The Phenomenological Experience of Parents Who Live with a Boomerang Child

D. Robert Casares, Jr. and Carolyn C. White

Department of Counseling and Behavioral Sciences, University of Holy Cross, New Orleans, LA, USA

ABSTRACT

Prior quantitative research indicates that boomerang child coresidence provides economic and emotional support for young adults as they transition to adulthood; however, no qualitative studies have explored the day-to-day experiences of parents who live with an adult child. This phenomenological study investigated the experiences of parents who live with a boomerang child, analyzing data collected from interviews with eight couples. Participants indicated that boomerang child coresidence was a largely positive living arrangement, yielded benefits for both parents and their adult children, and produced minimal family conflict. The following themes emerged from the data: roles, expectations, challenges, and benefits. A summary of key findings and clinical implications is provided.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 April 2018
Revised 26 June 2018
Accepted 26 June 2018

KEYWORDS
coresidence; parent-child relations; intergenerational relations; families in middle and later life; qualitative research

In the United States, individuals are more likely to leave home and return at some point during young adulthood, due to shifts in the timing of marriage and childbirth, prolonged educational attainment, and the composition of the labor market (Furstenberg, 2010; Parker, 2012; Payne & Copp, 2013). In the literature, this phenomenon is commonly referred to as intergenerational coresidence (Goldscheider & Lawton, 1998; Leopold, 2012). Coresidence has been noted for providing both benefits and drawbacks for the individuals involved in this living arrangement (Glick & Van Hook, 2011; Ward & Spitze, 2004) and is often described as a safety net, as it offers a form of protective support in periods of hardship, economic difficulty, and transition (Eggebeen & Davey, 1998; Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O’Brien, 2011). For young adults, the chance to move home creates an opportunity to reduce expenses and commonly provides a desirable living situation, while also diminishing a young adult’s sense of...
autonomy and privacy (Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Sassler, Ciambrone, & Benway, 2008). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the day-to-day experiences of parents who live with a boomerang child between the ages 18–31.

**Literature review**

**General phenomenon of coresidence**

Throughout history and across cultures, adults have chosen to reside with their parents. Adults have traditionally coresided with parents under three circumstances: (1) elderly parents move in with their adult children as they reach the end of their lives (Goldscheider & Lawton, 1998), (2) adult children remain in the parental home, in favor of moving out on their own (Aquilino & Supple, 1991), or (3) adult children return to the parental home during the transition into adulthood (Mitchell & Gee, 1996).

Over the past decade, coresidence has increased in both prevalence and social acceptability (Furstenberg, 2010; Mykyta & Macartney, 2012). The rate from 1968 to 2007 was 32%; between 2007 and 2009, rose to 34%; and in 2012 increased to 36% of U.S. adults ages 18–31 (Fry, 2013). In 2012, the number of young adults living with their parents was 21.6 million (Fry, 2013), a prevalence that is the highest recorded since the 1950s (Parker, 2012). In recent years, nearly half of young adults have returned to the parental home to reside for a minimum of four months (Bouchard, 2014).

**Concept of boomerang child**

The term boomerang child refers to a young adult who has moved out of the parental home for an extended period of time and, for a variety of reasons, returns home to live with his or her parents. The label of boomerang child is well-established within academic literature (Bouchard, 2014; Newman, 2013; Parker, 2012; Mitchell & Gee, 1996) and print journalism (Davidson, 2014; Henig, 2010; Hoder, 2012). Sassler, Ciambrone, and Benway (2008) observe: “Today’s young adults are more likely than those of the past to leave home and attend college or establish independence, they are also more apt to return to live with their parents” (p. 673).

According to Fry (2013), of the Pew Research Center, three primary factors have contributed to the rise of young adults living in their parents’ home, namely: (1) declining employment, (2) rising college enrollment, and (3) declining marriage. Additional precipitating factors include the desire to save money, the inability to support one’s self and form independent households as a result of declining earnings, and the need for increased emotional support (Bell, Burtless, Gornick, & Smeeding, 2007; Mykyta,
Another study conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates that young adults are more enthusiastic about returning home to live with parents, given this phenomenon’s increase in prevalence over the past decade (Parker, 2012).

