sellye, 2016). In general, families where open and free communication is encouraged have a stronger sense of shared identity, whereas a parent’s fixation on homogeneity of thought and belief results in a weaker sense of shared family identity (Johnson et al., 2019; Schrodts & Scruggs, 2021). However, much of the literature on political socialization and shared family identity is quantitative in nature, which, while valuable, does not delve into the internal experiences of the participants in the way that qualitative research is structured to do (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). To gain this deep sense of understanding, the proper framework is required.

Turning Points Framework

Focusing on understanding how families express differences in political identity and manage their relationship through these expressions led me to utilize Baxter and Bullis’ (1986) turning points framework. Originally, the model was conceptualized to analyze relational change between romantic partners, with turning points themselves being defined as any event that caused a change in the relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). However, further research has used the turning points framework to analyze a myriad of relationships, including divorced couples, parent-child relationships, stepchild-steparent relationships, friendships, on-again/off-again romantic relationships, and student-teacher

relationships (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2018; Dailey et al., 2016; Graham, 1997; Golish, 2000; Johnson et al., 2003; Wang, 2014a). This framework allows for a richer understanding of the development of a relationship than prior prescriptive frameworks, as it centers the relational member and their experience, instead of attempting to prescribe and assign instances of change within a relationship. This more descriptive model does not assign linearity to a relationship, but instead serves to describe the more fluid nature of change within a relationship and fosters a deeper understanding of the relationship being described.

Research Questions

In this study, I used a turning points model to identify substantive communication events between a student and their family member and utilized the students' interview responses to clarify the change in the relationship that occurred in each event. To build upon the extant research done within the realm of family communication and political identity, I advanced the following two research questions:

RQ₁: What turning points emerge when a student has a conversation with a family member of a differing political identity?

RQ₂: What types of family communication messages occur between family members of differing political identities?

Method

To address my research questions, I adopted a turning points model framework. The interpretive turning points approach allowed me to gain insight on communication events from the participant's perspective by centering the participant's experience and analyzing the events that the participants deemed valuable (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Dailey et al., 2016; Graham, 1997; Golish, 2000). Through this interpretive approach, I was able to extrapolate shared meaning that people in a particular group share, as interpretive research reflects not just the researcher's understanding, but the participants' collective views (Corbin &

Strauss, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To gain this perspective and derive shared meaning, I conducted semi structured interviews with students.

Participants

My participants were undergraduate and graduate students, primarily enrolled at a small Southern liberal arts university, who were 18 years of age or older and identified a family member who had a different political identity than their own. I located participants through convenience sampling and snowballing techniques approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Of the fourteen participants, twelve identified as "Caucasian" or "White", one identified as "Black", and one identified as "Southeast Asian." Twelve participants identified as female, and two identified as male. All the participants identified as non-conservative, ranging from "liberal" to "Democratic Socialist."

Data Collection and Procedures

The 14 interviews I conducted averaged 60 minutes in length, ranging from 21 to 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, a videoconferencing software. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned rather than using the real names of the participants. Following each interview, I downloaded the transcription that the application recorded and corrected any mistakes made by the automatic transcription.

Data Analysis

The primary objective in my data analysis was the classification of turning points between family members of differing political identities. The interview transcripts were used as the raw data, with each turning point serving as the unit of analysis. Each unit of analysis was assigned a valence, which I defined as positive for an increase in closeness from the previous turning point and negative for a decrease in closeness from the previous turning point. Each transcript was read twice: once to gain an overall perspective of the interviewees and a second time to locate emerging themes. As these themes were noted,

I ensured that they met the three criteria established by Owen (1984): recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness.

