

FAMILY ACHIEVEMENT GUILT AS EXPERIENCED BY FIRST-GENERATION  
COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2019

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2019

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to describe how family achievement guilt is experienced by first-generation college students (FGCS) at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance was used to guide this study that explored the central research question: How do FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university describe their experiences with family achievement guilt? Sub-questions included (a) What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?, (b) How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?, and (c) How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate their family achievement guilt? Criterion and snowball sampling was used to select 11 participants from a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Data was collected through a survey, individual interviews, and an on-line focus group. The data was analyzed using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis method as described by Moustakas. Through this analysis, three themes emerged to include (a) journey of leaving, (b) dynamic understanding of the college experience, and (c) pressure to perform. The findings in this study suggested the experience of family achievement guilt for FGCS is a progressive experience. Implications for these findings and recommendations for further research are provided.

*Keywords:* first-generation college student, family achievement guilt, survivor guilt, cognitive dissonance

**Copyright Page**

### **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to my husband who believes I am more than I am and who has never shown impatience with the length of time it has taken for me to find my path. Also, I dedicate it to my children who spent several years observing the process. My hope is, one day, I will watch you do the same.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am thankful for God, my shepherd, who allows me to hear His voice and who provides guidance for all my endeavors.

Dr. Milacci, I will be forever honored you offered to be my chair and even more so you stuck through with me to the end when you did not have to do so. There are times words are insufficient and this is one of those times. I am indebted. Thank you.

Dr. Duryea, Earlier in this journey, during coursework, you provided me a piece of feedback I did not take for granted. If one day I can say even half as much to one of my students, using only one sentence, I will consider it a gift. I appreciate your willingness to serve on my committee despite you did not know me beyond an eight week class years prior. Know your contributions as an educator impacted my placement on this path. Thank you.

Dr. Covarrubias, It is surreal I was so fortunate to have you on my committee. Thank you for all of the time you gave to me including the e-mails, phone calls and, multiple readings of my paper. Your work has greatly informed my understanding of where I am within place and time and has inspired a passion for a topic I did not know anything about until I inadvertently stumbled upon one of your articles. Thank you.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Continuing-Generation College Student (CGCS)

First-Generation College Student (FGCS)

Gladebury University (GU)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The concept of family achievement guilt, a type of guilt felt by college students when they compare their opportunities with those of family members at home, is relatively new and has been described as an extension to the concept of survivor guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015; Piorkowski, 1983). In addition to not being a well-established concept, it is likely family achievement guilt may be difficult to grasp due to a variety of factors including existing deficiencies in the definition and description of survivor guilt (Hutson, Hall, & Pack, 2015). A notion exists that guilt is the consequence for wrongdoing (Griffin et al., 2016). Isolating the specific aspect of wrong-doing associated with college attendance may be challenging for those outside the experience. For some, attending college requires a violation of family norms and that violation may be perceived as worthy of shame (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Hinz, 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgo-Cienfuegos, 2015).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview for this study which sought to understand family achievement guilt as experienced by first-generation college students (FGCS) at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Following a brief discussion of the problem's background, the researcher situates herself within the research. The specific problem of family achievement guilt is introduced within the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance. The research questions are identified and explained. A list of defined terms is provided.

### **Background**

Educational expansion has brought with it an increase in the number of FGCS (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Pfeffer & Hertel, 2015; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). While definitions

vary within the literature for FGCS, most identify this group as those who report their parents either did not attend college or did not earn a college degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stebleton et al., 2014). With the growth of this demographic has come an increase in research focused on discovering and understanding the needs of FGCS (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfield, 2017). The catalyst for this growth in research was the recognition that differences exist in terms of challenges encountered and academic outcomes realized between FGCS and continuing-generation college students (CGCS) (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Ecklund, 2013; Hinz, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The presence of family achievement guilt has been identified as a factor contributing to the differences between FGCS and CGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016).

### **Historical**

Survivor guilt was first explained by Freud after experiencing feelings of guilt upon the death of his father (Freud, 1896, as cited in Masson, 1985). Survivor guilt is a type of guilt that occurs when individuals feel their circumstances are better than those of others (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Sevier, 2000). While definitions in the literature are vague, both conceptually and clinically (Hutson, Hall, & Pack, 2015), this type of guilt was first and most often used to describe the experiences of war veterans or those who have survived natural disasters (Lifton, 1967). More recently, the concept of survivor guilt has been extended to situations such as airplane crashes, disease epidemics, and job loss (O'Connor et al., 2000). Altered identity was found to be a consequence for some who experienced survivor guilt (Hutson et al., 2015).

Piorkowski (1983) was the first to consider the applicability of survivor guilt to African-American college students who had familial histories of poverty. Despite Piorkowski's (1983)

descriptions of emotional and academic difficulties experienced by this group, very little, if any, research was conducted, for decades, to explore the presence of survivor guilt in FGCS. Within the past few years, interest in guilt and FGCS has resurfaced with the result of a limited amount of published research on the topic (Austin, Clark, Ross, & Taylor, 2009; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015).

## **Social**

In a sense, FGCS are considered non-traditional students (Woollum, 2015). They do not earn this classification due to the manner in which they attend college; rather, they earn it due to familial histories that do not include successful college pursuance (Covarrubias et al., 2015; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). Throughout American history, social initiatives, such as the establishment of the historically Black colleges and universities for freed slaves and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act designed to acclimate soldiers returning to civilian life, have provided greater access to higher education for wider segments of the population (Department of the Treasury, 2012; GI Bill, 2009). The 1965 Higher Education Act provided even more college access to underserved populations through the development of federal programs established with the intent of supporting FGCS (TRIO, 2017). The demand for skilled labor in the U.S. is expected to increase (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) with many new jobs requiring college educations.

The numbers of FGCS continue to increase with the greatest increases occurring in traditionally underserved populations (Stebbleton et al., 2014). However, the likelihood these same students will graduate college is significantly less than that for CGCS (Adams, Meyers, & Beidas, 2016; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Ecklund, 2013; Pratt et al., 2017). FGCS are typically students who want to help and bring honor to their families and communities (Banks-Santilli,



2015). FGCS have been reported as having a lower sense of belonging (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), experiencing higher levels of negative emotions (Moreno, 2016; Stebleton & Soria, 2012), more feelings of isolation (Pratt et al., 2017), being at greater risk for depression (Stebleton & Soria, 2014), and lower self-esteem (Covarrubias et al., 2015). The progression of research began to reveal FGCS may experience challenges that are unique to their status as the first in their families to attend college (Covarrubias et al., 2015; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). It is worth noting research indicates concern has been expressed FGCS have been primarily viewed through the lens of what they lack rather than what they possess and institutional efforts to address the needs of this population have been aimed more at fixing these students than working with them as equal partners in the processes of teaching and learning (Wilson & Devereux, 2018).

One of these unique challenges is the concept of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016). Family achievement guilt is a type of guilt felt by students who recognize their family members do not have similar access to higher education (Covarrubias et al., 2015). Research has primarily focused on Hispanic and Latino populations (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016). More research is needed to explore the experiences of other demographic groups with family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016).

### **Theoretical**

Existing research provides a variety of theoretical frameworks for which the topic of family achievement guilt could be explored including evolutionary theory (Darwin, 1925; O'Connor et al., 2000), social identity theory (Reicher, Haslam, Spears, & Reynolds, 2012; Tajfel, 1974), and cultural mismatch theory (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Theories such as

social identity theory and cultural mismatch theory explain how factors related to socioeconomic status and culture impact group membership. While these theories serve to inform the study, the researcher desired to gain a better understanding of the experience of family achievement guilt as the phenomenon has not been extensively reported. Furthermore, the researcher is process oriented and was inclined to frame the study with a theory that allowed her to describe a sequential process for how the participants in the study experience family achievement guilt. Finally, the researcher perceives family achievement guilt is likely a product of dissonance. Therefore, Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance was selected to frame the study.

The selected theory (Festinger, 1962) describes cognitive dissonance as the result of conflicts between an individual's beliefs, values, thoughts, and actions. Festinger (1962) explained individuals will experience mental anguish in the presence of cognitive dissonance and will seek to minimize or remediate the dissonance, through a variety of means, to reduce the mental anguish. The research questions for the study address the progression of family achievement guilt within the context of cognitive dissonance. A review of the literature did not uncover previous studies that used theory of cognitive dissonance to frame the exploration of family achievement guilt.

### **Situation to Self**

To situate myself, I must question how I know what I know and evaluate the importance of that knowledge (Husserl, 2012). Palmer (1993) attributed his knowledge as the determinant for his understanding of the world. He described his knowledge as something he possessed that not only gave him a picture of himself and of the world, but defined the relationship between the two (Palmer, 1993). I frequently suggest to people I was born knowing things, because I perceive my understanding of life, as a young child, was advanced for my age. I had a good

childhood despite the things I knew. For example, I always knew I was not supposed to have been born and that my mother was supposed to have gone to college. I always knew my father, who was not a good high school student, could have had more adult freedom if he would not have “had to” marry my then pregnant mother. I always knew life was hard, there was never enough money, and that even a good effort to improve one’s circumstances was probably going to fail. One’s truth is informed by their everyday knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Like Palmer (1993), I believe what I know and how I know it shapes my view of my place in the world. Like Moustakas (1994), my perceptions have defined what I know to be true. The fact that my perceptions have changed over time has resulted in my acknowledgement that some things I believed to be true may not have been true or they may have only been true for a period of time. Therefore, I concede truth is not necessarily static or absolute, could be situationally dependent, and may only be true in a specific moment.

My role as a child was the “smart one”. I was the one nobody taught how to read; the one who was discovered reading as a toddler. I was the one who took the blame for what the others did, because it was said the other kids were not smart enough to have done whatever had been done. I was the one who competed in the state spelling bee in sixth grade. Until I was high school aged, I always knew I would be the one who went to college.

When I was 14, my mother joined the Army. My parents describe that decision as one motivated by the necessity of eating buttressed with their understanding that they and their children would always be in poverty if they did not make radical efforts to get out. That decision took the family from rural Iowa to a military base in Germany where I was enrolled in high school. My adult analysis of that situation consists of three themes. First, even though we had more money than we had ever had, we were still living under the poverty line. Second, the

military is very class oriented. Nearly all my teenaged peers had officer or upper-enlisted parents. This reality prevented even the consideration of potential friendships with most of my classmates, because, even for children, mixing of the ranks was discouraged. Third, in Iowa, it was easy to be smart. There was one class per grade level and each class was small. There was not a lot of competition to be the smartest person in the class. In a much larger school, I determined I was not smart. I rarely earned higher than a “C” for any course in high school. By my sophomore year, my attendance began to drop off and that trend continued through to my senior year to the point I almost never attended a full day of school. Still, I graduated and, after a year of living without a plan, I joined the military.

My relationship with the military was complicated. My parents’ agenda of getting their own lives together did not leave much room for direct and consistent supervision. My experiences with being required to submit to authority were limited. Accepting the structures of military authority was difficult. It was my perception the paper of a college degree was the factor regarding who was considered smart and who was not. I was annoyed by the realization I might, in fact, be at least as smart as the people telling me what to do. I was bothered to the point I secretly began taking CLEP (College Level Examination Program) tests during my lunch breaks. I experienced significant success with CLEP tests and completed my Bachelor’s degree in three semesters by combining those tests with courses I took at a satellite campus designed for military members. It can be said pride and resistance to authority were the factors that drove me to earning that first degree. Having that piece of paper allowed me to silently know I was as smart as those who were telling me what to do.

I have never been able to return to Iowa for longer than a few days per year. All my family (except for my parents and brother) are still there. In earlier years, I was angry with them

for not changing their circumstances. I was angry when they turned down opportunities. There was the time I heard the story about a cousin with a scholarship who got as far as the parking lot of college and then refused to get out of the car. I was vocal about my anger. In more recent times, I came to understand without that radical decision by my mother to join the Army, I would likely still be there and would likely experience the same challenges as those still there. In even more recent times, I came to understand anger was the product of my guilt. Guilt over being the one who got out, the one who went to college, the one who has a well-paying job, and the one who has the life she desires keeps me from there. My opinion this guilt is irrational does nothing to alter my belief it will likely exist forever; a notion supported by Spiegler and Bednarek (2013).

I am interested in studying family achievement guilt, because I am intrigued by the truth of the reality of what I consider irrational. I am interested in studying it, because the people I speak with about it either do not have answers for my questions or they lack sufficient perspective to be able to grasp the reality of the concept. My profession as a teacher of high school students, who will be the first in their families to go to college, causes me to feel some responsibility for generating more awareness of what I perceive is a problem.

I am pragmatic. I generally look for solutions to problems and am most concerned with outcomes (Creswell, 2013). At the same time, I view the world as a series of cause and effect relationships, but acknowledge there is no prescription for which effects will accompany any given cause (Creswell, 2013). I hold the ontological assumption people determine their own realities and those realities may change as their possessed information changes. I am biased in my measurement of the value of higher education. Regarding guilt, I believe, based on personal experience and observation, the experience of guilt has wide variations and is likely heavily

influenced by family value systems. I understand the experiences of FGCS vary and family achievement guilt is not an automatic outcome.

This study was conducted using a social constructivist interpretive framework (Creswell, 2013). For the purposes of this study, reality was determined according to how each participant viewed it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Because it is a transcendental phenomenology, interpretations of the participants' experiences have not been made (Moustakas, 1994). Significant bracketing was required to separate the experiences of myself and those close to me from those of the participants (Husserl, 2012). The exercise of bracketing left me with the understanding the situation of attending college on a campus is different from my experience and, therefore, leaves me without that perspective.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is FGCS are generally less successful and experience lower rates of graduation than CGCS (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Despite efforts to address it, this achievement gap between FGCS and CGCS is increasing instead of decreasing (Tate, Foud, Marks, Young, Guzman, & Williams, 2015). Many factors have been identified to explain this lack of success and ultimate attrition (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Pratt et al., 2017; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). As an extension to Piorkowski's (1983) concept of survivor guilt, Covarrubias et al. (2015) introduced the concept of family achievement guilt to describe an emotion some FGCS experience when they compare their opportunities to attend college with a lack of the same opportunities for their family members. Previous studies have suggested family achievement guilt is related to the retention of FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015, Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012). Several factors may contribute to this type of guilt

including conflicts that present when students transition to college environments that promote different ideas, beliefs, and values than what is presented in their homes (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Hinz, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield & Burgo-Cienfuegos, 2015). Theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) identifies mental anguish as an outcome when an individual's ideas, beliefs, values, and actions are not in alignment and goes on to explain the individual will seek to reduce any resultant negative emotions by resolving the inconsistencies.

While some exploration of guilt in FGCS has been completed (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012; Woollum, 2015), this is an emergent area of study. More studies are needed to give a voice to FGCS who experience family achievement guilt to increase the understanding of their experiences, the manifestations of their guilt, and their individual efforts towards guilt remediation (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how family achievement guilt is experienced by first-generation college students at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Family achievement guilt has been generally defined as guilt felt by students who recognize their family members do not have similar access to higher education (Covarrubias et al., 2015). Additionally, less selective universities were understood as those with lower admission criteria, such as standardized test scores and high school grade point averages (GPA), than those universities that tend to primarily offer admission only to top performing students (Barron's Profile, n.d.; College Rankings, n.d.). The theory guiding this study was Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance as it explains the mental anguish

individuals experience when they possess different ideas, beliefs, or values that conflict or they participate in actions that conflict with ideas, beliefs, or values they hold. This theory (Festinger, 1962) also describes subsequent actions individuals will take to reduce the dissonance in the effort to establish internal consistency between their ideas, beliefs, values, and actions.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this research is discussed from three perspectives: empirical, theoretical, and practical. The researcher is hopeful gaps in the existing literature and practice regarding FGCS and their experiences with family achievement guilt may be further informed by this study.

#### **Empirical Significance**

While appreciable research has been conducted to explore the general makeup and achievement of FGCS, less focus has been given to the intrapersonal challenges, such as family achievement guilt, FGCS encounter (Tate, Williams, & Hayden, 2013; Woollum, 2015). This study may add to an emergent body of literature on family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) as experienced by FGCS. The existing research has focused primarily on Hispanic and Latino populations attending selective universities (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Future research has been recommended to study achievement guilt in different populations of FGCS including low-income and White (Moreno, 2016), to determine how achievement guilt manifests both physically and psychologically in FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015), how behaviors resultant from survivor guilt might lead to strengthened relationships (Woollum, 2015), and how FGCS experiences might differ at nonselective universities (Hinz, 2016). This study sought to explore



the phenomenon of family achievement guilt, as experienced by a diverse group of participants, at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance was used to frame the study. This theory describes emotional anguish as an outcome when conflict exists between a person's thoughts, beliefs, values, and actions. A review of the literature did not produce research that explores family achievement guilt in the context of Festinger's theory (1962). Therefore, this study has the potential to add a new context for the application of the theory.