Within the media and popular culture, the perception of boomerang child coresidence remains divided. Some journalists have lamented this phenomenon, characterizing boomerang children as lazy parasites who are incapable of making a positive contribution to society (Buchholz & Buchholz, 2012; Rampell, 2011). Comedic films such as Billy Madison (Simonds & Davis, 1995), Failure to Launch (Rudin, Aversano, & Dey, 2006), and Step Brothers (Apatow, Miller, & McKay, 2008), along with television shows like Baskets (Székely et al., 2016), have further stigmatized this phenomenon, by portraying boomerang children as immature nuisances who drain parents of their patience, energy, and resources. Conversely, some journalists contend that boomerang child coresidence serves as a beneficial and fiscally responsible living arrangement for young adults, as they strive to attain full adult status (Davidson, 2014; Henig, 2010; Hoder, 2012).

**Relational considerations**

The coresidence relationship is fraught with complexity and tension, as it requires young adults to navigate through a variety of domains and exercise contradictory roles on a routine basis. Young adults possess numerous societal privileges that confer legal status as an adult and grant a sense of independence and autonomy; yet, economic and situational factors commonly extend a young adult’s dependency on parents (Aquilino, 2006). Swartz et al. (2011) noted that some researchers and journalists are concerned with parental support in young adulthood prolonging dependence (Cote, 2000; Tyre, 2002), while other academics have postulated that parental aid allows young adults to overcome the various challenges of life and promotes the development of self-sufficiency (Aquilino, 2005; Eggebeen, 2005) and the eventual attainment of adult-status (Johnson, 2013; White & Lacy, 1997). Studies investigating parental satisfaction and household tension associated with parent-adult child coresidence present limited and marginally conflicting data. A quantitative study conducted by Ward and Spitze (2007) determined that this living arrangement may create tension and marital discord within families; however, results also indicated that coresidence did not negatively affect the overall quality of relationships among family members. Other old research indicates that coresident parents typically report relationship satisfaction and minimal conflict (Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Ward & Spitze, 1996). Generally, shared leisure time with adult children outnumbered arguments and disagreements (Aquilino &
Supple, 1991). The relevance and current implications of the studies conducted by Ward and Spitze (1996, 2007) and Aquilino and Supple (1991) are uncertain, as each study’s findings are based on analysis of survey data that was collected three decades ago (1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households). Previously, the overall level of marital satisfaction among parents living with boomerang children was quite high, with about 73% being very satisfied (Mitchell & Gee, 1996). The research of Aquilino and Supple (1991) and Mitchell and Gee (1996) both acknowledge that a selection factor might impact coresidence patterns and satisfaction, noting that parents with stronger marital relationships may be more inclined to permit their adult children to return home during a time of need. While prior quantitative data indicates that boomerang child coresidence yields various benefits for parents and young adults and constitutes a satisfying and desirable living arrangement, no qualitative research has investigated parental experiences with boomerang child coresidence, as noted by Furstenberg (2010), “What happens inside families on a day-by-day basis when young adults co-reside with their parents remains a largely unexplored topic… What is lacking is good qualitative evidence on how parents and young adults work things out” (p. 74).

Methods

The research question that guided this study was: What are the experiences of parents who live with a boomerang child? Because of the focus on lived experience, the phenomenological method (Creswell, 2014) informed research design, data collection, and analysis. This approach is concerned with the ways individuals and groups derive meaning from their lived experiences and aims to describe the nature of those experiences in universal terms (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

Eight couples participated in the qualitative study. See Table 1 for participant pseudonyms and demographics. All participants identified as Caucasian, middle class, married or remarried; and six constituted two-earner households. Education levels ranged from high school to doctoral, with two men completing trade school or an apprenticeship. The mean age was 56.4 (range = 44–65). The number of boomerang children who lived with a particular couple ranged from 1 to 3. Half of the couples (n = 4) reported having a least one younger child in the home throughout the duration of coresidence. Of the 14 boomerang children (9 women, 5 men), the mean duration of completed coresidence (n = 11) was 19.4 months.
One couple reported intending to have another boomerang child within the next 8–10 months; three couples were presently living with a boomerang child.