Recurrence is observed when multiple parts of the transcript “had the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Repetition is defined as “an explicit repeated use of the same wording,” and forcefulness “refers to the underlining of words and phrases” and the emphasis used to “stress and subordinate some utterances from other locutions” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). While reading through the data, I began categorizing the turning points using analytic induction, which is a conceptualization process that utilizes judgments of similarity and difference (Bulmer, 1979). This process began with the first unit of data, which focused on an initial theme, and, after creating an initial and preliminary label to capture the turning point category, every following turning point was compared to the existing categories. When a unit was similar to a category that already existed, I grouped it with the existing category. When a unit was distinct and different from all existing categories, a new category was created for that turning point until theoretical saturation was reached.

After reaching theoretical saturation, I produced an initial list of themes garnered from the turning points and then refined and clustered categories to address the listed research questions while identifying the subcategories that emerged from the categories. Following that process, I confirmed that the categories were reflective of the content and then produced a final list of themes. After finalizing the categories, I paired each category and subcategory with an exemplar statement to further develop the categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Finally, I compared the turning point themes found to existing literature and used labels that reflected the existing literature when possible.

Data Validation

To meet best practices for interpretive scholarship, I utilized multiple data validation strategies (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). First, I recorded and transcribed every interview, resulting in 426 pages of transcription. Then, I kept interviewing and analyzing data past the threshold of theoretical saturation, found to be eleven interviews. Third, I engaged in member checking by emailing each of the participants summaries

of the findings and a list of the preliminary themes to confirm whether or not the findings accurately echoed the participants' experiences, with none of the participants responding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, I used detailed and rich quotes from the participants to provide evidence for my findings.

Results

The goal of the research questions presented earlier in the study was to better understand substantive communication events between students and family members with different political identities. In addition, I pursued insight regarding the nature of the family communication that occurs within the context of those events. Overall, the results indicate that the reported turning points spawned from engagements happening within the family. Specifically, the turning points reinforced how young people form their political identities and reflected a decrease in the closeness between the participant and their family member when political conversations revealed a dissonance in beliefs. Interviews revealed two supratemes of turning point events regarding political identity creation and three regarding political conversations with family members with different political identities: (1a) the inciting incident, (1b) value transference, (2a) disagreement versus disrespect, (2b) online hostility, and (2c) keeping the peace.

Political Identity Creation

The Inciting Incident

The inciting incident was the first theme to emerge from discussions about political identity creation. This phenomenon focused on a singular major event, usually a national event, that inspired the participant to become more interested in politics, and typically occurred during the participants' high school years.

Participants noted that these events were significant, due to them being the first instances of the participants beginning to form beliefs that were different than the beliefs that their parents had instilled in them. Through further analysis of this theme, it became clear that there were two primary types of *inciting incidents*: presidential elections and social movements.

Presidential elections were notably prominent in responses about political identity creation. Participants who identified as liberal discussing a parent who was conservative noted that observing major election cycles resulted in internal dissonance between who their parents were supporting and who the participant found themselves agreeing with more frequently. Arthur, a 21-year-old, recalled:

I can remember the first election that [...] I was at the age where I sort of knew what was going on and I got more interested in the process was 2016. [...] But, I can remember, I would go back in my room after school, and I would watch the coverage of the primaries. [...] When the conventions convened during the 2016 Republican National Convention and the 2016 Democratic National Convention, I was right in front of the TV that summer watching the conventions and I listened to the speakers and sort of just kind of look at the environment the conventions were held in. And you could definitely tell a difference in tone and vision. [...] Something that Secretary Clinton said that I really admired was that “We have to take steps that don’t disrupt our lives, and we need to stay calm, and not let it prevent us from making decisions that make us less safe.” And that really resonated with me.

Here, Arthur specifically recalled being an adolescent and following the 2016 presidential election. He described the process of returning home from school and attempting to watch both parties’ candidates for president to form his own opinions about the parties and their platforms. In doing so, he explained that he found comfort in the serenity of the Democrats and specifically Hillary Clinton’s speech, which drew him closer to the Democratic ideology and helped shape his political identity.