### **Practical Significance**

This study may serve to inform universities about family achievement guilt and its relationship to the retention of FGCS. Colleges and universities have demonstrated their acknowledgement of retention issues associated with FGCS by implementing programs with the objectives of improving access and graduation rates for high risk groups such as FGCS and low-income students (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2017). However, those initiatives are frequently targeted towards freshmen students (Ishitani, 2016). While it is true the first year of college is critical for FGCS and retention rates in that year are of concern (Banks-Santilli, 2014; DeAngelo & Frank, 2016; Pratt et al., 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), FGCS are most likely to withdraw during their second year (Ishitani, 2016). The near singular focus on first year students, combined with scant research on family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016), has created a gap in the literature to explain exactly what happens with second year FGCS who are not retained (Ishitani, 2016). This study sought to understand the experiences of FGCS with family achievement guilt at various levels of college completion.

While FGCS and their parents may anticipate the academic demands of college, the emotional demands that also impact ultimate retention may be more obscure (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2017). This study may potentially provide a greater understanding and increased awareness of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) to these stakeholders. Additionally, most of the existing literature reports on the characteristics of FGCS from a deficiency perspective (O'Shea, 2015). The third sub-question in the study sought to determine the strengths of FGCS who have successfully minimized their guilt to a level that has allowed them to persist and be successful in the university environment.

An awareness typically exists for FGCS and their parents a college degree is needed for economic mobility (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014). Individuals who have attained a four-year college degree are more likely to be employed (Baum & Payea, 2013). Increased employment provides greater tax revenues (Baum & Payea, 2013). In general, employed citizens have easier access to health insurance, are more active with healthier lifestyles, and are more prepared to appropriately care for and engage with their children in a manner that supports their positive development (Baum & Payea, 2013). The study explored family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) as a factor to the problem of lower college graduation rates for FGCS. Therefore, this study may potentially impact a greater society that stands to benefit from college educated citizens (Baum & Payea, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study consist of a central research question and three sub-questions:

Central Research Question: How do FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic

university describe their experiences with family achievement guilt?

The overall experiences of FGCS with family achievement guilt are important for universities to understand as they struggle with determining how to meet the needs of a group that is generally less successful than CGCS (Adams et al., 2016; Ecklund, 2013; Pratt et al., 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Additionally, more research is needed to understand those experiences (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016).

SQ1: What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?

Previous studies using primarily Hispanic and Latino participants have indicated interdependent value systems commonly found within Hispanic and Latino family structures conflicted with independent value systems found on university campuses (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016). The researcher hoped to identify a diverse group of participants who might articulate other contributing factors to their guilt.

SQ2: How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?

Existing research indicates family achievement guilt may contribute to feelings of not belonging in and desires to drop out of college for Hispanic and Latino FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016). Moreno (2016) stated future studies are needed to determine how guilt manifests in other populations of FGCS.

SQ3: How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate family achievement guilt?

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance describes processes of remediation individuals undertake to lessen conflict between their thoughts, beliefs, values, and actions. For

some FGCS, the guilt may be resolved by discontinuing college (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016). Others may seek out the campus services related to mental health; however, many do not, even though they acknowledge they need those services (Cuijpers, Cristea, Ebert, Koot, Auerbach, Bruffaerts, & Kessler, 2015). This study hoped to describe how FGCS who experience family achievement guilt remediate that guilt to levels that allow for positive college progress.

### **Definitions**

1. *Continuing-Generation College Student*- Students who have at least one parent who has earned a four-year, college degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).
2. *Family Achievement Guilt* - Guilt felt by students who recognize their family members do not have similar access to higher education (Covarrubias et al., 2015).
3. *First-Generation College Student*- The definition for first-generation college student varies within the literature (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). For the purposes of this study, first-generation college students will be defined as college students who do not have a parent who has earned a four-year degree.
4. *Less Selective University*- University selectivity is determined by several varying factors. For the purposes of this study, less selective universities will be understood as those with lower admission criteria, such as standardized test scores and high school grade point averages, than those universities that tend to primarily offer admission to only top performing students (Barron's Profile, n.d.; College Rankings, n.d.).

5. *Mid-Atlantic Region*- The mid-Atlantic region includes the following states: New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, New York, West Virginia, Delaware and the District of Columbia (Allard, Crane, Currit, Polsky, & Yarnal, 2000).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an introduction and background to the study which sought to understand the experiences of family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. The concept of family achievement guilt was introduced as an extension to the concept of survivor guilt and was defined as guilt felt by students who recognize their family members do not have similar access to higher education. Theory of cognitive dissonance was introduced. The researcher provided a personal history including experiences with family achievement guilt and her motivations for wanting to further explore the topic. The problem and purpose for the study were discussed and the research questions were presented. Increasing demands for skilled labor and the need to understand the relationship between family achievement guilt and college retention were among practical reasons provided for the study. A list of pertinent definitions was provided.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A literature review was conducted to identify areas of research applicable to this study of family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework and FGCS are defined and described. Primary issues of access and retention are presented. A discussion on the emotion of guilt, including family achievement guilt as an extension to survivor guilt, is provided. An attempt to explain the relationship of shifting or conflicting identities as FGCS participate in the processes of positive social mobility to family achievement guilt is made. The review concludes with a summary of the findings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance was used to frame this study on family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS. For the purposes of this portion of the review, resources were selected based on their contributions to the provision of an overall picture of the development, impacts, evolution, and current relevance of the theory to the field of modern social science as it relates to the concept of family achievement guilt. Additionally, only resources available in English were considered.

### **Theory of Cognitive Dissonance**

The theory of cognitive dissonance explains a condition of discomfort individuals experience when inconsistencies exist between their thoughts, beliefs, and actions (Festinger, 1962). Festinger (1962) used the term "dissonance" to describe the relationship between two elements of an individual's cognition where contradiction is present. Cognition is defined as knowledge an individual possesses without distinction for whether that knowledge is an opinion

or a fact (Festinger, 1962). For example, an individual who smokes may know smoking is an unhealthy habit, but also knows they smoke (Festinger, 1962). The inconsistency between those two thoughts is dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Festinger (1962) was clear elements of cognition must be relevant to each other for dissonance to exist.

Individuals naturally strive to maintain consistency in their lives (Festinger, 1962). When inconsistencies are present, the resultant dissonance may be physically experienced as discomfort by the individual (Festinger, 1962). Individuals will seek to resolve, often with rationalizing behaviors, the dissonance to alleviate the discomfort (Festinger, 1962). For example, in the case of the smoker who knows smoking is unhealthy, the smoker may choose to quit smoking or they may rationalize the impacts of smoking are not as great as others perceive (Festinger, 1962). They may perceive their enjoyment from smoking outweighs potential negative impacts or, perhaps, they may believe some other negative impact would occur to them if they were to stop smoking and, therefore, the continuation of smoking is a reasonable decision (Festinger, 1962).

**History and life of the theory.** Theory of cognitive dissonance evolved from a project funded by the behavioral sciences division at the Ford Foundation intended to theoretically integrate topics of communication and social influence (Festinger, 1962). Festinger and his team coined the term dissonance, defined as inconsistency, during phases of the project that involved the spreading of rumors and his observations of voluntary and involuntary exposure by individuals to information (Festinger, 1962). From those beginnings, the theory of cognitive dissonance was developed and expanded to a variety of contexts (Festinger, 1962). The life and evolution of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962) is one which was characterized by great regard, for a couple of decades, followed by a significant drop in popularity, and then a resurgence of modern interest frequently in the form of new mini-theories (Aronson, 1992;

Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). At a minimum, it can be said Festinger's (1962) theory was not without controversy as it revolutionized the field of social science (Aronson, 1992; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007, & Joule, 1984).

Upon its introduction, the theory (Festinger, 1962) had immediate and far-reaching impacts in the field of social science (Aronson, 1992; Bem, 1967; Cooper & Fazio, 1984, Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Joule, 1986). Up until that point, behavior was overwhelmingly explained by reward and reinforcement theory (Aronson, 1992). The idea behavior could be explained with the combination of cognition and motivation was revolutionary (Aronson, 1992) and resulted in more than 1000 documented research studies within the theory's first 25 years (Cooper & Fazio, 1984).

Not all social scientists, however, initially embraced the theory (Festinger, 1962) due to its reliance on an individual's extant phenomenology (Bem, 1967). Additionally, Bem (1967), while proposing a self-perception theory, argued cognitive dissonance is not deductive; not all who experience dissonance will necessarily seek to resolve it as outlined by Festinger (1962). As time went on, factors such as public opinion on the deceptive nature of the research, high-impact research procedures that nearly always caused some discomfort to participants, labor and time-consuming aspects of dissonance research during a time when academics needed to frequently publish, and significant progress by cognitive scientists all negatively influenced the magnitude and continuation of efforts focused on the theory of cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 1992; Festinger, 1962).

Renewed interest in cognitive dissonance theory has surfaced in more modern times with analyses of the theory since inception (Aronson, 1992; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Joule, 1984). Researchers generally agree impacts to the field of social



science resultant from the theory of cognitive dissonance have been significant (Aronson, 1992; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Joule, 1984). Where disagreement comes is the validity of the theory in fully describing dissonance and its associated processes with the primary complaint the theory is vague (Aronson, 1992). Festinger (1962), himself, admitted aspects of the theory are unavoidably vague. A primary issue of ambiguity was the theory did not describe conditions for which it could be predicted individuals would experience dissonance (Albarracin, Johnson, & Zanna, 2014). As a result, research was almost immediately conducted for the purposes of hopefully providing more specificity in the areas of necessary conditions and dissonance prediction (Albarracin et al., 2014).

New mini-theories have cropped up that are related to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962), but that do not reference cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 1992). Aronson (1992), a friend and peer of Festinger (1962) asserted the ability for researchers to synthesize is negatively impacted when related theories are cocooned from one another and the negative outcome becomes one where research is splintered and disjointed. Aronson (1992) contended most of the newer mini-theories related to cognitive dissonance fit within the structure of the original theory (Festinger, 1962) and that it is better to build on existing work than to create new.

**Relationship of cognitive dissonance to family achievement guilt.** In his quest to review 60 years of research on cognitive dissonance reduction, McGrath (2017) identified guilt as the only documented negative affect to motivate dissonance reduction. Studies specifically tying cognitive dissonance and family achievement guilt were not located. A possible explanation is while appreciable efforts have been devoted to understanding the needs, characteristics, and outcomes of FGCS, significantly fewer have focused on the intrapersonal

challenges facing this population (Woollum, 2015). It is also conceivable some other terminology unfamiliar to the researcher has been used. However, research has described situations where shame, a negative affect identified as resultant from dissonance (Festinger, 1962) was felt by FGCS who discovered attending college required them to violate family norms (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Hinz, 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, Burgo-Cienfuegos, 2015). Similarities between guilt and dissonance (Stice, 1992), have influenced the researcher to conclude the FGCS participants in the identified studies were experiencing dissonance and, therefore, studying family achievement guilt through that lens seems appropriate. Regardless, more research is necessary to explore the intrapersonal challenges FGCS encounter (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Woollum, 2015).

### **Related Research**

The remainder of this literature review's focus will cover three primary areas: FGCS, family achievement guilt, and the relationship of identity to both. Again, only resources available in English were considered. Additionally, due to significant variances in educational systems globally, the researcher specifically sought research conducted in the United States.

### **First-Generation College Students**

Identifying FGCS is complicated due to varying definitions in the literature (O'Shea, 2015; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Among those variations is the limited definition of FGCS as those whose parents have never attended college to broader definitions that describe various levels of parental college participation that did not culminate in the earning of a four-year degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Some researchers, like Jehangir (2016) who added low income as a qualifier, have added further descriptors to their definitions. Additionally, intersectionality often occurs and groups such as non-traditional students and first-in-family students are

generally classified with FGCS (O'Shea, 2015; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The study will simply define FGCS as those students who do not have a parent who has earned a four-year degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

**General characteristics.** The literature is abundant with descriptions of challenges FGCS encounter when transitioning from home to university life (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). FGCS have been found to differ from CGCS in several ways (Ishitani, 2016). FGCS are more likely to come from non-white backgrounds of lower income, have lower college entrance exam scores, choose less prestigious universities, enroll in fewer credit hours per semester, and pursue less rigorous degree programs (Ishitani, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). This population also includes more students who did not enter college directly after high school and who may have dependents relying on them for financial or other support (Ishitani, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). FGCS are more often employed than CGCS (Ishitani, 2016). FGCS are generally less successful, have lower grade point averages (GPA), and lower graduation rates (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016; Ishitani, 2016; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). However, while the list of challenges and difficulties for FGCS is presented as long, O'Shea (2015) argued the focus of research on this population has been deficit oriented with the result FGCS are portrayed as lacking in one way or another in terms of what they bring to university life. Very little attention has been given to identifying the strengths of FGCS in terms of how they transition to university life (O'Shea, 2015). O'Shea (2015) provided an additional critique to existing research by saying researchers have not focused on the actual FGCS enough and have gotten distracted by the broader surrounding issues of the population such as class, disadvantage, and background.

**College access.** American society generally accepts the idea an educated population is beneficial (Baum & Payea, 2013). Employment is more likely for those who have attained four-year degrees (Baum & Payea, 2013). The overall economy benefits from employed citizens by increased tax revenues (Baum & Payea, 2013). Employed individuals generally have better access to health insurance and engage in healthier and more active lifestyles (Baum & Payea, 2013). Educated citizens are better prepared, both intellectually and financially, to raise their children to become productive and contributing citizens to society (Baum & Payea, 2013). FGCS tend to view college from a job oriented perspective (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Both FGCS and their parents have acknowledged a college education provides a greater likelihood for increased employment options and greater financial and overall general stability (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014). The demand for skilled labor in the U.S. is expected to increase (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) with many new jobs requiring college educations.

Post-secondary education has historically been socially stratified with higher levels of society having greater access to and support for college attendance (O'Shea, 2015). Over the past century, presumably because the United States recognizes the value of educated citizens, social initiatives have been established to provide greater access to college for historically underrepresented populations (Department of the Treasury, 2012; GI Bill, 2009; TRIO, 2017). Among these initiatives were the establishment of the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) for freed slaves and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act designed to acclimate soldiers returning to civilian life (Department of the Treasury, 2012; GI Bill, 2009). The 1965 Higher Education Act provided even more college access to underserved populations through the development of federal programs established with the intent of supporting FGCS (TRIO, 2017).

In response to both the increased presence of historically underrepresented populations on campuses and data indicating these populations struggle with achieving the desired outcomes, initiatives and programs have been developed to target issues of access, low performance, and lack of degree completion (Ishitani, 2016). Unfortunately, while FGCS are more likely to drop out of college during their second year, the bulk of attention is given to freshmen students (Ishitani, 2016). Because the attention given after the first year is so minimal, little data exists to provide a picture for what happens with FGCS during their second year (Ishitani, 2016). Ishitani (2016) argued support offered by universities is dropped when FGCS need it most.

Additionally, it was found while FGCS access campus support services at the same rate as CGCS, FGCS do not reap the same benefits from those services as CGCS (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). While universities may believe they are providing adequate supports and may even have data indicating FGCS are utilizing those services, the reality may be access to and efficacy of those supports is not optimal relational to the actual needs of FGCS (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). Jehangir (2010) described the college experience for FGCS as one made of three parts: getting to college, surviving the transition into college, and getting through college. As such, each of these phases will present different challenges to FGCS universities may not be prepared to meet.

**Retention.** Retention refers to the outcome of students remaining engaged in university programming until degree completion (Ishitani, 2016). While the exact numbers of drop-outs seem difficult to confirm, with DeAngelo and Frank (2016) reporting 75% of first year FGCS discontinue and Ishitani (2016) reporting the largest rate attrition occurs during their second year, the research is clear the lack of retention of FGCS by universities is a significant problem (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). It is also worth

noting the risk of attrition remains stable for all groups of FGCS even when controlling for factors such as race and ethnicity (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

College readiness has been identified as a significant factor to retention (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016; Ishitani, 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). FGCS generally have lower Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) scores (Ishitani, 2016) and more often than CGCS require remediation courses prior to qualifying to enroll in courses for credit (Pratt et al., 2017). FGCS may also struggle to cope with the non-academic demands of university life due to a lack of preparation by their parents, who are unfamiliar with the challenges their children will encounter during the transition from home to college (Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015).

Living arrangements and distance between home and school were discussed as factors related to retention (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016). Students who attend schools geographically located closer to their homes have a greater chance of reaching graduation (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016). DeAngelo and Frank (2016) reported while there were no significant differences in graduation rates for FGCS who lived either on campus or at home, significant differences were found for other living arrangements. Graduation rates were much lower for students who lived off campus, but not at home (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016).