**Procedures**

The snowball method was used to identify potential participant couples that met the following criteria: (1) presently married, (2) currently living with or have previously lived with a boomerang child, (3) the boomerang child returned home after a minimum of six months of living on his or her own, (4) the adult child’s age ranged from 18 to 31 at return. Divorce and remarriage did not preclude couples from participation. We included stepparents’ perspectives to provide a comprehensive representation of current family compositions, given the prevalent nature of blended families in American. Participants were recruited from a suburb of a large city located in the Southern United States.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all eight participant couples and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Participants selected the location of our interview, with six couples selecting their residence, one selecting a mutually agreed upon office setting, and one opting to interview from their residence via videoconference. All interviews were conducted by the first author over a period of one month and ranged in length from 30 to 45 minutes. Parents were interviewed conjointly, and each interview was recorded for future transcription. Interviews began with the same prompt: *Tell me about your experiences with living with a boomerang child.* Open-ended questions and prompts were posed in response to participant descriptions, to invite parents to elaborate on their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Couple</th>
<th>Assigned Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Years Married</th>
<th>Number of boomerang child coresidence experiences</th>
<th>Sex, Age(s) of boomerang child at time of return</th>
<th>Duration/status of boomerang child coresidence experience(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Cheryl Lawrence</td>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M, 22</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Pamela James</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F, 22</td>
<td>1 1/2 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Elizabeth Henry</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M, 20</td>
<td>2 years: ongoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Susan Jeffrey</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F, 22</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F, 23, M, 24</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Joan Patrick</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F, 21</td>
<td>6 months: ongoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Katherine Greg</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M, 21</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M, 22, M, 22</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F, 22, F, 24</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 Claire Francis</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F, 21</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F, 24</td>
<td>9 months: ongoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 Holly Mike</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F, 22, F, 23</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(range = .5–4 years).
experiences living with their *boomerang child*. Examples of the open-ended prompts used include: Tell me more about (a) the circumstances that led up to your son/daughter moving back home; (b) the impact your adult child’s return had on your life; (c) other examples of changes and/or frustrations that resulted from his/her return; (d) the ways that you feel your relationship with your son/daughter was strengthened during the time he/she lived with you; (e) how your adult child’s return helped him/her work toward future goals; (f) how you discussed your adult child’s plans for the future and/or length of time he/she expected to live with you; (g) the role you played in your son/daughter’s transition to living independently; (h) how your perception of your son/daughter shifted during the time he/she lived with you.

**Data analysis**

Data reached saturation after eight interviews. Once all eight interviews were conducted, transcripts were analyzed to develop insight into participants’ experiences with *boomerang child* coresidence. Themes were identified and an understanding of the subjective experiences of participants were developed through the use of Creswell’s (2013) six simplified steps for data analysis, which were developed from the methods presented by Moustakas (1994): (1) a list of significant statements was developed from each transcript, (2) significant statements were then grouped into themes and subthemes, (3) a description of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon (textural) and a description of how the experience happened (structural) were each written, and (4) a composite description of the phenomenon was written, which incorporated both the textural and structural descriptions.

**Establishing trustworthiness**

After initial themes were developed, summaries of participant experiences, themes, and subthemes were emailed to each participant, and couples were asked to respond to the accuracy of the findings, with regard to their experience with *boomerang child* coresidence. All couples agreed to participate in member checks; however, only four couples responded to our request. Each of these four couples confirmed the accuracy of the findings and recommended no changes. Additionally, a peer reviewer analyzed one transcript and constructed a list of significant statements consistent with our identified themes and subthemes. Lastly, we triangulated evidence from taped interviews, written transcripts, and field notes, which allowed us to corroborate multiple data sources and further confirmed the validity of our themes (Creswell, 2013).
Table 2. Themes and subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muddled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timetable for departure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Adjustments and flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult child’s struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inconveniences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolving conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational and personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preparation for the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

All participants expressed a general satisfaction with living with a boomerang child, reported normal to minimal levels of conflict, and highlighted various benefits associated with their adult child’s return to the parental home. Table 2 presents themes and subthemes. The following section discusses these themes and subthemes through a summary of key findings and the use of rich descriptions taken from participant interviews.