Presidential elections were not, however, the only *inciting incident* that was present among the participants’ experiences. National social issues were also noted as playing a big part in how the participants formed their political identity. Many participants reported the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests or the COVID-19 pandemic as the catalyst for their political identity creation, but national social movements of all types inspired adolescents to form their own political identity. Olivia, a 22-year-old, discussed how national events surrounding gun violence forged her political identity:

Well, I was born in 1999 and one of the biggest ways – one of the biggest things that have shaped, you know, my political identity is issues like gun violence and gun violence prevention. I was born a couple months after Columbine and it's always been a presence. [...] And this has just been something that we've had to deal with: going through school shooter drills and things like that. The [Aurora, Colorado] movie theater shooting. Like, our parents wouldn't let us go to the movie theaters at the time. You know, and I identify myself as a member of the LGBT community and the Pulse nightclub shooting happened. [...] When I was a senior in high school, the Parkland shooting at the Parkland High School happened, and I got myself involved with March for Our Lives in [my hometown] and kind of helped start that in [my home state] so that's, like, one of the issues that's always been present in my life.

Olivia noted that continued mass shootings were what prompted her to begin investigating what her political identity was. She expressed an innate discomfort recalling the school shooter drills that she was required to do as a child and how normalized they had become. This intersected with another aspect of Olivia's identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as Pulse, the nightclub in Orlando, Florida where a mass shooting occurred in 2016, was a known gay bar. This, alongside the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, led Olivia to get involved in local activism, like March for Our Lives, a national demonstration in favor of gun control legislation. These *inciting incidents* surrounding this issue of gun violence, Olivia explained, were what helped shape her political identity.

A more subtle *inciting incident*, however, was possible. While most were national events, some were smaller, more personal inspiring moments or revelations to a perspective not seen before. A few participants noted that exposure to diverse media was the inspiration for their political identification. Charlotte, a 21-year-old, noted the impact that the movie-musical *Rent* had on her:

My biggest, like, hobby and interest in middle school and high school was musical theater. So, my freshman year of high school, I watched the musical *Rent* for the first time, and, I hate to say it, but it changed everything for me. It was nothing like I'd ever seen before. And, I'd already, by that point, kind of leaning more towards looking into what a Democrat was because I really had no idea. Because my

grandmother, and my whole family, and that side is also conservative that I didn't even really know anything about politics. [...] Whenever I saw that and saw things that were celebrated that I'd never seen celebrated before, I really enjoyed it. So, I was like, "This is what I want to support and believe in."

Charlotte described how her perspective shifted in a way that it hadn't prior to watching the movie *Rent*. This movie, which depicted queer relationships, a crossdresser, the AIDS crisis, and the struggles of impoverished and unhoused people, opened Charlotte's eyes and expanded her view of the world. The celebration of being authentically true to oneself and the themes of the film resonated deeply within Charlotte and, in turn, led her to form her political identity.

Value Transference

For those who developed political identities that mirrored or were similar to their parents, participants explained that, through their research into various political affiliations, the values and beliefs that their parents instilled in them were by far the driving forces in their development. When discussing a conversation with his mother, 20-year-old Liam explained:

[My parents] have always really believed in, like, asking questions, challenging authority, don't believe – I guess – everything you see. [...] One of the first times I remember talking about politics is with my mom when I was in, like, middle school, probably, because Obama was president. [...] I asked my mom, "Do you like Obama?" like we all ask our parents for guidance. [...] The answer that she gave me [...] is kind of like, "He's done some good things, but he's also done some bad things." [...] But, most of the time, it wasn't really a single conflict that shaped – or a single point that shaped my political views. It's mainly just been a steady upbringing.

For Liam, *value transference* represented the critical thinking skills his parents instilled in him at a young age. He noted that the important takeaways from these conversations were the nuance that his mother emphasized and a steady caution for political authority. Liam specifically contrasted *the inciting incident* by noting that there was not a single specific event or conflict that shaped his political identity. Instead,

the consistent critical lens that his parents encouraged helped guide him towards the identity that he now holds.