McClellan (2013) provided three factors highly related to FGCS retention; family support, sense of community, and support services provided by the university. FGCS have frequently reported not having appropriate support from a family that understands the demands of college (Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). Additionally, FGCS have indicated resentment or feelings of disconnectedness to their families has occurred when they have changed as a result in their participation in higher education (Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). However, it was found university involvement may be more important in terms of retention than parental attitudes

(Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Still, FGCS are more likely to live off campus, spend their free time engaged in part-time employment, and are less likely to participate in campus organizations such as sororities and fraternities (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Ecklund (2013) recommended universities increase their support by providing more mentoring and advising while DeRosa and Dolby (2014) indicated FGCS do not advocate for their needs at the same level as CGCS.

## **Guilt**

The phenomenon of this study is family achievement guilt. It has been proposed the experience of guilt feels similar to that of dissonance with the rationale guilt and dissonance share key features (Stice, 1992). Both guilt and dissonance are negative states of arousal that may provoke individuals to engage in behaviors intended to reduce negative feelings (Stice, 1992). Personal responsibility must be felt by an individual before they can experience dissonance or feel guilt (Stice, 1992). Both dissonance and guilt may be relieved by self-affirming behaviors by the suffering individual (Stice, 1992). In addition to connecting the phenomenon of family achievement guilt to the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance, this portion of the review intends to serve multiple purposes. Those are to provide a brief history of the evolution of opinions about guilt, to describe the intrapersonal effects of guilt, and to present existing research that explains how guilt is related to the problem FGCS are generally less successful and experience lower rates of graduation than CGCS (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014).

**History of guilt.** The emotion of guilt is complex and one theologians, philosophers, and social scientists have (and continue to) struggled to define for centuries (Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, & Fulton, 2010). As such, the cognizance of guilt has evolved over time (Woollum, 2015).

Although a substantial amount of research has been conducted on guilt, the wide variety of contexts, both intrapersonal and biographical, have complicated the matter in determining a clear definition for the emotion (Brooke, 1985). Further muddying the waters is the problem of identifying and differentiating, amidst contradicting opinions, the similar emotion of shame from guilt (Brooke, 1985; Klein, 1948; Tilghman-Osborne, et al., 2010).

Darwin (1925) theorized the survival and advancement of humans was dependent on the development of altruistic characteristics and submissive behaviors that would lead to the minimization of aggression, sharing of resources, and protection of the group. In Darwin's evolutionary theory (1925), guilt is described as a more recent adaptation that offered the benefit of impulse control in terms of negative actions by an individual to the group. Additionally, Darwin (1925) identified social comparison and submissive behavior as acts based on fear and self-protection when in a lower status position. Submissive behavior has been correlated with both fear and feeling better off than others in reports on survivor guilt (O'Connor et al. 2000).

Freud (1924; 1933) believed the human psyche contained three parts; the id, the ego, and the superego. Freud (1924; 1933) surmised the unconscious basic needs and motivations were represented by the id while the superego represented conscious morals and the understanding of socialized norms. The ego, served the purpose of satisfying the id while keeping intact the values of the superego (Freud, 1924; 1933). Freud (1924; 1933) described guilt as the result of the competition between the id and the superego and illustrated aspects of this competition in his description of the Oedipus Complex; a situation where the child who is in love with their opposite sex parent, while in competition with their same sex parent, must come to terms with reactions from their opposite sex parent the love relationship is not viable in the context the child has put it due to social norms based moral reasoning. Freud (1933) explained the answer guilt



originates from the idea of sin is not a sufficient answer and went on to explain individuals have an innate need to be loved by others for both reasons of protection and avoidance of potential punishment by superiors. Essentially, both Freud (1933) and Darwin (1925) agreed the response of guilt is tied to the needs of the individual for group membership and protection.

Klein (1948) extended Freud's (1924; 1933) assessments of guilt by saying Freud had not considered enough the impacts of love through the progression of the Oedipus complex in early childhood. Klein (1948) believed the power of the complex was diminished in response to the child's love for his father and his desire to preserve him. Additionally, Klein (1948), from her observations of infants exhibiting destructive behavior to their mothers, reasoned infants could not navigate the complexities of conflicting parental actions due to their mental capacities and, therefore, engaged in the destructive behaviors. Klein (1948) posited guilt is the outcome when an individual feels they have harmed another. Klein's (1948) descriptions of guilt, as both a component of interpersonal relationships and a catalyst for making amends, have been preserved in modern beliefs about the emotion (Woollum, 2015).

**Differentiating guilt from shame.** Identifying and differentiating guilt from shame has been largely inconsistent throughout research (Tangney, 1995; Tilghman-Osborne, et al., 2010). The differentiating between guilt and shame was traditionally an act that focused on situational contexts with the popular opinion, absent of empirical evidence, guilt is experienced more privately and shame is experienced more publicly (Tangney, 1995). Empirical evidence later suggested otherwise and indicated shame was slightly less likely to occur in the presence of others than guilt (Tangney, 1992; Tangney, 1995). Both emotions are described as moral emotions, those that serve to preserve relationships and community, with shame more focused on the characteristics of the self and guilt more focused on the minimizing the impacts to others

caused by the self's behavior (Tangney, 1995). Tangney (1995) posited guilt and shame are not equally moral due to this difference in focus; guilt is more focused on making reparations for behavior while shame considers less any harm done to others due to its preoccupation with degrading the self.

Research is inconsistent about the impacts of guilt. Studies on depression reported guilt is positive and healthy (Tangney, 1991) with the opinion guilt serves as a mechanism to repair wrong-doing and, therefore, reduce depressive symptoms (Tilghman-Osborne, et al., 2010). On the other hand, guilt has been viewed as a source of continued pain and resultant in negative consequences for the suffering individual (Kugler & Jones, 1992; Tilghman-Osborne, et al., 2010). It seems, to the researcher, if the purpose of guilt is to make reparations for wrongdoing (Tangney, 1995), then guilt should be considered an adaptive emotion. However, family achievement guilt has been presented in conjunction with maladaptive behaviors (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). The researcher is left to wonder if family achievement guilt can be both adaptive and maladaptive or if the maladaptive behaviors are the result of the addition of shame (Tangney, 1995) when the FGCS continues attending college; the act that causes the guilt. At the same time, the researcher acknowledges the determination of what is adaptive or maladaptive is subjective and based on the value system of the judge. In the case of a FGCS discontinuing college in an effort to return to the family and reestablish those ties, those who value individualism may view the behavior as maladaptive while those who prioritize family may view it as adaptive.

**Survivor and family achievement guilt.** Survivor guilt, in its most basic form, describes guilt experienced by survivors of catastrophe when others did not (Hutson et al., 2015; Lifton, 1967). The concept has also been described as one that has its roots in the most powerful

of emotions, unconscious guilt, and is one with the propensity to cause the afflicted to engage in self-destructive behaviors (Matsakis, 1999). However, the concept remains ambiguous and difficult to pin down due the absence of a generally accepted definition both conceptually and clinically (Hutson et al., 2015). Hutson et al. (2015) conducted a literature review to identify the attributes, antecedents, consequences, related concepts, and surrogate terms associated with survivor guilt in a variety of contexts. The results of their (Hutson et al., 2015) review provide a breadth of information across multiple disciplines.

The concept of family achievement guilt was coined as a contextual extension of survivor guilt that specifically applies to students who experience the guilt due to their perceptions family members do not have similar opportunities to pursue higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). It is important to note, prior to the evolution of the term, empirical evidence did not exist for family achievement guilt beyond the application of survivor guilt to the university setting by Piorkowski (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Even then, Piorkowski (1983) did not specifically tie survivor guilt to the surpassing of family members, but to African American college students being survivors of their inner-city home environments. This distinction is important, because the perceived harmed party (Klein, 1948) defined in family achievement guilt is a family member (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). The wider umbrella of survivor guilt does not relationally limit who one may feel they have harmed (Lifton, 1967; Hutson, Hall, & Pack, 2015; O'Connor et al., 1997).

Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) reported, after administering an open-ended measures instrument, FGCS experienced higher levels of family achievement guilt than did CGCS with minority students reporting more guilt than White students. FGCS also reported significantly less family achievement guilt after participating in exercises which focused on the FGCS helping

their families (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Quantitative measures correlated family achievement guilt with higher depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem (Covarrubias et al., 2015). Covarrubias et al. (2015) did not find remarkable interactions between ethnicity and first-generation status for self-esteem. Beyond these two studies, empirical mentions of family achievement guilt are few (Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015). Therefore, it is not possible to provide an adequate discussion of family achievement guilt without considering the broader classification of survivor guilt.

There are five key characteristics of survivor guilt; the presence of loss, being spared from harm, an association with distress exists, a process that is interpersonal, and experiences unique to the afflicted individual (Hutson et al., 2015). If the concept of survival guilt is to be extended to the context of FGCS in the university setting, researchers may immediately seek examples of those characteristics. For example, one might ask “What is lost for the FGCS?” Or, one may wonder about the harm the FGCS was spared from. Because this is an emergent area of study with insufficient existing research (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015), researchers may seek to know, considering Hutson et al.’s (2015) description the experiences are individualized, how the presentation of survivor guilt, termed family achievement guilt in this context, manifests in this specific population.

To consider what may be lost for FGCS, as a result of pursuing higher education, a minimal understanding of classism is likely necessary (Hinz, 2016). Hinz (2016) posited the values of the working class frequently conflict with the values of the middle class and those who experience processes related to upward mobility from one class to another must reconcile those conflicts. For example, the philosophy of the middle class often views success and opportunity as products of hard work while those in the working class may view those same things as

products of luck (Hinz, 2016). The essence of this example is when one moves from the working to the middle class, one must decide whether they got there by work, as their new class would tell them, or by luck, as their former class believes. Situations exist where some individuals may never feel at home in either class due to the inability to fully reconcile their personal philosophy to that of one class or the other (Woollum, 2015). Additionally, some who experience class mobility also experience imposterism which presents as an individual's possession of feelings related to believing they convinced others they are better or greater than they actually believe they are (Austin et al., 2009). Imposterism has been linked with symptoms of depression (Austin et al., 2009).

For the FGCS, attending college is an action associated with upward social mobility (Hinz, 2016). Research is unclear as to how guilt levels are impacted if one is successfully able to fully navigate class transition including full adoption of the general philosophies maintained by the new class. However, instances of FGCS and those newly associated with the middle class hiding their previous social backgrounds are recorded (Hinz, 2016). For the researcher, it seems reasonable to predict guilt could be a product of that and other behaviors associated with FGCSs who feel compelled to hide who they have become from their families.

Conflicting values between home and university life is a significant theme within the existing research on survivor and family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Hinz, 2016; Moreno, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015; Woollum, 2015). The act of acquiring higher education implies growth. The concept of growth involves loss (London, 1989). FGCS risk losing their sense of family membership as they perceive they are different than their family members (Moreno, 2016). FGCS may feel the pursuance of higher education is harmful to those

they love or may associate their desire to surpass their family members as aggressive behavior (Woollum, 2015). If, as both Darwin (1925) and Freud (1933) described, guilt is tied to maintaining group membership and ensuring group protection and if, as maintained by O'Connor et al. (1997), guilt is a mechanism to preserve attachments, loss for FGCS experiencing family achievement guilt could be the membership, protection, and attachments of and to their families.

In terms of being spared from harm, the concept of harm, within the context of survivor guilt, is somewhat subjective in nature stretching the spectrum from actual death to lesser forms of disaster such as job loss or non-terminal disease prognosis (Hutson et al., 2015; Lifton, 1967; Piorkowski, 1983). Previous examples of potential harm in the literature have been presented situationally and, for the FGCS, remaining in those situations may represent harm (Woollum, 2015). Harm may be physical or emotional, perceived or real, and may come as a result of inner-city living conditions, family strife, or simply the reality of isolation in rural environments (Woollum, 2015). For the FGCS, being publicly shamed by family for attending college might be perceived as harm (Woollum, 2015). However, because the options for negative experiences on such a wide spectrum are innumerable and because the research specifically tied to family achievement guilt is so minimal (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015) it seems presumptuous to believe what has been presented is sufficient and perhaps care should be taken to consider any limitations one may place on the concept of harm. What is clear is guilt frequently exists for those who escape what they perceive as harm when they also perceive others have not been so fortunate (Hutson et al., 2015; Lifton, 1967; Piorkowski, 1983).

Festinger (1962) described psychological distress, or mental anguish, as an outcome of cognitive dissonance. Isolating factors of distress in the FGCS is perceived, by the researcher,

complicated. Distress is a component of adverse experience, but can be defined broadly to include anything unpleasant, causing sadness, presenting an obstacle, resultant in social problems, or perceived culpability for a negative situation (Hutson et al., 2015). FGCS are more likely to experience shortcomings in terms of being prepared for college life than CGCS (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The researcher wonders whether distress stemming from factors unrelated to leaving or surpassing family members, such as being academically unprepared for college, causes FGCS to be more susceptible to family achievement guilt.

Still, the act of determining whether a specific event of distress is related to surpassing family members is not an easy task. For example, many FGCS students must transition from interdependent to independent lifestyles which, for some, may cause distress due to a familial and cultural emphasis on communal values (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). The researcher could argue this type of distress is unrelated to surpassing family members and is more related to changes associated with the transition to adulthood as described by Erikson (1994). The researcher could also argue this distress is resultant from an underlying acknowledgment such a transition is indicative of the FGCS wanting something different or a better life (Moreno, 2016) and that process of transitioning is a cause for family achievement guilt as the student acknowledges accepting new values, which may be viewed as devaluing family values (Woollum, 2015), accompany the surpassing (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Woollum, 2015).

Some examples of reported distress FGCS may experience can be easily isolated as direct causes for family achievement guilt. Those afflicted with survivor guilt typically feel a responsibility for the welfare of others (O'Conner, 1997). In the case of family achievement guilt, those feelings of responsibility are directed towards family members (Covarrubias &

Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) indicated FGCS frequently experience inner conflicts between the demands of both school and home. If the student chooses the demands of school over those in the family home, such as studying for a test instead of attending a birthday party, the student may feel guilty for acting in a manner which indicates the student has put less of a priority on their family (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). However, it is important to note, this is a no-win situation for the student and guilt will likely be felt regardless of choice (Vasquez-Salgado, 2015). The acknowledgement by FGCS is that they are absent from the home and are unable to help with the household responsibilities or contribute financially to the needs of the family might easily be associated with feelings of responsibility for the well-being of family members (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Theoretical frameworks for the modern family indicated all family structures include, both explicit and implicit, role assignments for family members (London, 1989). FGCS have sometimes reported their role in the family was the one who would go to college (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Existing research is unclear regarding the pressure this assigned expectation puts on the FGCS. Additionally, the researcher wonders how the role impacts levels of guilt towards any siblings who may have been assigned lesser roles, as possibly perceived by the FGCS, within their family structure. FGCS have also reported they feel they do not deserve to go to college (Stephens et al., 2014). The existing research on family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015) is unclear how feeling undeserving impacts guilt levels.

Three antecedents were identified relational to survivor guilt; personal characteristics, sense of belonging, and fairness or equity (Hutson et al., 2015). Antecedents describe conditions that are in pre-existence prior to a specific event occurring (Hutson, et al., 2015). The



antecedents for family achievement guilt seem to follow suit. Empathy, which has strong ties to guilt (Tangney, 1995), for family members with less desirable opportunities is typically present (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Piorkowski, 1983; Woollum, 2015). Sense of belonging, in the case of survivor guilt, refers to the relationship the guilt afflicted has with the victim (Hutson et al., 2015). While survivor guilt allows for a much broader definition of relationship (Lifton, 1967; Hutson, Hall, & Pack, 2015; O'Connor et al., 1997), family achievement guilt specifies the perceived victims are family members (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). The component of fairness or equity present within family achievement guilt is the perception, real or not, other family members do not have similar opportunities as the FGCS who feels guilty (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015).

Under the broader classification of survivor guilt, the potential contexts are many including disaster, war, death, illness, and lack of some other advantage (Hutson et al., 2015; Lifton, 1967; Piorkowski, 1983). In contrast, the context for family achievement guilt has been described in the literature in singular nature and relative to the associated upward mobility of FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Piorkowski, 1983; Woollum, 2015). The researcher speculates the possibility other contexts exist for family achievement guilt due to the reality it can be argued there are other avenues to escape negative situations and participate in upward mobility beyond college attendance and graduation.