Theme: Roles

The multifaceted nature of residing with a boomerang child necessitated that parents and children fulfill roles that are typically fluid, rather than static. Participants reported that, first and foremost, they are parents. Although boomerang children have previously enjoyed a period of autonomy and of living independently, most participants expressed a need and a desire to fulfill the role of parent during the time that their young adult lived in their home. This role commonly found expression in concern and oversight, or through the need to correct undesirable behaviors exhibited by the boomerang child.

Several couples indicated that certain developmental milestones allowed them to view their boomerang child as an equal adult. While some parents struggled to view their adult children as equals, others felt the shift in perspective was natural and beneficial. Jeffery reported: “It just gave me a good chance to get to know them as full adults… as integrated people; to get to know them in that way.” Recognizing equal adult status among parents and children contributed to mutual respect and enabled parents to extend new privileges to their adult children, such as increased transparency. Several couples described having routine conversations with their
boomerang child about previously undiscussed topics, such as family financial concerns and work-related stress and frustrations. Elizabeth reported: “At first, he would get uncomfortable and he didn’t want to know it. But, now he’s like: ‘Okay I get it.’ I think he respects us for telling him.”

Each couple remarked on the confounding nature of living with a boomerang child and articulated the fluid roles both parents and adult children experienced. Several parents shared about how their boomerang child struggled with navigating through the complexities of adult life, while remaining dependent on their parents for financial and material support. Relying on parental support occasionally served as an impediment to the boomerang child’s pursuit of autonomy. The behavior of boomerang children sometimes led participants to assume an authoritarian role of a parent, as Holly commented: “And correcting, having to correct an attitude. You’re like: ‘You shouldn’t talk like that!’—that sort of thing.” Elizabeth confessed: “It’s been interesting because we can’t treat him like a teenager, so dealing with the adult-to-adult interaction has been challenging, but I think we’re working though it… He’s 22 years old and you can’t really ground him.”

Participants indicated that the roles of parents and boomerang children are commonly muddled. Participants needed to fill the role of parent, friend, or adviser, depending on the needs, behaviors, and attitudes of their adult children. Sons or daughters may conduct themselves as mature adults one day and as children the next day, illustrating that the dynamic of living with a boomerang child is complex and ever-changing.

**Theme: Expectations**

Each couple outlined their expectations for their adult child’s conduct while living at home. House rules differed among families, but each couple described the importance of clearly and specifically communicating their rules. Most commonly, parents expected their boomerang children to fill their time with productive activities such as work or school. James reported:

“I don’t think we would have handled it well if we would have seen her sitting watching TV… but, the fact that we saw our daughter trying the best that she could made it easier to say: ‘Yeah, whatever we have to do to help you.’”

Each household had rules for appropriate and expected behavior. The nature and parameters of these rules varied from household to household, but each couple articulated basic ground rules by which they expected their boomerang children to abide throughout the time they resided in their parents’ home. Most couples expected boomerang children to assist with basic household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, yard work, and transporting younger siblings. In the case of Greg and
Katherine, sons and daughters were expected to perform certain chores based on tasks associated with traditional gender roles. Katherine stated:

Doing their laundry, keeping their space neat, they [all] had to do that. And if [my sons] could help with the yard work—or saw something like that [needed to be done]—then we expected them to help. My daughter, I expected her to help with some of the cooking.

Some parents went as far as requiring chores as a stipulation of living at home without the expense of paying monthly rent. None of the parents interviewed expected or required their boomerang children to pay rent. Mike reported: “I didn’t ask them to contribute financially or anything like that, nor did they offer (laughs).” Most participants indicated that providing free housing was intended to serve as an opportunity for their boomerang children to save money for future endeavors and goals. Greg explained his motivations thusly: “So the real purpose of her living with us was to allow her to build up a little nest egg, since she lived here free of charge.” However, parents expected boomerang children to pay for additional expenses, such as eating out, social activities with friends, and clothes.