While the distinction between these two upbringings did not appear to cause a difference in how fervent their political belief was, children whose political identity was shaped by an *inciting incident* reported a sharper decline in closeness with their family members after engaging in discordant political conversations than those whose political identity was shaped through *value transference*.

Political Conversations with Family Members with Different Political Identities

Disagreement versus Disrespect

When engaging in discourse with a family member, the most common theme that occurred was that the family member would often view any form of dissonance or anything short of universal agreement as an affront. Emma, a 20-year-old, recounted a conversation she had with her mother after the January 6th insurrection:

I had said something against the way that [my mother] believed that this matter was handled, and it was a much more visceral reaction than I was expecting. I kind of expected like a “I don’t know what you’re thinking” but it was a whole thing. She was, like, “Are they really – like have they gotten you already?” talking about coming to the university and furthering my education, [saying], “Oh, have they really gotten to you? Like, you’re going to disagree with me?” There are issues sometimes present where disagreement gets confused with disrespect and that was a lot how I was, like, brought up. And, if you didn’t outright agree [...] [it] was disrespectful. And, if this person was older than you, it was really disrespectful.

Emma described the shock she experienced when expressing an opinion that was discordant to her mother’s. She delved into an expectation she had formed in her head about how the conversation would go and the unpleasant feeling of that expectation being violated. The way that Emma described her mother’s reaction, as though the university that she attended had brainwashed her instead of these beliefs

being formed genuinely, conveyed the sense of hurt that she felt when confronted with such an unexpectedly harsh reaction.

This sensation was usually unexpected and could cause a sharp decline in the relational closeness between the participant and their family member. Most participants reported that this phenomenon was caused by their family member's myopic view of politics and described a desire for more open-mindedness from their family member. There was a myriad of emotions that interacted with what the participants believed was close-mindedness, ranging from pity to fury. Olivia articulated how this affected her relationships with her father:

He was one of those people that only watches one news source. Like, he only watched Fox News – he never did his own research – or YouTube. So, he was very heavily into, like, Fox News and stuff and people on YouTube instead of doing his own research. So, like, any time anyone tells me something, like “This is how it is,” I never trust anybody. [...] I don't trust people, so I, like, do my own research, because I don't want to profess something and it not be true. [...] He just sees, like, the one person say something, and he just goes with it and runs with it. And, I'm not like that. [...] Just the disconnect between not knowing the beliefs of each [party] and not having trustworthy news sources or not using enough news sources to form your own opinion. He doesn't know how to form his own opinion, in my opinion.

Olivia's frustration with her father, who she believed only engaged with politically conservative media, was evident and led her to believe that his opinions were not his own. This was based in her belief that his selective exposure funneled his perspective in a way that it may not have if he were to engage with a political media with a variety of viewpoints. There was a disconnect that Olivia noted in the way that they approached newsworthy events: Olivia liked to research facts from a multitude of sources, whereas her father only engaged with what was familiar to him. Ultimately, this myopia caused Olivia to think lesser of her father.

This myopia also caused incredibly tense conversations that boiled over into more heated arguments, as noted by 22-year-old Rue in regard to a conversation with her mother about interracial dating:

At the time, when I was in high school – and this was before she really was, like, politically involved, but she definitely had her stances on, like, what races were considered good, what races were considered bad, and I think that also really shaped me because I'd seen how wild it can be when somebody is completely acting out based on, like, somebody's skin color. [...] I just really liked this one guy and he is black. I brought it up to my mother and she was just not happy about it. She was just like "You want to date him?" and I was like "Yeah." But, then she was like "Why do you want to date him? He's Black. You know, like, 99% of them are, like, you know, cheaters. All of them are gangsters. They go to jail. Like, they're killers, they're cheaters, you know. They always leave their kids." [...] It was less about, like, me just wanting to spend a day with him. It was more about trying to really convert me to thinking that I can't be dating Black people. [...] That's also really traumatizing, because I've never seen somebody so worked up about somebody's skin color. And, when I would retaliate and be like "You're racist," she'd be like "I'm not racist, I'm not racist, that's just the fact, that's just the truth" and the seething anger. [...] It got me fired up. Like, I will yell or yell back, 'cause she will yell at me. So, I will yell back and, like, retaliate, and eventually I will cry because I was just, like, so in shock.