The consequences of survivor guilt were identified as altered identities, problems with relationships, negative impacts to health, and ultimate resolution (Hutson et al., 2015). For FGCS, changing identities might be related to not fitting in with the previous social class (Hinz, 2016), new values inconsistent with previous values that were more aligned with family values

(Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015), or changes from dependent to independent living (Stephens et al., 2012). Relationship problems, including the loss of sibling and parental relationships, are described in the literature (Woollum, 2015). FGCS frequently reported feelings of isolation and a lower sense of belonging (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). Ultimate resolution, for the FGCS experiencing family achievement guilt could come in several forms including dropping out of college to return home (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), employing coping skills to persevere and continue the pursuance of their educational goals including minimizing academics successes in the presence of family members (Covarrubias et al., 2015), or the pursuance of helping professions that will enable them to return to their home environments for the purposes of improving the lives of their loved ones (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

### **Relationship of Identity to Family Achievement Guilt**

For the researcher, a struggle exists in pinpointing the exactness of family achievement guilt in terms of both its practical definition and rationale for why it is experienced by some FGCS. Covarrubias et al. (2015) have defined family achievement guilt felt by students who recognize their family members do not have similar access to higher education. However, because the literature has not focused enough specifically on family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS and because researchers have become distracted by the broader issues of social class, background, and advantage (O'Shea, 2015), ambiguity on the topic is extant. After considering those broader issues of classism, racial and ethnic demographics, and background, etc.... (Hinz, 2016; O'Shea, 2015), the researcher perceives all of those as components of identity. Therefore, the remainder of this review will focus on an attempt to describe identity and its relationship to family achievement guilt.

Identity is a multi-dimensional and dynamic process that involves knowing one's self, knowing others, and knowing how one is viewed by others (Jenkins, 2014). Identity theorists study the relationships of identities to each other as well as the relationships of identity to role performance, emotional affect, physical and mental health, self-concept, and social organization (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity theory strives to explain how meanings associated with different identities are mediated and regulated in the context of identity interaction (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

Researchers have been unable to fully explain identity and have often left the term undefined in their reports (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity research has primarily focused on multiple identities, emotions and identities, and changing identities (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Current research on the relationship of the role of emotions to identity processes as individuals experience multiple identities within and across situations is inadequate (Stets & Serpe, 2013). A challenge exists in knowing how different aspects of identity become relevant within various social structures (Stets & Serpe, 2013). A sufficient understanding for how identities evolve and change over time does not exist (Stets & Serpe, 2013). It is possible research has neglected or not adequately considered the implications of human collectivity and associated identity (Jenkins, 2014). For the researcher, who perceives the study of identity is a black hole, there is reassurance in Erikson's (1994) sentiments the more one studies identity, the vaster the concept becomes. Regardless, because altered identity is a potential consequence for survivor guilt (Hutson et al., 2015), it becomes necessary to piece together what research does exist for purposes of building the foundation for the further development of identity theory within this specific context.

In its most literal form, identity refers to meanings individuals attach to groups and other social structures they identify with (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity is a component of the

belongingness and community experienced by the group membership Darwin (1925) described as necessary for survival, but also extends to perceptions of “we” or “us” that can become divisive (Jenkins, 2014). Identity relies on perception and involves validation (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity validation refers to the process of an individual perceiving others view them the same way they view themselves (Burke & Stets, 2009). While this validation might be an easy concept to understand concerning a single identity, it was proposed (James, 1890) and is generally accepted individuals have multiple selves or identities each influenced by the different people and situations the individual interacts with throughout their lives (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Stets and Serpe (2013) explained identity theory presumes individuals develop a self-structure to manage these various identities.

The self-structures described by Stets and Serpe (2013) contain three components of identity that frequently intersect and cannot be divided from each other: role, group, and person. While the role and group components connect individuals to groups and other social structures, the person component serves to define identity characteristics that identify the individual as a human with unique qualities not necessarily possessed by others within the groups and social structures they identify with (Stets and Serpe, 2013). Role identities refer to internalized ideas associated with specific roles or responsibilities to groups and social structures individuals identify with (Stets and Serpe, 2013).

Stets and Serpe (2013) indicated negative emotional responses as potential outcomes when individuals maintained multiple identities that conflicted with each other. However, the pair (Stets and Serpe, 2013) also pointed out Thoits (1983) maintained conflicting identities actually resulted in positive emotional outcomes such as higher levels of self-esteem and the provision of a sense of direction in life. However, Thoits (2003) also posited resultant stress

from conflicting identities could be related to obligatory role identities, rather than voluntary roles, an individual might possess (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Obligatory role identities refer to those an individual accepts due to social or other expectation and which the individual cannot easily escape from (Thoits, 2003). In contrast are voluntary role identities that come with less permanent role expectations (Thoits, 2003). For example, the role identity of parent is obligatory, because the identity of parent cannot be easily escaped (Thoits, 2003). However, an identity role obtained through a voluntary activity, such as a hobby, can be easily escaped when the individual no longer desires to identify with that particular hobby (Thoits, 2003). Burke and Stets (2009) offered positive and negative outcomes might be less determined by the obligatory or voluntary nature of identity roles and more by identity validation. The pair maintained if conflicting role identities were validated, the individual would experience positive emotional outcomes (Burke & Stets, 2009).

When considering the FGCS experiencing family achievement guilt, the researcher can easily imagine situations where the individual is managing multiple selves with the potentially conflicting obligatory identities of both the child of parents who did not attend college and college student. Serpe and Stryker (1987) introduced the concept of open and closed environments and explained identity shifts are more necessary in closed social structures that restrict an individual's identity and behavior. Higher education is viewed as a vehicle for social mobility (Southgate, Brosnan, Lempp, Kelly, Wright, Outram, & Bennett, 2017) and allows for FGCS to enter environments which may require identity shifts when university life is vastly different than their home life. Research is not consistent regarding the impacts to individuals, such as FGCS, whose identities may shift as a result of social mobility (Friedman, 2013;

Daenekindt, 2016; Hadjar& Samuel, 2014). Two processes of identity shifts relative to social mobility were identified as dissociation (Sorokin, 1927) and acculturation (Blau, 1956).

Dissociative thesis, which refers to the act of dissociation from the culture of an originating class as they transfer to another (Sorokin, 1927), is a generally accepted concept within the field of sociology (Daenekindt, 2017). Both Sorokin (1927) and Cooley (1909) claimed social mobility was both disruptive and a detrimental experience. Higher suicide rates, mental health issues, and feelings of inferiority were described as outcomes of social mobility as individuals' identities dissociated from class to class (Cooley, 1909; Sorokin, 1927). Sorokin (1927) claimed individuals are never fully able to complete that dissociation process and are left to view the world through the lens of the original class. However, despite a flourish of research in the 1960's and 1970's, sufficient empirical evidence to support or disprove the theory does not exist (Daenekindt, 2016). Daenekindt (2016), who argued the experiences of upward and downward mobility differ and who looked at the dissociative thesis through three sub-dimensions: social isolation, utilitarian individualism, and social disorientation, found no evidence to support social mobility is both disruptive and detrimental to the individual. However, Daenekindt (2017) was hesitant to claim consequences of social mobility to individuals is disinteresting and concluded different dimensions of dissociation are indeed impacted by social mobility.

Conversely, acculturation thesis (Blau, 1956) describes a process of resocialization that involves a conscious leaving of habits, beliefs, and customs from the originating class as those from the new class are accepted. Daenekindt (2016) theorized the negative impacts described by the dissociative thesis may be more felt by those experiencing downward mobility while those experiencing upward mobility may more positively engage in acculturation. While this

explanation makes sense to the researcher, Friedman (2013) claimed these processes are described in a manner too simplistic with partial explanations and are, in fact, much more complicated and impactful at deeper levels. Friedman (2013) explained while acculturation may be viewed in a more positive light, negative impacts to the individual may be realized in the form of anxiety regarding fitting in with the new group while, at the same time, experiencing guilt for leaving their original class.

Much of the issue regarding the conclusiveness of the research in terms of both the dissociative thesis and the acculturation thesis, as processes of identity shifts, seems to be the fault of the research, itself. Daenekindt (2016) maintained the research has failed to adequately measure dissociation and that insufficient analytical strategies and statistical methods have been used. Friedman (2013) argued research has focused its inquiry of social mobility on outcomes such as socioeconomic status on not on the psychological impacts to the individuals, themselves. Regardless of the inconclusive nature of existing research regarding the impacts of social mobility to the human psyche, both Friedman (2013) and Sorokin (1927) agreed individuals who have journeyed from one class to another retain forever figurative baggage from their originating class.

While it is generally agreed FGCS are engaging in academic activity associated with upward social mobility (Southgate, Brosnan, Lempp, Kelly, Wright, Outram, & Bennett, 2017), it may be worthwhile to consider both dissociative (Sorokin, 1927) and acculturation (Blau, 1956) theses are valid theories. FGCS are participants in intergenerational mobility. Intergenerational mobility describes a scenario where an individual and their parents do not have the same positions within the social hierarchy (Daenekindt, 2016). Regardless of whether the FGCS is dissociating from their class of origin or actively eschewing familial values, these acts

identity change associated with social mobility likely cause a disequilibrium both socially and emotionally (Friedman, 2013).

Sorokin (1927) used the term “mental strain” to describe dissociation. Festinger (1962) used the term dissonance to describe mental anguish that occurs when inconsistency is present within an individual. Negative emotions, such as guilt, are frequently outcomes of both dissociation and acculturation (Daenekindt, 2016; Friedman, 2013). While the concept of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias et al., 2015) remains somewhat elusive to the researcher, it seems reasonable to hypothesize the aspect of identity change, whether by dissociation, acculturation, or some other process, could be the catalyst.

Identity theorists have offered a variety of opinions regarding the development of identity. While Freud (1924) believed aspects such as personality and identity are determined within the first five years of a child’s life, Erikson (1994) subscribed to identity acquisition being a changing process throughout the lifecycle. Erikson (1994) divided an individual’s lifespan into psycho-social stages to correspond with what he identified as crises individuals must overcome to successfully advance to the next level. Most relevant to the FGCS is the crisis of identity vs. role confusion during adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson, 1994). Erikson maintained individuals in this age group must reconcile an identity separate from their parents which would successfully result in the individual being able to discern where they fit in the world (Erikson, 1994). Based on the length of time Erikson (1994) prescribed for the crisis to resolve, identity vs. role confusion is likely difficult for individuals to navigate as they bridge between child and adult. The researcher is left to wonder if the obligatory identity role of college student conflicts so much with the obligatory familial identity role the FGCS is sometimes unable to successfully resolve this crisis with family achievement guilt as a potential outcome.



It is important to acknowledge explanations of identity have originated from multiple fields. While identity theory came from the field of sociology and strives to explain how the identities of individuals influence their behavior relative to roles they hold in society, another theory, social identity theory, is derived from the field of psychology and attempts to explain the identity from the perspective of group membership (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). Other theories, such as cultural mismatch theory (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) have been presented to describe how identity is shaped by dependent and independent culture with potential negative outcomes to individuals when they attempt to maintain identities in independent environments while experiencing the obligatory role identities associated with dependent familial environments. Of most importance to this entire section of review on identity is while researchers continue to work on creating a full explanation for identity, the concept frequently remains elusive and much is still unknown.

### **Measurement of Family Achievement guilt**

Current research indicates a standard measurement for family achievement guilt has not been used consistently (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Piorkowski, 1983; Woollum, 2015). Piorkowski (1983), the first to consider survivor guilt as a topic relevant to the university setting, seemed to rely on personal narratives of students to measure whether the condition of survivor guilt could be applied. Both Woollum (2015) and Moreno (2016), with grounded theory and narrative studies respectively, sought to explore the experiences of FGCS with family achievement guilt. However, neither of these researchers (Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015) indicated using any measures for guilt during participant selection beyond eliciting participant experiences with guilt. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) and Covarrubias, et al. (2015) presented studies that utilized the Interpersonal Guilt

Questionnaire (IGQ) to identify the presence of family achievement guilt (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997).

The development of the IGQ was the result of recognition, while the study of guilt is an important part of psychopathology research, reliable and valid measures for interpersonal guilt were insufficient (O'Connor, et al., 1997). The IGQ is available in 45 and 67 question formats (O'Connor et al., 1997). Both formats have tested as reliable instruments; however, the testing for the 67-question version included more participants and is considered psychometrically superior to the 45-question option (O'Connor et al., 1997). Previous studies (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) adjusted the IGQ for purposes of isolating guilt specific to family achievement. The family achievement guilt scale (Covarrubias, Landa, & Gallimore, *Manuscript in preparation*) was recently developed specifically to measure family achievement guilt. This instrument consists of 27 items intended to measure levels of guilt across three areas: independent privilege, financial pressures, and becoming different.

### **Summary**

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance was presented as the framework for this study with cognitive dissonance being defined as inconsistencies between what an individual believes and how they behave. While, for the past half century, the theory has experienced varying degrees of attention, support, and criticism, it is widely acknowledged to have significantly contributed to the field of social sciences (Aronson, 1992; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). The review of the literature did not uncover the consideration of the theory as a lens for which to view the experiences of FGCS with family achievement guilt. The researcher determined theory of cognitive dissonance is a valid framework for this study due to her conclusion cognitive dissonance exists for FGCS who

experience, as described in the literature, conflicting philosophies between their college lives and their home lives.

Variances exist in the definition of FGCS (O'Shea, 2015; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). For purposes of this study, FGCS will be defined as college students who do not have a parent who has earned a four-year degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The literature is abundant with described challenges and negative outcomes experienced by FGCS (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stephens et al., 2014). However, it was also noted researchers have generally taken a deficit oriented approach in terms of describing FGCS with insufficient attention having been given to exploring the strengths FGCS bring from home to university life (O'Shea, 2015). Furthermore, it may be the bulk of studies on FGCS are confounded by the inclusion of broader issues, such as class and background, by researchers (O'Shea, 2015).

While disagreement in reporting exists for the exact numbers and timeframe of attrition, retention of FGCS by universities is a significant concern (Pratt et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2014). Family support, engagement with university life and university supports were identified as primary factors to retention (McClellan, 2013). The literature reported FGCS expressed their parents were not familiar enough with university life to be able to effectively support their children and that stress occurred within familial relationships when the FGCS changed as a result of attending college (Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). FGCS who actively participate in university life have higher levels of retention (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, factors such as living arrangements and financial needs often draw FGCS away from campus (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016). University supports offered to FGCS are positively correlated with retention (Ecklund, 2013). However, it was argued a disconnect may exist between the perceptions of universities and FGCS regarding accessibility and acquisition of intended benefits of those

services (Shumaker & Wood, 2016). It was also suggested FGCS may not fully advocate for their needs which may entail not taking advantage of services offered (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014).

The literature reveals significant inconsistencies and discrepancies in guilt research (Brooke, 1985; Klein, 1948; Tilghman-Osborne et al., 2010). While it was determined a universal definition for guilt, clinically or contextually, does not exist, the modern view of guilt is it is a component of interpersonal relationships that serves to rectify wrongdoing and preserve attachments (Woollum, 2015). The emotion of guilt was determined to be different from that of shame with shame being more centered on the self while guilt has a more outward focus (Tangney, 1995). The researcher concluded guilt, as its function is described in the literature (Tangney, 1995), should result in adaptive behaviors as the afflicted seeks to make amends. However, family achievement guilt is often described in conjunction with (perceived by the researcher) maladaptive behaviors (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015) and the researcher wondered whether this is the result of the addition of shame when the guilt afflicted FGCS seeks to resolve their guilt in self-serving ways.

Family achievement guilt is an extension to the concept of survivor guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). While survivor guilt is more situationally encompassing and allows for the afflicted to have any relationship with the perceived victims, family achievement guilt is specific to successes relative to academic achievement with the perceived victims being specifically defined as family members who have fewer opportunities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). Essentially, family achievement guilt is a type of guilt felt by FGCS when they perceive their family members do not have similar access to higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). Because very little research exists on

family achievement guilt, the researcher determined descriptions for the wider classification of survivor guilt are considered appropriate for this study.

Five key characteristics of survivor guilt were presented; presence of loss, sense of harm, presence of distress, interpersonal relevance, and individualized experiences. Examples from existing research to substantiate these characteristics, relevant to the context of family achievement guilt, were provided (Hutson et al., 2015). The researcher expressed her lack of clarity with the characteristic of distress and wondered if home distress is perceived to be greater if the FGCS is also experiencing significant distress at school.

Antecedents to survivor guilt include personal characteristics, relationship to the victim, and the sense of equity or fairness (Hutson et al., 2015). The consequences for survivor guilt include modified identities, relationship problems, negative health impacts, and ultimate resolution in some form (Lifton, 1967, Hutson et al., 2015; O'Connor et al., 1997). The literature provides examples FGCS frequently exhibit empathy, identify family members who have fewer opportunities, and describe situations where iniquity is present (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). While the literature did provide examples for all of these antecedents and consequences, the fact so few studies have been completed specific to family achievement guilt presents the problem we do not have sufficient information to make adequate conclusions. Additionally, the existing studies have had a limited population focus. The research questions for this study seek to determine both the antecedents and consequences, specifically ultimate resolution from a non-deficit perspective, for a different population.