Parents routinely elaborated on the manner, content, and circumstances of expected communication with their boomerang children. All couples expected boomerang children to communicate about everyday comings and goings, to minimize parental worry about safety and so couples could structure their daily plans. Many parents articulated the types of things that they expected to communicate about with their boomerang child, such as social plans, anticipated return time when going out, and whether or not their adult child would be home for dinner.

Several participant couples reported feeling uncomfortable with imposing a timetable for their boomerang child’s departure, while others stated that their adult child was welcome to stay at home for as long as needed. Although parents did not dictate a departure date, each couple reported that having an approximate idea of when their boomerang child would leave home made the living arrangement easier. Common opportunities for moving out included completing school, securing gainful employment, getting married, and buying a house.

Theme: Challenges

The boomerang child’s return home was a period of transition, marked by adjustments for both parents and their adult children. Many parents spoke about the need for flexibility in their daily schedules, which necessitated adjustments to previous routines. Susan remarked: “Before, Jeffrey and I could just put something together last minute… so that time had kind of ended. The laundry and the meals, that kind of thing was a big step
backwards for me.” Parents also reported the need to establish boundaries with their boomerang children about expected behavior, relational dynamics, and conditions for remaining in the parental home. Claire stated:

I went through a period where my daughter told me: “But you’re my best friend,” because I wasn’t agreeing with her… and I told her: “No, no, no, I’m your parent… I’m not your best friend. Someday we will be good friends, but right now, I feel like this is what you need to hear.”

Participants indicated that conflicting needs and expectations among parents and adult children frequently required establishing clear and firm boundaries. Parents also expressed the need for family members to compromise, collaborate, and be flexible with one another. Family circumstances and the boomerang child’s maturity level held the potential to either require firmer boundaries or to afford adult children a sense of freedom.

Regardless of a boomerang child’s age, participants expressed ongoing concern for their son or daughter’s wellbeing. Many parents reported sharing in their adult child’s struggles. Claire described the challenges associated with watching her adult child struggle to accomplish her goals, stating: “When she got denied [admission to graduate school] she was disappointed; we went through those feelings with her. If she’s disappointed, we’re disappointed. And I feel like we’re still walking right beside her with every little up and down…” A majority of participants reported concern for their adult child’s happiness and expressed a desire for their son or daughter to become a successful, productive member of society.

As family members merged their various expectations and distinct living styles, inconvenient circumstances emerged. Elizabeth shared:

So, if we plan a romantic evening at home, you have to wait until almost the last minute, because you don’t know if he’s going to walk in. Which is fine… but it’s awkward, because you have to worry if somebody is going to come home when you’re in the middle of having a romantic evening for two, which you thought you might be able to do again (laughs) after you got rid of your kids.

The needs, behaviors, and expectations of their boomerang child commonly disrupted parents’ schedules or delayed plans for travel and leisure. Inconveniences included a lack of parental privacy, an expectation that parents would prepare dinner nightly, or that pets would be welcomed home along with the boomerang child. Parents also described how they addressed the inevitable conflicts they encountered when their boomerang child returned. James described how he approached conflict resolution, remarking: “I think it’s always about the atmosphere in the room and sometimes you’re more forgiving, sometimes you’re flexible… and sometimes you’ve just kind of had enough and you’re like: ‘Hey, I didn’t have that great of a day either.’” Patrick described observing his daughter make an effort to avoid potential conflicts, stating: “So sometimes she probably
bites her tongue too, because she’s appreciative of what’s going on here—that we are trying to help her. It’s a give and take, so she probably bites her tongue too.” Each couple reported that living with a boomerang child provided various opportunities for working through conflict. Regardless of their differing approaches, a majority of parents indicated that disagreements were minimal and typically resolved peaceably.