Rue and her mother experienced quite a bit of dissonance based around Rue's desire to date interracially, specifically with a Black man. In listing off numerous stereotypes, Rue's mother's negative view of Black men caused Rue to lash out in anger and begin to engage in a shouting match with her mother. Rue noted that the conversation, which originated with a desire to spend a day with a Black man, devolved into her mother attempting to evangelize her beliefs and invalidate Rue's. This rejection of her mother's myopia was then viewed as disrespectful and was the catalyst for a more hostile verbal interaction.

Online Distance

The second major theme to emerge within political conversation between family members was *online distance*, which participants noted to be how their family member's online usage and integration into

online communities isolated and ostracized them from the participants. This online engagement through social media served to reinforce the family member's beliefs and confirm their biases causing unintentional harm to the participant, as noted by Olivia who discussed her father's online support of Donald Trump in 2016:

I could see what he was posting on Facebook and on Twitter and things like that, and I had to, like, unfollow him on things like that, so I don't have to see it. Even if he wasn't one of those wearing the red hat, like, yes, he wasn't a die-hard person. This, to him, was the least worst option for him. But, for me, you know, just because of the things that Donald Trump stood for and still stands for [...] it's like you're potentially voting for somebody that could take rights away from your children. I just – I personally could never do that. But, you know, it did cause a strain, because it definitely made me see him differently than I had before, you know, he took an active role in voting for that, so it definitely made me see him a little differently.

Olivia described noticing her father's online posts and how those posts, despite not intentionally being harmful or particularly radical, still reinforced and were in support of a candidate who Olivia believed could take rights away from her. This caused a notable impact on the relationship between the two of them, as Olivia did not see Donald Trump as the lesser of two evils, as her father did. Olivia saw the then-candidate Trump as someone who, if granted executive power, could inflict harm onto her, and her father's support of him was viewed as support for his policies. This created distance between Olivia and her father.

The other noted form of *online distance* contrasted the posts that family members actively made and focused more on the communities that they involved themselves in online. These spaces could be what encouraged the myopia detailed earlier, as they are described as being circular and confirmatory instead of informational and critical. Liam, when describing the online spaces his uncle occupied, detailed:

He, I don't think, has an opportunity to see outside of this bubble of going to work, coming home, watching the news, going on Twitter/Facebook/whatever, going to sleep, and repeating that. [...] He doesn't have a lot of opportunities to kind of exchange, and that's probably when I chilled the most about it. I feel sad for him, because he doesn't have those opportunities to, like we do as college students, meet new people. And, I feel like he's kind of just stuck in an echo chamber of repeated ideas that become more extreme over time. He is probably the most challenging to talk to politics.

When describing his uncle's online engagement, Liam noted that a lack of exposure to diverse people and thought could be what was causing political conversations to be difficult. He noted that these spaces could turn into echo chambers of confirmation bias, where every member of the online community was simply affirming the biases of every other member. This, as Liam continued, could make political discourse more difficult, as conversations with people outside of the echo chamber may not produce the same affirmations and thus created expectancy violations.

Keeping the Peace

When discussing more recent conversations, many participants noted that *keeping the peace* was a very important aspect of relational maintenance that they had begun to focus on. This manifested itself in two ways: avoidance and agreement. Many participants expressed that, as time went on from the first hostile political conversation, that they slowly began to refrain from engaging in political conversations, as the expectation was that they would simply turn into arguments. Chloe, a 24-year-old student, detailed how she learned to mitigate conversations with her mother as much as possible:

I really just avoided her. [...] It was just a weird time. Very, very uncomfortable. And, I had to, I always am constantly filtering myself, but even more so. I just felt like I was almost a robot being so careful not to bring up any subject or say anything that would set anyone in my house off. And, so that's another issue with her is she will get very invested, like, emotionally invested when we have a conversation. And, not that I'm not, but, like, she will cry. I tell her she's wrong with information, give her information. So, literally just, like, "Hi, how was your day? Interesting. Okay. See you later." Very surface level.