Identity refers to the meanings individuals associate with group membership and other social structures (Jenkins, 2014). Both Freud (1925) and Darwin (1925) tied guilt to group

membership. Altered identities have been determined to sometimes be a consequence for survivor guilt (Hutson et al., 2015). The review revealed while a breadth of research and theories exist on identity, it is also acknowledged so much is not known that the concept remains elusive and even undefined in the reports (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

Relative to FGCS is Erikson's stages of development theory, specifically the crisis of identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1994). In this stage individuals must reconcile their identity as separate from that of their parents, during late adolescence and early adulthood, to successfully progress to the next level (Erikson, 1994). Processes for identity shifts were discussed in the context of differing environmental demands on identity within the process of higher education as it associated positive social mobility (Blau, 1956; Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Sorokin, 1927; Southgate et al., 2017). The literature contains varying ideas on the affect associated with shifting identities (Blau, 1956; Daenekindt, 2016; Friedman, 2013; Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Sorokin, 1927; Southgate et al., 2017). A general acceptance exists individuals maintain multiple selves or identities and sometimes those identities conflict with each other (Friedman, 2013). While some researchers believe conflicting identities result in crisis and distress, others view those conflicts as sources of direction and life meaning (Blau, 1956; Daenekindt, 2016; Friedman, 2013; Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Sorokin, 1927; Southgate et al., 2017).

While research has shown an increased interest in FGCS, much is still not known about this group. The results of this review indicate FGCS have unique experiences and struggles relative to their pursuance of higher education and those translate to negative outcomes such as higher rates of attrition (DeAngelo & Frank, 2016; Ishitani, 2016; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos & Ditzfield, 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Family

achievement guilt is a relatively new concept with the existing research focusing primarily on Hispanic and Latino FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Woollum, 2015). Furthermore, while significant research has been conducted to identify the needs, characteristics, and academic outcomes of FGCS, far fewer studies have explored the intrapersonal challenges to success this group encounters (Woollum, 2015). Additional studies are needed to give a voice to other groups of FGCS who experience family achievement guilt to provide stakeholders a better understanding of their experiences, manifestations and individual efforts towards remediation.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology is to describe the experiences of first-generation college students, with family achievement guilt, at a less selective, public university in the mid-Atlantic region. This chapter provides an overview of the research methods. Additionally, a rationale is provided for the chosen design along with a description for site and participant selection. Methods for data collection and analysis are explained. Finally, actions taken to ensure the study was trustworthy and ethical are presented.

### Design

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as the study of seeking the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by a group of individuals. Family achievement guilt is the phenomenon in this study. The researcher endeavored to understand and describe the phenomenon of family achievement guilt, as experienced by FGCS, at a public, less selective, mid-Atlantic university. The intent of understanding the phenomenon, as experienced by this specific group, was to provide a voice that may be different from that of groups previously studied (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015).

This study is qualitative due to its intent to seek the meaning of human action without the use of quantitative data (Schwandt, 2015). The study was conducted in the natural environment of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias, Landa, & Gallimore, *Manuscript in preparation*) was used to verify all participants were experiencing family achievement guilt.



The transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate due to the researcher's goal of reporting, versus interpreting as in hermeneutical phenomenology, the experiences of several individuals who all experience the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) credited Husserl (2012) with inspiring his methods for transcendental phenomenology. Husserl's (2012) philosophical views countered ideas of philosophical realism that suggested an external world exists beyond one's consciousness (Schwandt, 2015). Husserl (2012) contended assumptions based on personal experience influence all perceptions (Schwandt, 2015) and described transcendental phenomenology as activity that requires the researcher to search inside themselves to determine and set aside any experiences with and prejudgments of the phenomenon to objectively describe and report the experiences of the participants. This process is referred to as bracketing or epoche (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

As the human instrument (Creswell, 2013), it was important I continually engaged in the bracketing, or epoche, process to minimize how my experiences, beliefs, and perceptions will impact the study (Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). I believe my experiences have provided me insight on some of the struggles FGCS face. However, because I did not, as a FGCS, attend college on a traditional campus, I do not have that perspective to draw from. At best, I can understand some of the struggles related to parent knowledge of how college works due to my experiences of realizing there were many things I did not know about college and that I learned throughout my daughter's first year. Even so, I recognize those experiences are likely minimal in comparison to the experiences of true FGCS and their parents simply due to the reality I had participated extensively in college programming in other contexts. Essentially, the aspect missing from my perspective is that of campus life. Additionally, while I do have experience

with guilt related to a variety of activities related to positive social mobility, I did not recognize my guilt existed until later in life. This causes me to question whether young adults experiencing family achievement guilt are aware of the guilt and, if so, to what extent.

### **Research Questions**

This study had a central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Research Question: How do FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university describe their experiences with family achievement guilt?

SQ1: What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?

SQ2: How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?

SQ3: How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate family achievement guilt?

### **Setting**

The study was conducted at Gladebury University (GU, a pseudonym). GU is a small, public university located in a mid-Atlantic state. GU reported 88% of its 5000 students are in-state residents with approximately 41% of the total student body identifying as minority students (Cultural diversity..., 2018). The retention rate from freshman to sophomore years at GU is approximately 75%. GU ranks as one of the lowest in the nation for on-time graduations at just under 20%. However, GU has earned an average ranking for just under 50% of students graduating in what is termed reasonable time; three to six years depending on the degree. GU was selected for three reasons. First, one of GU's recent goals was to recruit and graduate more first-generation college students. Second, GU is situated in a rural location and commuting is

not a viable option for non-local students whose family homes are hours away in the more populated areas of the state. This aspect will potentially limit the participants in the study to those who must live away from home to attend. Third, GU has a diverse student body that allowed for a mixed group of participants.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were selected through criterion and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, FGCS and experiencing family achievement guilt. The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) was used to identify participants who were experiencing family achievement guilt. Age and FGCS status were determined by self-reporting. Participants were classified as FGCS if they indicated neither of their parents had achieved a four-year, college degree (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

This study intended to use 12-15 participants (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The actual number of participants was 11 and was dependent on data saturation with a minimum of 10 required (Creswell, 2013; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Snowball sampling was used for recruitment (Creswell, 2013). The researcher intended all participants were students enrolled at GU at the time of data collection. For purposes of obtaining data about family achievement guilt remediation efforts, the researcher presumed participants who had returned after completing their freshman year would be able to provide greater insight than freshmen participants who may have been in the initial stages of the guilt experience. However, freshmen students were not disqualified from the study. Purposive towards maximum variation, there was no intention to limit participants to a specific racial or ethnic demographic due to the focus of existing research

having been on primarily one demographic (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016).

Data was collected and subsequently eliminated from a twelfth participant. While this participant did not qualify for the study according to the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), the participant indicated through conversation she was familiar with family achievement guilt. The researcher was curious if the participant's experience with family achievement guilt simply had not registered on the scale. It was later determined, via her interview and focus group data, the twelfth participant had observed a situation where her friend experienced family achievement guilt and she was astute enough to recognize and empathize with the friend's experience. All participants, including the twelfth, received a 20-dollar gift card redeemable at a local, general merchandise store to thank them for their participation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

### **Procedures**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and granted from both GU (see Appendix A) and Liberty University (see Appendix B) (Creswell, 2013). The flier (see Appendix C) to advertise the study and solicit participants was posted on both traditional and digital bulletin boards at GU including one in an office that specifically serves FGCS. After potential participants contacted the researcher to indicate their interest, appointments were established. Potential participants then read and signed the informed consent document (see Appendix D) and completed the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) to determine their eligibility. Participants self-reported their demographics by writing those descriptors (age, race, gender, year in college, and contact e-mail address) on the top of the Family Achievement Guilt Scale paper.

Participants were asked to contribute to three methods of data collection including the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), an interview (see Appendix E), and an on-line focus group (see Appendix F) (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researcher asked participants to choose an interview location where they would feel most comfortable. One interview occurred in a high school guidance counselor's office, three were conducted in a combined sorority and fraternity house, and the remaining seven participants chose the campus library.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were given a piece of paper with the focus group address and login information. Participants were instructed to create accounts using an anonymous username created by the researcher. Participants then responded to six focus group questions (see Appendix F). Five of the participants completed the focus group within one day. The researcher sent the remaining six participants a reminder e-mail that included a direct link to the focus group and their specific login information. All participants, except for one (Bailey), ultimately provided data for the focus group questions.

The researcher analyzed the data according to a modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data outlined by Moustakas (1994). Once the data was analyzed, a written summary was presented to each participant, except for one (Erikah) who declined to provide contact information, to verify the researcher had correctly recorded their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Once verified, the results were recorded and presented (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Throughout the process, the researcher continually bracketed herself from the participants' experiences by continual acts of reflexivity with journaling being used as a primary strategy (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Among the journal entries are the researcher's own answers to the interview

and focus group questions (See Appendix G).

### **The Researcher's Role**

Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) indicated the definition of a FGCS varies within the literature. When I consider my own status as an undergraduate student, I was a non-traditional student. Non-traditional students complete higher education through alternative to traditional means and are frequently combined in the classification of FGCS due to a partial overlap of general characteristics (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). My experience was one that existed within the overlap of both non-traditional student and FGCS. While my mother did eventually obtain a four-year, college degree, it was not until after her children were adults and no longer living at home.

Nearly all my higher education has been obtained through non-traditional means. It was late in my doctoral journey, and after I had already earned an Ed.S., I took my first course on a college campus. My first-born child is currently attending college in the traditional manner of living away from home and taking courses on the campus. She is the first in her extended maternal family who has experienced the opportunity to do so. I consider all three of us college pioneers from a family where we are the only ones to have pursued higher education. My husband, like myself, earned his four-year, college degree through non-traditional means. However, he has a familial history of relatives pursuing higher education.

I am a high school teacher with an almost singular experience of teaching students who identify as immigrant and minority students. An overwhelming percentage of my students who attend college will be the first in their families to do so. My observations of and discussions with them leave me with the perception that their ideas of what college will be like, in all areas, is based largely on what they have imagined. If my students have visited a college campus prior to

high school graduation, it was almost always the result of a school field trip. I have students who will not ever visit a college campus until the day they move from their homes and into the dorms.

While I am not studying family achievement guilt at the high school level, I observe daily instances where the needs of students' families take priority over their academic activities. Examples of this are when students do not attend class due to parental expectations they will babysit younger siblings, take a grandparent to an appointment, or even go to work to contribute monetarily to the household. When I have conversed with my students regarding these instances, their responses have typically indicated they believe their responsibilities to their families are greater than those associated with their individual, academic accomplishments. At the same time, I have never had a student who expressed high school graduation was not a priority in their family. When I consider the reality of prioritizing family needs over academic accomplishment in the context of college life, I can easily see how conflicts between the two arise.

Beyond my daughter and a few former students attending GU, I do not have any association with the research site. I am biased in my belief education is crucial for bettering one's circumstances and live a life in which I rationalize the benefits of education are greater than the ramifications of my guilt. I could argue, despite not being true for me, guilt may not be a permanent condition for all who experience it and, therefore, dropping out of college, in deference to family achievement guilt, is an irrational action. As the human instrument, I was aware both my personal and professional experiences with FGCS needed to be bracketed out in order view the phenomenon without prejudgments (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). I anticipated this bracketing would be accomplished through a variety of activities which ultimately included journaling, reflexivity, and conversations with persons outside of the study (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Creswell, 2013).

## Data Collection

Data was collected using three methods (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). First, potential participants completed the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) to determine whether they were experiencing family achievement guilt and, if so, in which areas. Second, individual interviews were conducted (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, participants were asked to participate in an on-line focus group (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Participants reviewed and signed a consent form prior to any data collection (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

### Family Achievement Guilt Scale

Eligibility to participate in the study was determined by the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*). While first-generation status was determined by self-reporting, the researcher desired a more definitive measure to determine whether potential participants were experiencing the phenomenon of family achievement guilt. The family Achievement Guilt Scale consists of 27 Likert Scale items divided into three areas FGCS might experience guilt: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*). This data collection method ensured all selected participants were experiencing the phenomenon; a requirement for phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) was administered in a pencil and paper format. The researcher did not alter the instrument in any manner except for removing the title. The title was removed as an effort to decrease the influencing of participant responses. Prior to completing the instrument, each potential participant was provided a definition for FGCS and was asked to affirm that definition described



their status. Additionally, potential participants were asked to provide general demographic information about themselves including their age, year in college, race and gender they identify with, and contact information.

### **Interviews**

Except for one participant (Aliyah), individual interviews were conducted on or within walking distance of the campus of GU (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher allowed participants to choose a comfortable location for their interviews. Participants were provided an explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedures for the interview, and were informed they could stop the interview at any time for any reason (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were audio-recorded using two devices (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) which resulted in 127 pages of single-spaced data.

The interview questions were adapted from an interview protocol (see Appendix E) provided to the researcher by a leading researcher of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). These adaptations occurred for the purposes of ensuring the questions were open-ended (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) or to add questioning that sought to provide additional insight related to this study's fourth research question about guilt remediation efforts (see Table 3.1). Permission was granted for the use and modification of the provided interview protocol for this study (see Appendix H).

1. Please tell me about yourself including where you are from, your progress in college, your major, and whether you live at home or at school.
2. What made you decide to attend college?
3. What are your goals for after college?

4. What emotions would you use to describe your experiences during your transition into college?
5. How did your family react when you started college?
6. What are your family's general thoughts about higher education?
7. How often are you in contact with your family members?
8. What forms of communication do you use when you communicate with your family?
9. If you live away from home, how often do you visit home?
10. Describe the connections you have been able to make with peers, faculty, and staff since you have been in college.
11. Describe how you have been doing academically.
12. Tell me more about your extracurricular involvements including any clubs, leadership, or volunteer experiences.
13. What do your parents do?
14. What do your siblings do?
15. What would you say is your role in the family and how do you contribute to the family dynamic?
16. How is your life different when you are school from when you are at home?
17. In what ways is college changing you?
18. When you are at home, how would you describe your family's reaction to the person you are becoming?
19. What are your experiences when you talk about school with your family?
20. Please describe the emotions you feel if you experience challenges with managing your responsibilities both at school and at home.

21. When you think about the opportunities available to you in college and the opportunities available to your family members at home, what emotions do you feel?
22. What types of emotions do you experience when you visit your family at home?
23. When you have experienced negative emotions related to attending college and not being home with your family, what did you do?
24. When you have experienced negative emotions about attending college, while at home, what did you do?
25. When you think about the most challenging or difficult times you have experienced in college, what has helped you persist through those challenges?
26. What other thoughts or experiences would you like to share?

Question one was an introductory question and allows for the participants to introduce themselves and for the interviewer to gain basic information about who they are and their progression in college (Creswell, 2013). Questions two through nine sought to determine how participants experienced the transition process from high school to college. These questions asked about the participant's motivations to attend college, emotions they felt during the transition process and how much contact they have with their home environments while away at college. A literature review revealed familial attitudes about and associated support for college were primary factors for the successful transition of FGCS into college (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Questions 10 through 19 probed participants to discuss their experiences at college with 10 through 12 asking about connections participants have made on campus as well as their academic progress. Research indicates FGCS struggle with feeling a sense of belonging at college (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Pratt et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014). From these questions,

the researcher hoped to be able to develop a profile for each participant in terms of their involvement in campus life. The remaining questions in this section were devoted to asking participants to compare and contrast their lives at home and at college. Many FGCS experience cultural conflicts between home and college (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). The researcher hoped the answers to these questions would serve the first sub-question, in this study, by revealing factors FGCS believe caused conflict and contributed to their feelings of family achievement guilt.

Questions 20-22 directly probed participants' experiences with negative emotions related to being away from the family to attend college. The nature of these questions required participants to reflect on their families while in the college environment by asking them to consider their positions as college students and the positions of their family members as non-college students. The researcher was curious if participants would associate any negative feelings they have experienced with the emotion of guilt.

Questions 23-25 were intended to serve the third sub-question that asked about remediation efforts. Festinger (1962), in his theory of cognitive dissonance, explained individuals will seek to remediate emotional distress resultant from cognitive dissonance due to inconsistencies in their thoughts, beliefs, values and actions. These questions wanted to know what FGCS have done to resolve negative emotions they have experienced. The researcher's personal experience with guilt caused the researcher to understand FGCS struggling with guilt may or may not associate their negative emotions with guilt during young adulthood or ever. Therefore, the researcher presumed negative emotional experiences identified by participants who have been identified as experiencing family achievement guilt, as measured by the Family

Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), were likely tied, to some extent, to that guilt.

### **Focus Group**

An on-line focus group was conducted for participants to discuss family achievement guilt as a group (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The questions for this focus group were taken from the interview protocol of a leading researcher in family achievement guilt (see Appendix F) (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). These questions specifically addressed family achievement guilt in the context of participants having been introduced to the concept and being able to provide data specific to their understanding of it.