**Theme: Benefits**

All couples reported developing insight as a result of their adult child returning home. Katherine remarked: “You can’t hold the rope too tight—they’re young adults, you’ve got to give them some slack. They’re trying to develop their independence and learn, and we’ve got to let them make some mistakes and make some decisions.” Parents reported that, over time, they developed a greater understanding what does and does not work in living with a boomerang child.

Parents commonly reported that the ability to continue to share time with their son or daughter and remain an active part of their adult child’s daily life was the primary benefit of boomerang child coresidence. Francis described how simple everyday experiences served as sources of joy and comfort: “And it’s nice sometimes, because my daughter will ask me to take a ride with her… so it’s nice just to hop in the car with her… even if it’s just to go get yogurt or something.” Accordingly, shared experiences were among the greatest sources of joy and satisfaction described by participants. Many parents also reported personal growth and improved relational health in their relationships with their spouse and their adult child. Mike described how his affection for his daughters deepened as they matured, stating: “I liked them better as young adults—post-college—than I liked them as teenagers; that was a more difficult time. I could more see what they were becoming, so I was happy with that… it was a good feeling.”

Coresidence also provided parents with the opportunity to assist their boomerang children in their preparation for future careers, marriage, or life as an independent adult. This preparation varied among families, however, all centered on the same goal for the boomerang child: facilitating a successful transition to living autonomously.

**Discussion**

The findings from this study are consistent with existing literature, indicating that the process of young adults receiving parental support and attaining adult stature is complicated, yet attainable (Aquilino, 2006; Furstenberg, 2010; Sassler et al., 2008). Many participants indicated that as
their boomerang child began to meet the demands of adult life—through establishing a stable career, saving money for the future, or contributing to household responsibilities—parents were able to diminish oversight and authority, which supports the findings of Arnett (2006). “As young people progressed toward becoming adults, parents stepped back” (Swartz et al., 2011, p. 427). Accordingly, participants adjusted their perception of their children, coming to see their child as a full adult. However, given the complex and multifaceted nature of boomerang child coresidence, participants also reported struggling, occasionally, to fully recognize their children as equal adults, another finding consistent with prior research (Aquilino 1997, 2006; Descartes, 2006; Sassler et al., 2008). As such, many participants described the confounding nature of living with an adult child, stating that the shifting needs of boomerang children sometimes required the response of a parent and, at other times, the attention of a friend or confidant. Overall, participants reported that the benefits of boomerang child coresidence exceeded the challenges and provided a rewarding and satisfying living arrangement for parents, which supports the findings of several older studies (Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Ward & Spitze, 1996) and diverges from Bouchard (2014), whose research indicates that coresidence negatively affects the marital relationship by interfering with positive interactions between parents.

The gender of the fourteen boomerang children described in this study was not characteristic of the documented rates at which sons and daughters have traditionally returned home. Daughters comprised nearly 65% of boomerang children presented ($n = 14$); however, the findings of Fry (2013) and Parker (2012) indicate that gender is a significant factor in coresidence, with young adult males (18–31) being more likely to live with their parents (40%) than young adult females (32%). Additionally, several participant responses corroborated the findings of Sassler, Ciambrone, and Benway (2008), who observed: “Women were involved in traditionally female inside tasks (vacuuming, dusting, laundry), whereas men did stereotypical outside labor (yard work, garbage)” (p. 685). Consequently, our findings indicate that daughters were not more involved in household chores than sons. While roles and expectations for sons and daughters differed among participants, data from this study and the research of Ward and Spitze (1996) indicate that, overall, the coresidence experiences of boomerang children—both male and female—tend to be more similar than dissimilar.

The opportunities to provide guidance and develop insight were two prominent benefits that emerged from these interviews. As boomerang children progressed through emerging adulthood, many parents expressed the need to provide support and direction. All parents reported that living with their adult child increased occasions for meaningful conversations and
allowed them to participate in the personal and professional development of their boomerang child. These findings are consistent with previous research, which indicated that a young adult’s interactions with parents create an influential opportunity for growth, exploration, and development (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett 2006).