Chloe noted how she and her mother would avoid any substantive conversations entirely, in hopes that they wouldn't have to engage in difficult, emotional conversations. So, to spare both of them the emotional hardship that would come with these interactions, Chloe detailed how their conversations would be kept to a minimum and the superficial nature of those conversations.

This was not the only form of *keeping the peace*. Many participants noted that the sharpest increase in relational closeness occurred when their family member's opinion changed in alignment with their own. This type of peacekeeping, agreement, did not have to be entirely concordant or consonant, but simply a shift that indicated that the family member was becoming more open-minded and amenable to the participant's beliefs. Charlotte detailed an event where her grandmother, who had previously expressed anti-abortion opinions, supported Charlotte through both words and actions:

So, like I always knew in my head that, like, my grandmother was a pro-life woman, and before I, like, ever got pregnant or anything – you know, in those early ages, whenever I was developing my political identity – I decided that I wanted to be pro-choice. [...] And, then, of course, I mean, like, you know, it happened to me and I was, like, dumbfounded. I found out I was pregnant and I was driving to Wal-Mart to take the test, because I couldn't even stomach bringing one home, because I had no idea of what to, like, do. But, I just kind of, like, had the gut feeling that it was going to be positive. And, I was in the Wal-Mart bathroom, found out I was positive, went to my car and, like, cried for about fifteen minutes. And, then I came back home. [...] And, I just pulled [my grandmother] into the living room, I told her, like, "I think I'm pregnant" and it was – like, I couldn't have even dreamt of the reaction she would give me. Because I'd thought in my head of every single bad scenario that possibly could have happened and I had no idea what she was going to do. [...] She was like "I'll let you think about what you want to do, but, I mean, you're a kid. You can't have a kid." And, it was completely like – I would have never in a million years guessed that that's what she would have said to me. [...] There was never a single time the whole experience that she said "Well, what if you keep it?" [...] So, she, the next day, was on the phone with every single clinic in the area we had. [...] I guess things kind of mended for me and my

grandmother, because, even though she's still, like, to this day – like, will vote in the way that you would think is just the most Trump-supporting person ever, she's really become a lot more open-minded since my years in college and ever since all that happened.

In recounting this story, Charlotte detailed the concern and apprehension she had, not just through the process of discovering that she was pregnant, but of revealing this to her admittedly anti-abortion grandmother. She discussed how she ran through every feasible conversation tree in her mind before the conversation even began and expected the conversation to go poorly. However, when her grandmother supported her decision to terminate the pregnancy in both words and actions, Charlotte described how that caused them to become closer and specifically noted how her grandmother had become more open-minded in recent years.

Discussion

In the present study, I explored political identity creation and important communication events that students perceived as turning points in the relationship with a family member with a differing political identity. In addition, I explored the nature of family communication that occurred within these noted turning points. This study makes important contributions to existing literature on how families engage in politically polarized and potentially contentious conversations while providing insight on the complexities associated with how college students manage relational closeness with their family members who do not share their political identity. In what follows, I highlight my findings, and then provide theoretical and practical implications of the present study.

My first research question focused on emerging themes regarding the turning points that occurred when students engaged in political communication with family members who did not share their political identity. Through analysis of the interview data, I identified two themes regarding political identity creation and three themes regarding political conversations. The two themes of turning points within political identity creation were (a) the inciting incident and (b) value transference. The three themes found within political conversations with a family member were (a) disagreement versus disrespect, (b) online

distance, and (c) keeping the peace. Participants reported that turning points involving *the inciting incident* occurred during their high school years, whereas *value transference* usually occurred earlier, during middle school. Neither type of identity creation was shown to be linked to how passionate or radical one's beliefs were, but were indicants of how these identities formed for the participants. When engaging with family members of a differing political identity in political conversations, though, participants noted that turning points involving *disagreement versus disrespect* and *online distance* usually occurred after their political identity had been more concretely formed, with *keeping the peace* occurring even later in their timeline. Participants associated negativity and tension with *disagreement versus disrespect* and *online distance*, whereas *keeping the peace* was noted to be a necessity to repair a damaged relationship.