Data from the focus group was collected electronically. Each of the participants was provided information to access the focus group via paper hardcopy and e-mail (except for Erikah who declined to provide an e-mail address). For purposes of confidentiality to other participants, each participant was given a predetermined, by the researcher, user name for logging in. Of the data collection methods, the focus group was the only method that provided data on family achievement guilt resultant from participants interacting with one another.

The researcher hoped this data collection method would serve two purposes. First, this method was the first to explain the concept of family achievement guilt to the participants. The researcher was interested in understanding if FGCS who had been identified as experiencing family achievement guilt by the Family Achievement Guilt Scale were able to connect the concept of family achievement guilt, as explained to them, to their own negative emotions. Second, the researcher anticipated data collected from the focus group would serve to provide perspective on the data collected from the two previous methods.

1. Some researchers have a theory called family achievement guilt. They say this is an emotion that first in their family college students experience when they have better educational opportunities than other family members. The researchers say a person feels guilty if they get more privileges and independence, because family members back home might not enjoy the same. Please describe what you think about this theory.
2. Describe how this theory of family achievement guilt makes sense to you.
3. How do you relate to this theory?
4. How would you change any part of the definition for the theory?
5. What other ideas do you have about negative emotions students might experience that may be related to being the first in their family to go to college?
6. What recommendations do you have on how to improve experiences for first-generation college students on campus?

Questions one and two explained the concept of family achievement guilt, a term coined by leading researchers in an emergent research area (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015), to participants. Participants were asked to consider the definition of the concept and to provide feedback about what they thought about the concept and whether it made sense to them.

Questions three, four, and five asked participants to consider how the concept of family achievement guilt might have applied to them. Existing research on family achievement guilt is minimal (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015). However, research indicates depression increases college withdrawal (Cuijpers et al., 2015). Covarrubias et al (2015) found depression was positively correlated with guilt in FGCS. The researcher was interested in

whether FGCS, who had been identified as experiencing family achievement guilt, associated negative emotions they may have experienced with guilt.

Question six asked participants to provide insight on how the experiences of FGCS could be improved. While universities have responded to the data FGCS experience more challenges than CGCS during the transition to college life (Ishitani, 2016), research reveals those initiatives frequently miss the mark of meeting the needs of the population they are intended to serve (Ishitani, 2016; Shumaker & Wood, 2016). Additionally, FGCS are less likely than CGCS to advocate for their needs (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). The researcher was interested in understanding what participants, who have been identified as experiencing family achievement guilt, believe could be done to help them remediate their negative emotions.

The researcher believed this question was potentially valuable towards supporting the third sub-research question that asked how participants have resolved their guilt to a level that has allowed them to remain at college. However, while it could have been argued, due to their continuance with college programming, all participants could have already remediated their guilt to acceptable levels, the researcher anticipated a potential existed some participants, especially underclassmen, may not have reached the remediation phase as outlined by Festinger (1965). The researcher acknowledged the sensitive nature of the situation and was prepared to refer participants to appropriate university services if that action was deemed prudent by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis portion of this study followed a modification the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). Specific to this type of analysis was an epoche process that involved the researcher conducting and analyzing a self-

interview for purposes of arriving at the essence of their own, personal experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then was able to set aside her personal biases to look at the participants' data following the process that commenced with horizontalization and terminated with the production of a complete textural-structural description for the essence of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

To begin horizontalization the researcher carefully reviewed the data for each participant to identify all expressions which were relevant to the experience of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher read the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings of each participant's data several times. The researcher made hand-written notes on the printed transcripts during each of the initial reviews to indicate communications not captured by the transcriptionists including sighs, pauses in response, voice changes due to emotion, etc... Additionally, the researcher consulted her notebook to review notes regarding non-verbal cues and other observations taken at the time each participant was interviewed and added comments to the transcripts as appropriate. The researcher then looked at each phrase provided by the participants and labeled each with a code.

Once a complete list had been generated, reduction and elimination occurred (Moustakas, 1994). The reduction and elimination were accomplished through the lens of the research questions. To accurately eliminate and reduce, the researcher determined if each expression contained both a moment that was required and adequate for understanding the phenomenon and was something that could be given a label (Moustakas, 1994). The remaining expressions, called invariants, were categorized according to themes (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher then compared each of the invariants with the data collected from each participant (Moustakas, 1994). If the invariant did not match, explicitly or implicitly, the



participant's data collection record, it was discarded (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then created textural and structural descriptions for each participant that were ultimately combined into one, final textural-structural description for the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Of importance to the entire activity of transcendental phenomenology was the constant effort by the researcher to participate in the epoche process in order to remain as unbiased as possible (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) described truth as a matter of perception and it was the goal of the researcher to determine what each participant believed was true about their experience. This study analyzed those composites from each of the three data collection processes to create one composite that represents the essence of the phenomenon of family achievement guilt as experienced by the group, as a whole (Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Family Achievement Guilt Scale**

The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) was first analyzed to determine if the participant was experiencing family achievement guilt and, if so, in which of the three areas: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. The researcher initially verified all potential participants were a FGCS and were at least 18 years old by reviewing their self-reporting at the top of the instrument. The researcher then reviewed the responses for each of the 27 items on the instrument to determine which areas the participant indicated the strongest levels of emotion. The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) is a five-point, Likert scale that does not have a specific score participants must achieve in order to demonstrate their experiences of guilt. A response of zero represents the lowest level of emotion and a response of four the highest. The researcher determined whether participants were experiencing guilt by studying the levels of

their responses in each of the three areas. If participants responded by selecting either three or four for an item, the researcher concluded they were experiencing moderate to significant levels of emotion for that question's specific event or scenario. All potential participants were found to be experiencing family achievement guilt in at least one of the three areas.

After determining areas of guilt for each participant as individuals, the researcher created a grid (see Appendix I) to group all the responses and to create a visual representation of how the participants responded as a whole in each area. Each instrument item was then coded through the lens of the research questions. All items were either categorized as containing a contributing factor for family achievement guilt, an impact experienced by the participant, or both. These categories mirrored SQ1 and SQ2. The instrument did not contain any items related to guilt remediation and, therefore, no items were coded to correspond with SQ3. Once the items were coded, the researcher recorded the number of participants who indicated they experienced the highest levels of emotion for each item. Only the highest level of "four" was considered for this step. All items had at least one participant who indicated they experienced the specified emotion at the highest level on the scale.

## **Interviews**

The transcripts and audio recordings for each interview were reviewed multiple times (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout this initial review process, the researcher created hand-written notes on hard-copy versions. Once the researcher was satisfied complete interview records, to include non-verbal cues and other observations, had been constructed, the researcher began to analyze the data through the lens of the research questions. Each line of participant responses was reviewed to determine if it was relevant to the research questions. The researcher used a

different colored highlighter to represent each of the research questions and highlighted the interview transcripts appropriately.

The processes of horizontalization, reduction, clustering into themes, validation and creation of textural and structural themes then followed (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher first created textural and structural descriptions for each participant as individuals (Moustakas, 1994). The final step was to create a description of the essence of the experience of family achievement guilt as it was experienced by the entire group of participants (Moustakas, 1994). This was accomplished by examining the themes for each individual participant to verify all the themes were applicable to all participants. In cases where themes were not relevant to all participants in the study, those themes were either deleted or combined into larger themes.

### **Focus Group**

The processes for analyzing this data was similar to and followed the same sequence as that described for the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher printed out hard copies of the focus group data and read through the responses several times. During this initial review process, the researcher made annotations. The researcher then used the same highlighting technique as was used to analyze the interviews to indicate line by line the applicability of each response to the research questions. Once the highlighting was complete, the researcher categorized each response according to the corresponding research question. A list of codes was then generated according to the research questions. Themes were developed using those codes (Moustakas, 1994). The final product of this analysis was a composite description of the essence of experiencing family achievement group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, or validation, refers to the criteria used to determine the quality of qualitative research (Schwandt, 2015). The researcher employed a variety of techniques, as described below, for the purpose of conducting a credible, well-founded study.

### **Credibility**

Bracketing was accomplished to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, a triangulation of the data occurred (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Triangulation is a process that uses multiple types of data and analysis to confirm validity (Schwandt, 2015). Finally, the research was conducted at the location where participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher acknowledged family achievement guilt could potentially occur in either or both the college and home environments. It was also acknowledged family achievement guilt may manifest differently depending on home or school environment. The scope of this study only considered the perspective of family achievement guilt, as described by participants, while those participants (except for Aliyah) were engaging with the college environment.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Member and peer checking were used to determine dependability and confirmability for this study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Participants were provided an opportunity to review their data (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) via hard copies delivered by postal mail. Additionally, the researcher engaged with an established expert (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015) throughout the study for purposes of gaining further perspective on the topic of family achievement guilt and awareness of personal biases that may influence the findings (Creswell, 2013).

## **Transferability**

The researcher intended to provide a thick, deep and rich description of the essence of the experience of family achievement guilt (Creswell, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the process of providing a thick, deep and rich description of the participants and setting as one that allows readers to make decisions regarding the applicability of the findings to other environments.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher ensured IRB approval from both Liberty University and GU had been granted prior to collecting any data for this study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher adhered to practices intended to protect the participants' identity including the use of pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013). Participants were made aware of the study's purpose, their participation was voluntary, and that participation could be terminated at any time (Creswell, 2013). The researcher acknowledged the topic of this study is potentially sensitive in nature and committed to take reasonable steps to ensure participants did not feel marginalized and were provided guidance to follow-up mental health services if deemed appropriate by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The data was stored both in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home and on a password protected computer (Creswell, 2013).

## **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the design for a qualitative phenomenological study on family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS students at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Participants were selected using criterion sampling. Data was collected through the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), interviews, and a focus group. Data analysis was conducted according to the Stevick-Colaizzi-

Keen method of analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). Methods to establish trustworthiness and credibility were employed. Attention was given to ensuring all aspects of the study were ethical.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to describe how family achievement guilt is experienced by first-generation college students (FGCS) at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. The transcendental method was employed for this research as the goal of the researcher was simply to report, versus interpret, the experiences of the study's participants (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Chapter Three described the processes and sequence for data collection and analysis which occurred over an approximate period of five months. Chapter Four reports the outcomes of those actions.

This chapter provides a description of each participant, using pseudonyms. Revealed themes and the processes for their development are explained. Answers to the guiding research questions are given. Three themes were uncovered during data analysis which are:

1. The Journey of Leaving
2. Dynamic Understanding of the College Experience
3. Pressure to Perform

These three identified themes provide answers to the guiding research questions for this transcendental, phenomenological study which are:

CQ: How do FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university describe their experiences with family achievement guilt?

SQ1: What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?

SQ2: How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?

SQ3: How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate their family achievement guilt?

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were recruited from Gladebury University (GU). GU is a public university located in a rural area within the mid-Atlantic region. While GU is a part of the state university system of several colleges and universities, admission requirements to attend GU are somewhat lower than those required by the flagship state university. This study used 11 participants. None of the participants lived in their family homes while attending college and all, except for one, lived either on or within walking distance of the campus. The remaining participant was self-supporting and, while she commuted from her hometown, she did not live with her family. All quotes provided by participants have been left in their original form, as professionally transcribed, regardless of grammatical errors.

As shown in Table 1, three of participants were male and eight were female. Two of the participants were freshmen, two were sophomores, three were juniors, and four were seniors. Four of the participants identified as White, five of the participants identified as African American, one participant identified as White with a parent of partial Hispanic heritage, and one participant identified as half African American and half Asian. For purposes of consistency in this reporting, all participants who self-identified as African American or Black were classified as African American according to the method in which GU reports its student demographics. Pseudonyms were assigned alphabetically according to the placement of each participant in the data collection process.



Table 1  
*Participant Demographic Data Summary*

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	Year in College	Major
Aliyah	19	AA	Female	Sophomore	Social Science
Bailey	20	W	Male	Junior	Finance
Charles	21	AA/A	Male	Senior	Cybersecurity
Dana	20	W	Female	Junior	Economics
Erikah	23	AA	Female	Senior	Education
Fiona	22	W	Female	Senior	Law and Society
Gina	21	W	Female	Senior	Early Childhood Ed
Hazel	18	AA	Female	Freshman	Psychology
Ike	18	AA	Male	Freshman	Exercise Science
Jessie	20	W/H	Female	Junior	Nursing
Kiera	19	AA	Female	Sophomore	Early Childhood Ed

*Note.* AA=African American. W=White. A=Asian. H=Hispanic.

### **Aliyah**

Aliyah is 19 years old and is a sophomore at GU. Aliyah self-identified as an African American female. She is majoring in social sciences with plans of staying at GU for five years to earn a master's degree in teaching. She was on the dean's list both semesters of her freshmen year and is active in several campus clubs and a sorority. Aliyah's goals are to return to the high school she graduated from to teach history and to eventually become a high school principal. She currently works as a residential assistant in the dorms to pay for her room and board.

Aliyah moved to the Maryland suburbs from Washington D.C. roughly halfway through her childhood. Her mother is a bar tender. Aliyah has two older sisters who are still at home and

who are unemployed. She indicated she does not know who her father is. The final familial relationship Aliyah identified was one with her grandmother who continues to reside in Washington D.C. The researcher perceives the grandmother is a significant support, both financially and emotionally, within Aliyah's family structure.

Aliyah attended middle and high school within the same neighborhood. She specified she was not a good student when she began high school and had a history of negative behaviors and academic outcomes throughout middle school. Aliyah credited her relationships with her high school teachers and a local youth organization director for her current success and referred to all of them as either "Mom" or "Dad" in conversation. Following the interview, in casual conversation, Aliyah shared her high school teachers and the youth director had pooled money to pay for her first year of college and to support her other needs such as providing her with a cell phone, paying for uniforms and other clothing necessary for her participation in clubs and her sorority. During school breaks, Aliyah has stayed with her former high school teachers instead of with her biological family. On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), Aliyah's responses indicated she was experiencing family achievement guilt in all three areas, but the areas of independent privilege and becoming different were most pronounced.

### **Bailey**

Bailey is 20 years old and is a junior at GU. Bailey self-identified as a White male and is the second oldest of four sons. He is majoring in economics with a minor in finance and is planning to move to California after graduation. He described his goal as a two-part process. First, he wants to become a real estate investor until he can save enough from his profits and then he would like to become an entrepreneur. Bailey is involved in a few campus clubs and is also

vice president of his fraternity. When asked how he was doing in school, Bailey explained: “I’ve maintained over a 3.0. As far as that goes, that was my goal, and I’m still at that. I would say I have done very well” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Bailey lives off campus in a house he shares with other students.

Bailey was raised in a tourist town approximately 45 minutes from GU. His parents are both retired entrepreneurs who Bailey explained gave him the option to do whatever he wanted with his life and followed through with support, which included hiring a life coach to help with the application process and to prepare him for the college choice he made. Bailey’s older brother, who did not attempt college, is a wind turbine technician and his two younger brothers are still in high school. Bailey indicated he does not know if either of his younger brothers will choose college and expanded with his opinion “If they decide to, I think that’s great. If they don’t want to, I think that’s their issue” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Bailey used the term “hardly ever” when asked how frequently he visits home. However, he also shared his little brothers often visit him at college which was supported by the fact one of them was visiting at the time the interview took place.

The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) indicated Bailey was experiencing moderate to high levels of guilt in the areas of becoming different and financial pressures. In the area of independent privilege, Bailey reported low levels of guilt for all items except for the two that asked about opportunities he is allowed to experience while his family cannot and the knowledge he has exposure to things learned in college his family does not. Bailey was the only participant who did not contribute to the focus group.

## **Charles**

Charles is 21 years old and a senior at GU. Charles self-identified as a male who is both Black and Asian with his mother being both Black and Asian and his father being Black. He is majoring in cybersecurity and is active in a couple of on-campus clubs as well as his fraternity. Charles is planning to join the military after graduation as a strategy for managing his student loan debt. Charles described his motivation for attending college as one that is fueled by his mother's desire for him to get a degree. Charles lives off campus in a house he shares with other students.

While the associations were not fully explored, Charles was raised around the military through connections of various extended family members and, later, his step-father who had served, but was discharged due to disability. His mother is a respiratory therapist. Charles indicated his biological father died prior to his birth and that he does not know exactly what his step-father does, but that he thinks his step-father might be attending college to become a nurse. Charles has an older sister who is 24 and who lives at home. Like several other members of Charles' extended family, his sister had attempted college without success. She currently works in retail.

Charles spent his high school years in the Baltimore suburbs. He described his high school preparation for college as inadequate with specific examples of behaviors in high school, such as not studying, that did not translate positively to college success. Prior to his freshman year of college, his family moved to Texas. Charles recollected he was sad when he arrived at college and saw the other families there with their children. Charles' family has returned to Maryland and currently lives in the same neighborhood he attended high school. Charles visits his family frequently and is in contact with them daily. Charles' responses led the researcher to

perceive his step-father does not maintain an active presence in the household. This perception is supported by anecdotal information Charles shared his sister had called him the morning of the interview wanting to know how to “work the lawnmower” (Interview, September 29, 2018).