Participants also recounted occasional challenges as they attempted to acclimate to living with their adult child, a reality reflected in previous literature on parent-adult child coresidence (Aquilino, 2006; Bouchard, 2014; White & Rogers, 1997). Most participants described challenges related to establishing boundaries and resolving conflict but did not report any decrease in satisfaction within their marriage or with their home life, which is consistent with the findings of Ward and Spitze (2004). Participants also described the joy and responsibility of assisting their boomerang child in the difficult process of transitioning into full adulthood, as indicated in prior studies (Aquilino & Supple, 1991; Mitchell & Gee, 1996; Ward & Spitze, 1996). This opportunity was a source of tremendous pride for participant parents, who derived satisfaction from the recognition that their son or daughter’s return home constituted a prudent financial decision and enabled the pursuit of future goals.

**Clinical implications**

Given the increased prevalence of young adults returning to the parental home to reside, our findings provide several implications for family therapists. In light of these findings, it appears that narrative family therapy, structural family therapy, and solution-focused brief family therapy approaches are well-suited to working with parents of boomerang children.

A significant portion of our findings run counter to the unfavorable depictions of boomerang child coresidence presented in the media and popular culture. Narrative family therapists may assist couples who are experiencing negative emotions related to the stigma associated with boomerang child coresidence, by externalizing storytelling, re-authoring new stories, and enacting preferred narratives (Suddeath, Kerwin, & Dugger, 2017; White, 2007). Thus, an adult child’s return home holds the potential to create a positive family narrative, capable of generating meaningful shared experiences and promoting greater financial stability and professional success for a boomerang child.

Findings indicate that living with a boomerang child requires flexibility, collaboration, and compromise. Participants reported their expectations for how they would prefer to coreside with their boomerang child, their ground rules for acceptable behavior, and boundaries that would ensure optimal family functioning. As such, structural family therapists can assist parents of
**boomerang children** by defining and clarifying boundaries, reframing, and facilitating power adjustments, with the aim of developing a healthy family structure for parents who struggle with navigating the fluid and muddled roles that can arise from this living arrangement (Minuchin, 1974).

Solution-focused family therapy techniques may serve as effective approaches to working with parents of **boomerang children**, given the future-focused goals reported by most participants. Several challenges were also reported, including adjusting to a **boomerang child**'s return, sharing in a **boomerang child**'s struggles, encountering inconveniences, and working to resolve occasional conflict. Conducting a strengths assessment and identifying exceptions can assist parents in recognizing available strengths and leveraging resources associated with their new living arrangement (de Shazer, 1985).

**Limitations and future research**

Through this qualitative study, we sought to respond to a gap in the literature and describe the day-to-day experiences of parents who live with a **boomerang child**. Findings indicated that, from the parent’s perspective, **boomerang child** coresidence is a rewarding and beneficial experience for both parents and adult children; though, several limitations should be noted.

Firstly, qualitative data cannot be generalized to larger populations; however, this study provides an overview of how 8 sets of parents have experienced living with a **boomerang child**, which may provide therapists with insights into potential client resources and salient relational dynamics related to parent-adult child coresidence. Secondly, the snowball method yielded a predominately homogenous sample with regard to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographical region, and marital status. Thirdly, the sample size was relatively small; it is possible that new themes and insights could have been emerged from a larger and more diverse sample. Fourthly, participant couples described their subjective experiences conjointly and it is unclear if any participant responses were influenced by the presence of their partner; thus, future qualitative inquiries may opt to conduct individual interviews with parents. Finally, participant couples were given a chance to provide member checks, but their **boomerang children** were not given an opportunity to corroborate or clarify the accuracy of parental descriptions and identified themes.

**Boomerang child** coresidence is a timely phenomenon that merits further investigation. Qualitative research on how **boomerang children** experience the phenomenon of coresidence could provide additional insight into this complex and multifaceted living arrangement, in turn, generating useful
data to inform further quantitative studies. Lastly, future research on parent-adult child coresidence could also benefit from considering multicultural issues, in an effort to more accurately reflect the racially and ethnically diverse compositions and experiences of American families.

References