My second research question aimed to better understand the nature of family communication that occurred within turning points experienced by students when engaging in political conversations with family members who did not share their political identity. Participants throughout the dataset repeatedly noted that their experiences of turning points indicated a change in relational closeness that needed to be managed through family communication. Consistent with existing literature, participants discussed that, while total political alignment was not necessary, their relational closeness was impacted by how open-minded their family member was to their beliefs, whereas tension and a decrease in closeness was associated with close-mindedness and a myopic view of politics (Johnson et al., 2019; Schrodt & Scruggs, 2021).

Implications

The findings presented here provide both scholarly and practical implications. First, the findings of the study provide a deeper nuance to the existing quantitative literature by detailing and delving into the ways that students negotiate turning points through communication with family members. Although political communication between family members has been explored before, the research done presently is the first to do so while focusing on the ways that students navigated political conversations with family members

who did not share their political identity and how those relationships were shaped through turning points and negotiated in family communication (Johnson et al., 2019; Schrodt & Scruggs, 2021). As such, by utilizing a turning points framework for analysis, the present study contributes a richer understanding of the key communication moments experienced by students and the family interactions involved in these potentially difficult conversations.

Second, the findings of the present study provide nuance to current research regarding political polarization by indicating that students engaging in political conversations with family members may not be more polarized, but rather, engaging with family members who are not willing to shed their myopic perspective in favor of a more open-minded point of view (Bail et al., 2018; Boxell et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012; Santo et al., 2021). Specifically, my findings indicate that students feel closer to family members who, even if they do not share the same political identity, are willing to be open-minded, engage in good faith, and interact with them in an empathetic manner.

Furthermore, the present study provides practical implications as well. Seeing that students profess a higher level of relational closeness when engaging with a family member who is more open-minded and willing to meaningfully listen and accept a diversity of opinions, the insights gleaned from this study may assist in providing understanding about the unique experiences of college students. Specifically, this study may assist the family members of college students in understanding how best to communicate with the student. In addition, because students may seek comfort from those outside of their family, these findings may aid others in navigating communication events with college students.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there are contributions of the present study, there are also limitations and opportunities for future research as well. First, in observing turning points from the students' perspectives, I recognize that this study does not include or account for the experiences of the family members with whom the students are interacting. Given that descriptions of turning points explicitly recalled interactions between the student and a family member, the perspective of the family member alongside the student's would have

benefited the study. Future researchers may consider exploring how these family members navigate relational maintenance with a college student in their family with a different political identity. Second, the sample for this study was overwhelmingly homogenous. Of the fourteen participants, twelve identified as White, twelve identified as female, and none identified as conservative. Future researchers may consider examining the nuances in which a more diverse sample could impact findings. Third, the present study may also be limited in that turning points were only reported in retrospect. Although using past events allowed for a greater range of turning points, recollection may have changed over time and the participants' memory may influence their turning points. Future researchers may consider examining narratives of college students' experiences as they occur in real time. Taken together, these limitations and opportunities for future research provide avenues by which researchers can continue to determine how these crucial conversations can best be navigated.

Conclusion

Participants within this study noted that the most important way that they felt supported was by being able to freely discuss their thoughts with those close to them, whether they be family or friends. Regardless of the fervor of their ideology, these students displayed a very real willingness and desire to engage with the ideological differences that their family members held, if the discourse was open-minded and made in good faith. Participants reported the greatest decrease in closeness with their family members when said relational other did not seem to value an open and honest discussion in the same way. Despite political polarization, families should be able to utilize the findings of this study to mend relationships across ideological lines and engage in healthier communication.

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