Additionally, Charles was only able to provide vague details about his step-father and he did not mention his step-father as having a role within the family dynamic. The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) revealed Charles was experiencing moderate to high guilt in the areas of independent privilege and financial pressures and low to moderate guilt in the area of becoming different.

### **Dana**

Dana is 20 years old and is a junior at GU. She self-identified as a White female. Dana is majoring in economics with a minor in finance and plans to graduate a semester early. Dana did not specify career goals past graduation, but shared she had an internship with the government in Washington D.C. over the last summer break and is attempting to secure another internship position for next summer with a major retail chain headquartered in Wisconsin. When asked how she is doing in college, Dana explained her GPA is around a 3.0 and that is the best she can achieve due to a learning disability. She elaborated her college GPA is lower than her high school GPA, because her high school was small; “Everyone knew everybody. You know how to work things” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Dana participates in several on-campus clubs and is a member of an off-campus sorority. Dana lives off campus in a house she shares with other students.

Dana grew up in a rural area of Pennsylvania. She described her high school as a “cult” (Interview, September 29, 2018) and followed up with the explanation multiple generations of her family had attended the same high school which is typical for the area. Her graduating high

school class had fewer than 35 students with only a couple who went on to college. Dana associated her act of going away to college with leaving forever and described leaving as “kind of like a rebellious thing to do” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Dana’s father works on power line issues around the country; primarily traveling to where natural disasters have occurred. Her relationship with her father is one where she sees him approximately twice a year. Dana expressed she is more like her father than she is like her mother. Dana’s mother is a homemaker who “plays with her cats and goes to spin class. She does her me-time, all the time” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Dana’s older step-brother lives at home and attends a local nursing college after failed attempts at college away. Dana has a positive relationship with her grandmother whom she talks with several times a week. She was adamant she will not return to her hometown after graduation. The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) indicated Dana was experiencing moderate to high levels of guilt in the area of becoming different. Dana was experiencing no or low levels of guilt in the areas of independent privilege and financial pressures.

### **Erikah**

Erikah is 23 years old and a senior studying education at GU. She self-identified as an African American female. She stated she did not feel like she had a choice in terms of whether she would attend college; however, she was not specific about why she felt there was not a choice. When asked how she has been doing in college academically, Erikah did not provide specific GPA information, but said “Pretty well. Not the best student but not ... I haven't dropped out, so ...” (Interview October 5, 2018). Erikah indicated she was once a member of an unspecified campus organization, but she is no longer. However, she remains close with a circle

of friends she met through that experience and thinks of them as her new family members.

Erikah hopes to be a teacher after graduation. She lives in the dorms.

Erikah grew up in inner-city Baltimore amongst an extended family she said she was once close with. Her mother is an insurance case manager and her step-father tracks inventory at a medical facility. Her biological father has not been in her life. Erikah does not have any full brothers or sisters, but has several half-siblings on her father's side she does not know. Her extended family members were described as people who work mostly in trades and who have jobs like doing nails or event planning. "A lot of my family members have never left Baltimore, or if they have, they've never even been to this part of Maryland." (Interview, October 5, 2018). She further described her family relationship as one where she does not know them anymore and vice versa. Erikah speaks with her mother daily, but she is not often in contact with any other family members. Erikah indicated she will not return to Baltimore after graduation and is hoping for a career opportunity that will allow her to leave the country.

The Family Achievement Guilt Scale revealed Erikah was experiencing very high levels of guilt in all three areas: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. For all 27 items on the scale, Erikah indicated she experienced the highest levels of negative emotion except for moderate levels on two items in the area of independent privilege. Those two items dealt with the unfairness of the freedom she has and feeling bad about having a better life than her family. Erikah provided her full name to the researcher, but declined to provide contact information other than to request the researcher send a message through another participant (Aliyah) if the researcher had further questions.

**Fiona**

Fiona is 22 years old and a third semester senior at GU. She is majoring in law and society with a concentration in criminal justice. Additionally, she has three minors: women's studies, sociology, and psychology. When asked about her academic well-being, Fiona expressed college has been challenging due to a variety of personal struggles unrelated to college life. She elaborated with information she had been on academic probation and was nearly kicked out due to her grades and, in her junior year, she was the manager of the basketball team for a short time before losing the position due to her academic status. During her second semester of senior year, she used the opportunity to join a sorority as an incentive to get her grades up and is a current member of that group. Fiona expressed her motivation for attending college is to be able to get a higher paying job. Fiona lives in the dorms with her emotional support pit bull. She has been working at a hardware store to help pay her family's bills while she is at college. Her goal is a career in victims' services where she specifically hopes to serve in the areas of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Fiona grew up in central Maryland. During her freshman year of college, medical and financial issues necessitated her family move to another county in central Maryland. Her father did not earn a high school diploma and worked as an entrepreneur of a tire shop prior to having a stroke and becoming unable to work. Her mother has always worked in retail, but recently obtained a new job working at a title insurance company which will require another move her father is resisting due to not wanting to leave the rural area where they currently live. Fiona has two older brothers. One lives in Baltimore and the other is in New York City. Both went to college. After leaving home, neither remained in regular contact with their parents. Fiona described her brothers as those who told her she had to go to college to get out of the situation



she was in while her parents were more open to other choices. Fiona described her relationship with her grandparents as positive, but that she also feels guilty for not calling them as often as she should when they have contributed some to her college expenses. The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) indicated Fiona was experiencing high levels of guilt in the areas of independent privilege and financial pressures. In the area of becoming different, Fiona was experiencing low to moderate levels of guilt.

### **Gina**

Gina is 21 and a senior studying early childhood education at GU. Gina self-identified as a White female. Prior to attending GU, Gina completed a two-year program at her local, community college. She described her transition to GU as more stressful than her experience at the community college and further explained she struggles with depression and anxiety. When asked how she is doing academically, she replied “So far, pretty good. Right now, doing pretty good, now skipping classes. I have not gone to a complete full week of classes. I have at least skipped one class” (Interview, October 5, 2018). When asked why she is skipping classes, the response was her depression and anxiety over not being home to help has increased and there have been dosing issues with her medications for those conditions. Gina’s goal is to go on to earn a graduate degree in education and then to become a teacher. Gina explained her progress has been impacted by not passing all her classes and multiple failures on the Praxis (The Praxis Tests, 2018) tests. She is motivated to attend college by the insistence of her mother she had to get away from her home situation. Gina lives in the dorms with her emotional support cat she was very intentional about describing as a cat with legal protections. Gina further explained she has five other support animals, but none of those have been granted legal protections and she was, therefore, unable to bring them to college.

Gina grew up in central Maryland. Both of her parents served in the military, but did not retire in those careers. Her father works in customer service at a car dealership. Her mother, who had received some nursing training while in the military, works in a nursing related field on a military base. Gina was cared for throughout her childhood by her grandparents who had moved from several states away to provide childcare for her and her younger sister where they were young. While they once lived in separate homes, the failing health of her grandparents, combined with the financial struggles of her parents, warranted combining households. Gina described the situation as one where nobody is happy, but one that is necessary. When Gina is at home, she is responsible for many household tasks associated with the care of her grandparents and upkeep of the house. Gina indicated the communal house was recently remodeled in a configuration intended to allow space for Gina and her sister to live there as adults after college. Gina's younger sister is a high school student who is intending to go directly to a four-year college after graduation.

On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), Gina rated all 27 items at the highest level possible. This indicates Gina was experiencing high levels of guilt for all three areas: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. Gina's affect during data collection was such the researcher was concerned and then relieved when Gina indicated she was already receiving mental health services. Gina cried throughout the interview and sometimes paused to gather herself. The researcher wondered how the intersectionality of depression and anxiety with family achievement guilt have impacted Gina's college experience.

**Hazel**

Hazel is an 18 year-old freshman who self-identified as an African American female. She is majoring in psychology and hopes to become a psychologist or to work in the counseling field as a career. Hazel specified she would like to get a master's degree after her four years at GU, but has not decided anything specific in terms of that goal. She described her transition into college as "pretty easy" (Interview, November 5, 2018) and believes she is doing well in her first semester.

Hazel described sometimes feeling "low" (Interview, November 5, 2018) and dropping out of college is something she has casually considered. However, Hazel insisted "actually dropping out" (Interview, November 5, 2018) is not something she would do. She indicated she enrolled in college due to understanding she would need a college degree to obtain a job she would like to have in the future. Hazel relayed she has been a student at GU for approximately two months and that she had joined a club, but then decided to end her participation in that activity due to her perception it was getting in the way of her school work. She shared she had not really established any new relationships with peers or professors, but that she had one friend, Ike, who also participated in this study, from high school and that they mostly spent time only with each other.

Hazel's home is in Baltimore, Maryland. When at home, she lives with her grandmother and elementary aged brother. She has an older brother who lives in another state and who has a family of his own. She vaguely described her older brother as someone who works in a hospital, but admitted she does not know that much about him. Hazel's grandmother is a retired school aide. Additional adults in the household are an adult aunt of unspecified age and a 26 year-old

cousin. The aunt works for the public transportation system. Hazel described the cousin as someone who does not work and who “stays in the house” (Interview, November 5, 2018).

Only one other person in Hazel’s family, a cousin, has attempted college. Hazel recollected the cousin went to college and very quickly abandoned all her possessions there to return home. Hazel suspects her family was expecting she would do the same thing and they were surprised when she visited home and that she had not dropped out immediately after starting. Hazel visited home once during her first two months of college attendance.

Hazel described her role in the family as the one who babysits and tutors her younger brother. She communicates with her family several times per week, usually via phone calls. When her grandmother cannot help her younger brother with his homework, Hazel helps him over the phone. On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), Hazel was found to be experiencing low to moderate levels of guilt in all three areas: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures.

### **Ike**

Ike is 18 years old, a freshman, and described himself as an African American male. When Ike enrolled and began his attendance at GU, he was under the impression he would be studying nursing. However, after arriving, he discovered GU does not have a nursing program on campus and he would have to apply to study nursing at GU through a partnership with another local college. Ike decided that would be too difficult for him to pursue and changed his major to exercise science. When asked about his post-graduation goals, Ike indicated he would like to “go to grad school, or something, somewhere else” (Interview, November 5, 2018).

Ike expressed he had not formed any relationships with anyone on campus. However, he did note there are people on campus he knows from home, but they “don’t talk” (Interview,

November 5, 2018). Ike indicated his only relationship with another person at college is with Hazel who came to GU with him two months prior to the interview. He described that relationship as one where they encourage each other. Ike and Hazel did not have any classes together at the time of the interview. However, despite their differing majors, Ike and Hazel have signed up to be in all the same classes for the spring semester. Ike believed he was doing “fine” (Interview, November 5, 2018) academically, but also expressed he was surprised his professors did not really give him the attention he was expecting he would be given at college.

Ike mentioned he did find out about the different people who worked in the different offices on campus as a result of wanting to drop out and trying to figure out where to get permission to do that. Ike did not realize he could just go home without permission, but also expressed he was happy those people he met, through his quest to drop out, had encouraged him to stay. Ike visited home four times during his first two months of college. He used a bus service to get home.

Ike is originally from another state, but had spent his high school years living in Baltimore, Maryland. He is the second oldest of nine children. His older sister did not graduate high school and has moved to another state to live with her boyfriend. He was not certain about her life, but thought she might be working in the fast food industry. His seven younger siblings are all still at home and are either students or are too young to attend school. Ike’s mother works as an aide to elderly people in their homes. Ike reported he knows who his father is, but has not been in communication with him for several years. No other adults live in the house.

Ike described his family role as the one who provided babysitting or who ran errands for his mother. On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), it was revealed Ike was experiencing low to moderate levels of guilt in the area of

independent privilege, but moderate to high in the other two areas of becoming different and financial pressures. Ike explained he felt “not right” due to his not being at home to help his mother with the errands and that she has to “take the babies to Wal-Mart at midnight” (Interview, November 5, 2018) after working long hours. Approximately six weeks after the interview, Hazel relayed, via text, Ike decided not to return to GU after the winter break.

### **Jessie**

Jessie is 20 years old and a junior at GU. For the first two years of her college career, she played division one soccer on a partial scholarship at another university, but recently transferred to GU as a result of family and financial issues. Jessie was originally studying to become a physician’s assistant, but is now hoping to become a nursing major through a partnership GU has with another college. When asked about her other demographics, Jessie indicated she is female, but determining her race is difficult. She explained in Pennsylvania she is considered White, but in Texas she would be considered partially Hispanic due to her father being partially Hispanic. Her mother is White. She reported she personally considers herself White.

It was difficult for Jessie to describe how she feels she is doing in college due to many changes in her life that have taken place since her sophomore year. Because she has transferred schools and switched majors, her pathway to a four-year degree has been extended by a year. Jessie referred multiple times to her college experience as one that is comprised of two separate stories.

Jessie described her transition into the first university as stressful due to realizing she had lived a sheltered life and did not fit in with her soccer teammates. Her experience with the soccer team was so stressful she decided to not play during her sophomore year. She described her parents as supportive during those two years and provided examples of that support such as

phone calls every morning and every night and that they would drive 90 minutes, one-way, to visit her and to bring her food twice per week. However, her parents' support became non-existent when they realized she was changing and doing what Jessie termed "adult things" (Interview, November 6, 2018). Jessie provided the example she had created a social media account during her sophomore year. She explained they were upset when she did not always remember to text them "Good morning" and "Good night" when she was at college. Her parents' discovery Jessie had started dating between her sophomore and junior years was the breaking point for them and they notified her they would no longer be supporting her to include withholding their signatures on her college loans.

They told me...You can join the military, you can go to another college, you can drop out, you can go right into the workforce, you can get married, you can move to another country. We don't care. You do whatever you want to do. (Interview, November 6, 2018)

Limited resources forced Jessie to transfer to GU. She was accepted as a member of the soccer team and seemed hopeful she would be granted admission to the nursing program partnership for the spring semester. Jessie pays rent to live in a house her parents own an hour away from GU. She works approximately 60 hours per week, spread over three different jobs, to pay her tuition and living expenses. She conveyed she is confident she will be successful at becoming a nurse and then will pursue graduate school after a few years of working in the field. Jessie was previously heavily involved with community service, but can no longer participate in those activities due to her full schedule and need for money to live. She tearfully expressed multiple times her deep regret she can no longer volunteer.

Jessie is the oldest of three children. She has a teenaged brother and a six-year old sister. She very directly clarified her family is not religious, but her parents are strict. While she attended public school, her brother and sister have been homeschooled. Jessie's mother was previously a military trained nurse and her father is a diesel mechanic. Her parents live in Pennsylvania on a farm that is owned by her grandparents who live on the edge of the property. Jessie is no longer allowed to visit the farm or her family members at their homes.

Jessie expressed the only thing she believes she did wrong was that she grew up and could no longer be the child her parents wished for her to remain. She explained she is concerned about her brother in that environment. Her brother blamed her for ruining the family and has asked that she no longer try to communicate with him. Jessie continues to text her parents "Good morning" and "Good night" every day. They do not usually respond. "They were happy I went to college, but are not happy I changed" (Interview, November 6, 2018).

On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) Jessie was found to be experiencing moderate to high levels of guilt in all three areas: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. However, she verbally indicated while completing the instrument she feels higher levels of guilt in the area of becoming different. Jessie cried several times throughout the interview. Additionally, Jessie arrived at the interview with a large blanket and explained she often sleeps in the library when she does not have a class.

### **Kiera**

Kiera is 19 and is a sophomore studying early childhood education at GU. Kiera self-reported she is an African American female. Her goal is to become a teacher and she stated she will probably have to teach where she came from until she can save up enough money to move



away. Kiera would like to live “far away from home” (Interview, November 6, 2018) in her adult life and she identified Atlanta, Georgia as the place she would like to go.

Kiera reported she is doing “okay” (Interview, November 6, 2018) in college. Her transition was a little bit stressful with college being exciting at first and then reality set in. She indicated she is not very social and is not really involved with very many people on campus. She identified two relationships, one with her advisor and the other with her roommate, she relies on. Kiera has not joined any clubs or other extracurricular activities with the explanation she believes those things will be a distraction to her studies.

Kiera grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington D.C. She is the oldest of five children. Her mother sells medical supplies and her father works in a retail warehouse. Kiera described her role in the family as “the third parent” (Interview, November 6, 2018). She explained she was previously responsible for making sure the younger children had been bathed and fed at night. Now that she is away at college, she calls her sister every day to make sure the sister has taken care of her younger siblings’ physical needs. Kiera also works out of her dorm room doing hair and frequently sends home some of that money to pay for the extra things her siblings want. She explained it is difficult to be the third parent from a distance.

The Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) revealed Kiera was experiencing moderate to high levels of guilt in the areas of independent privilege and some areas of becoming different. Lower levels of guilt appeared in the area of financial pressures. Approximately six weeks after the interview, Kiera sent a message to the researcher, via text, she would likely not be returning to GU due to pregnancy.

## **Results**

The research questions were developed with the theoretical framework, Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance in mind. Festinger (1962) maintained individuals have an innate need for consistency in their lives and will seek to resolve inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions. Festinger believed individuals experiencing cognitive dissonance would experience increasing levels of discomfort until that resolution occurred. While the existing literature is unclear, the researcher perceives family achievement guilt is an emotion experienced as the result of dissonance.

Festinger's (1962) theory is viewed by the researcher as an explanation of sequential events. First, the individual experiences dissonance. Second, the individual, who perceives the experience as negative, will identify and analyze factors contributing to that experience. Lastly, the individual will employ strategies to resolve the dissonance. The sub-questions in this research were designed to represent each of these three events within the experience of dissonance resolution.

The researcher acknowledges not all who experience dissonance will experience it at the same levels. Additionally, the researcher acknowledges not all who experience dissonance will seek to resolve it within the same timeframe. Regardless, the actions of the data analysis focused on the basic premise the participants who were experiencing family achievement guilt were also seeking to resolve it. The researcher wanted to know what was causing the family achievement guilt, how the impacts were felt, and what each participant was doing towards resolution.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to analyzing any of the participants' data, and consistent with the modified Stevick-Collaizzi-Keen method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher collected data on herself

using the same data collection methods as the study. The purpose for doing this was for the researcher to get a full description of her own experience as part of an effort to bracket herself out of the study. Appendix G contains the data for the interview and focus questions from this exercise. This bracketing caused the researcher to realize her concept of the family achievement guilt experience has been influenced more broadly by additional factors related to upward mobility than college attendance. Throughout the analysis process, it became clear the experience of the researcher was entirely different than those of her participants. Key differences included the researcher's parents had already made the initial efforts to pursue class mobility, the researcher attended college non-traditionally while serving in the military which had already separated the researcher from her family, and she and her college peers shared similar backgrounds and professional status as the researcher's college experience occurred on a satellite campus that catered to the military community. With those understandings, the researcher believes she was granted the opportunity to view the experiences of the participants more objectively than she previously would have been able to do.

The processes for data analysis focused on the sequential nature of Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance. As all participants had already been identified as experiencing family achievement guilt, the researcher was concerned about identifying the causes, impacts, and remediation efforts applicable to each participant. Data was collected using the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), structured interviews, and a focus group. Each of the sources of data were reviewed several times prior to any coding occurring.

After reviewing each source of data multiple times for each individual participant, the researcher engaged in a process that involved separating and recombining the data for purposes

of identifying how participants responded both individually and as a group. The 27 items from the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) were placed in a table to provide a visual representation to the researcher how each participant responded and the overall responses to each item as shown in Table 2. This table allowed the researcher to view which areas each participant experienced the strongest level of emotions. Additionally, the researcher was able to easily observe which items on the instrument yielded the highest level of responses from the group. Items 25 and 27 had the strongest level of responses from the group. Closely following behind were items eight, nine, and 15.

Item 25 asked about feelings of pressure to do well in order to not let the family down. All except Jessie and Ike responded to indicate they felt the highest levels of pressure for this item. Item 27 asked about the level of participants' feelings of sadness regarding their families not being exposed to the things the participants were learning in college. Only Charles and Kiera indicated they did not experience strong levels of sadness for item 27. Item eight asked about sadness related to participants having more opportunity. Except for Dana, Hazel, and Ike, all reported high levels of sadness related to opportunity. Item nine asked about the level of worry participants experienced in terms of not being at home. Baily, Dana, and Ike indicated they experienced low levels of worry while the remaining eight participants indicated their experiences with this type of worry were greater. Item 15 asked about feelings of frustration experienced by participants when their families do not understand their college experience. Only Fiona, Charles, and Ike reported they do not experience high levels of this type of frustration.

Table 2  
*Family Achievement Guilt Scale Responses*

	Independent Privilege Items													Becoming Different Items							Financial Pressures Items						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Aliyah	1	3	3	4	1	2	4	4	3	3	1	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	1	1	1	4	2	4
Bailey	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	1	1	1	1	3	1	4	3	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	4	3	4
Charles	2	3	4	4	1	1	2	3	4	1	1	1	1	3	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	4	3	4	4	3	1
Dana	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	4	3	4	3	1	1	4	0	0	0	4	0	4
Erikah	2	2	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Fiona	2	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	4	4	4	4	1	4
Gina	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Hazel	2	2	2	1	2	4	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	1	2	1	2	3	1	4	1	3
Ike	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	2	2	4	4
Jessie	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	4	2	2	3	2	4	2	3	3	3
Kiera	1	2	4	3	1	1	1	3	4	1	1	3	2	3	4	1	1	4	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	1	1

The data from both the interviews and focus group were organized in a similar fashion. First, the data for each individual participant was reviewed multiple times. Then, the researcher separated and recombined all participants' answers according to each question. This allowed the researcher to see at once how all participants responded to a single question.

The process of coding began with the researcher creating categories for codes to be assigned. As the researcher was concerned about the causes, impacts, and remediation efforts for each participant, three categories, one for each concern, were created. The researcher then read the transcripts for the interviews and focus group line by line to identify statements that could be organized according to the predetermined categories. The researcher used three different colored markers to indicate which statements corresponded with each category. Statements the researcher perceived were contributors to family achievement guilt were highlighted in yellow.

An orange marker was used to identify statements that described impacts felt by each participant. Remediation efforts were identified with a green marker. What quickly became evident to the researcher was significant overlap existed between the causes for the guilt and its impacts as perceived by each individual participant. For example, in some cases, participants described the impacts of their guilt as also causes for their guilt. Additionally, there was some overlap between remediation efforts and causes for guilt. For example, a common remediation effort included limiting home visits to minimize in-person negative interactions between the participants and their families which then became a new contributor to the guilt for some participants. In all cases where overlap was determined, those statements were assigned to all categories the researcher perceived as applicable. It is worthwhile to mention the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) focuses more on the causes and impacts of the guilt and the researcher was not able to identify individual remediation efforts from it.

Once the initial codes were developed, the researcher sought to reduce them by combining similar codes. Codes applicable to only one or two participants were discarded. After reduction, the codes for causes were categorized according the three categories provided on the Family Achievement Guilt Scale; independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. The codes for impacts and remediation efforts were further reduced into categories determined by the researcher. Table 3 illustrates that reduction as it corresponds to the three sub-questions.

Table 3  
*Interviews and Focus Group Code Reduction*

Sub-Question	Code Categories
SQ1: What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Independent privilege</li> <li>-Becoming different</li> <li>-Financial pressures</li> </ul>
SQ2: How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Changed family dynamics</li> <li>-Negative emotions</li> <li>-Unrealistic expectations</li> <li>-Two separate worlds</li> </ul>
SQ3: How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate their family achievement guilt?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Thoughts about dropping out</li> <li>-Increase or decrease of home visits</li> <li>-Constant phone communication</li> <li>-Manages responsibilities from a distance</li> <li>-Maintains two worlds</li> <li>-Finds “new family”</li> <li>-Stays busy</li> <li>-Personal reflection for why they are there</li> <li>-Future plans do not include returning home</li> <li>-Justifies family is happy with the situation</li> <li>-Engages in activities towards independence</li> </ul>

### **Theme Development**

Throughout the data analysis, the researcher was mindful of the sequential nature of Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance as it related to where the participants were in their college experience. The study included 11 participants. Two (Hazel and Ike) of the participants were freshmen. Two (Aliyah and Kiera) of the participants were sophomores. Three (Bailey, Dana, and Jessie) were juniors. Four (Charles, Erikah, Gina, and Fiona) were seniors. The researcher used imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) after the phenomenological reduction to

uncover themes. Imaginative variation involves considering the data from a variety of perspectives and frames of reference (Moustakas, 1994). This process revealed three primary themes with seven sub-themes. The three primary themes are 1) the journey of leaving; 2) dynamic understanding of the college experience; and 3) pressure to perform. Each of these primary themes contained two or three sub-themes as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

*Themes and Sub-Themes of Family Achievement Guilt as Experienced by FGCS*

Themes	Sub-Themes
The Journey of Leaving	-Physically Leaving the Family -Figuratively Leaving the Family
Dynamic Understanding of the College Experience	-Evolving Concept of Opportunity -Progression of employment of effective coping strategies
Pressure to Perform	-College as a Family Experience -Previous Family Failures and Being “The One” -Putting One’s Self “Out There”

### **The Journey of Leaving**

A pattern emerged through the stories of participants the college experience could be described as a journey for them. This was especially true for the older participants who had progressed further in college and had more complete stories to tell in terms of their college successes and anticipated graduations. Two types of leaving surfaced; physically leaving and figuratively leaving.

**Physically leaving.** The act of physically leaving is just as it sounds. Participants physically left their homes and families to attend college. They no longer lived at home. All participants recalled their physically leaving home as mostly a positive experience for both them



and their families. Hazel recalled “They was happy for me. They are still happy for me” (Interview, November 5, 2018).

However, participants also shared their families sometimes struggled with negative emotions during the initial separation. Bailey reported his parents expressed worry along with their happiness he was attending college. “When I started, they were pretty much just like ... They were kind of worried because they didn't know what to expect either. They were kind of checking up on my all the time, freaking out” (Interview, September 29, 2018). Except for Charles whose family had moved to Texas and for Aliyah who had already physically left the home of her family, all participants experienced being brought to college by their extended families. Dana shared her family hid their tears as they left her at college.

Yeah. No, everyone was there. Yeah. They were happy to drop me off. They were proud of me, but at the same time, they were like, "Why can't you just go to Penn State?" which is like 20 minutes from where I'm from. I'm pretty sure they all cried leaving me at my dorm, if I remember correctly. My mom put on her sunglasses and then left the building. My grandma also came. (Interview, September 29, 2018)

Aliyah recollected her family did not know how to respond when she told them she had arrived at college.

Most were excited. Some were, I feel like they don't know how to react to that because none of them have even been to college. It was kind of like every time I was like, "Hey, I did this, I moved in," they were all like, "Oh great." It was more or less exciting, than more, I'm excited for you kind of thing, from time to time. (Interview, July 25, 2018)

All participants expressed their families were genuinely proud they had decided to attend college even if their families did not understand why they had decided to attend college.

As for the participants, themselves, a myriad of emotions was experienced when they physically left home for college. Most expressed emotions of homesickness, anxiety, and excitement. Most also indicated there was a period of time between their initial feelings and those after they had gotten settled in. Kiera recalled “I didn’t stay excited the whole semester. No. Then it just sunk in like reality or like a little bit of frustration, I felt a little bit of confidence more was needed” (Interview, November 5, 2018). Hazel also described her transition as one that involved what several participants had termed “reality”. “It was pretty easy. Like, I don't know. It was easy. But, then it was harder like reality. I don’t know. I just knew I had to be here and then it was ok” (Interview, November 6, 2018). All participants reported they called home to speak with their families when they felt negative emotions.

Physically leaving home caused some participants to feel guilty they had abandoned duties associated with their roles in the family as their families sometimes expected them to maintain the same roles they had while they were still at home. Both Charles and Aliyah explained they were the peacemakers in their families and they would often receive calls, while at school, from family members who expected them to resolve family disputes. Kiera described her role as “the third parent” (Interview, November 6, 2018). She explained her responsibilities at home included caring for her four younger siblings and she was the one who ensured the youngest of them had been fed and bathed. She expressed she frequently worried her next oldest sibling was not taking those responsibilities seriously and that she called nightly to verify the younger children had been cared for. Hazel was previously responsible for helping her younger brother with his homework. She maintained she did not feel guilty about not being there to do that, but also admitted to doing his homework with him over the phone on a regular basis at

night. Ike, who had seven younger siblings at home, shared he did not feel right about not being physically there to help his mother.

They used to come to me, "Can you help me with my homework? And do this and do that." Even on my down time I was still helping. I feel like I do, because when I'm home I still clean up, do this, do that. Anything she asks me, like, "Can you drive to the store? Go to the market. Can you do this?" Yeah, I can, and just anything she asks, I still do it. She works a lot, or sometimes she does a lot of over time, so she'll have to go to Walmart like 12:00 in the morning while everyone's asleep, or she takes the baby still. I don't know. I just feel down inside. I'm not there for her or something. (Interview, November 5, 2018)

Fiona recounted her two older brothers had abandoned their parents after college graduation. "They moved away and never came back" (Interview, October 5, 2018). She expressed guilt she was the last child and the only daughter and that she had also left them home alone to attend college. She further explained she felt guilty when she did not return home enough due to having too much work to do at school. Gina, whose family lives with her grandparents, struggled to define her role in the family beyond her contributions to the general cleaning and upkeep of the house. Gina was distracted many times during the interview by remembering her cleaning responsibilities and providing very detailed descriptions of them. Gina expressed several times she felt guilty she was not physically at home to help clean the house for her elderly grandparents.

The data showed the emotional impacts of leaving to attend college for the younger participants were primarily described in terms of the participants physically leaving. As participants progressed through college, impacts related to figuratively leaving the family were

increasingly mentioned. The researcher was intrigued most of the participants had described negative emotions about being physically absent from home, but only one indicated they would return home after college. That participant (Aliyah) had already physically left her family home and resided with people not biologically related to her when she visited home. The researcher perceives Aliyah's intent to return home had more to do with returning to a familiar geographic area with friends than it had to do with her biological family. Of further interest to the researcher is the idea all the participants believed their families were expecting they would come home to live after college even when some of the participants had shared doing so was not in their plans. Not all participants had shared their post college plans with their families.

**Figuratively leaving.** The concept of figuratively leaving is a little more complex than that of physically leaving. It is more difficult to measure. Unlike physically leaving that can be measured by whether someone is physically in a place, figuratively leaving is more abstract and, in the case of this study, resultant of changing ideologies and relationships.

Aliyah was the only underclassman participant to articulate leaving as something other than being related to physical presence. During the focus group, Aliyah introduced the idea of "achieving over the family limit and having new ideas" (Focus Group, October 5, 2018).

Erikah's contribution was similar.

Most families share common experiences and morals. These things bond them in ways that blood cannot. When one of them leaves and obtains experiences outside of those that the main family has it can sometimes make the student feel like an outsider amongst their family members. How can you go back to where you were? How can you be close with them again when that change has happened? (Focus Group, October 6, 2018)

When asked how college was changing them, most participants expressed they were becoming more independent and have changed the way they think about things as the result of being in a new environment with different types of people. Gina explained her family resented these changes in her.

Sometimes they're surprised. Sometimes they're like, my grandma. She's like, "Oh you think you know everything because you go to college now." I think they are happy, but I also think they aren't because I guess they think I'm being a smart ass but when I say something and, they'll say something and it's completely stupid, but it's in my career field. They'll say something about a child doing something and they'll be like, oh the child's doing it because ... They'll use the term retarded as politically completely incorrect and I'll say don't use that term. It's politically not correct. And they'll just keep using like my father just because of the way he was raised and I hate that term and I'm completely against it and he's like, "You think you know everything blah, blah, blah." And he goes on and on... (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Jessie, who transferred to GU after her parents became upset with her for changing and refused to sign her college loans for her to remain at her first university, lamented more than once the impossible situation she was in. "My parents wanted me to go to college, but they wanted me to stay the same" (Interview, November 6, 2018). In response to her family's actions towards her, which included banning her from the family house, Jessie began to pursue additional activities towards independence with intentionality. She found a new college. She changed majors. She was working, at the time of data collection, three different jobs to support herself. Still, she was consumed by guilt over what had happened between her and her family as a result of her becoming an adult while attending college. While she might be willing to

physically return home if her parents allowed her to do so, she cannot because they are not accepting of her adult-like thoughts and behaviors associated with her increasing independence. She does not know how to return to the person she was.

I grew up and they weren't prepared for that and when I didn't get ahold of them at like midnight to tell them a good night, they freaked out. I didn't have an iPhone until I graduated high school, had a flip phone, a little slide phone. She found out I have a Facebook, because I made one on my birthday, which was this past May when I turned 20. My parents they just told me that I'm unstable, that's just too unstable for us to support, your behaviors. It's just a part of accepting myself for who I am and I don't think of myself as a bad person, but if I think too much about it with my family, I just think I'm awful, so then it's very hard. Like I grew up and became an adult at school. Sometimes I feel really good and other times I feel absolutely terrible. So, I just lay on the floor of my house and just kind of zone out for a while. I do feel a lot of guilt, like my brother told me that I basically fucked up my life. He said, "You had everything and now look at you, you're having to work all the time and stress about things that before you didn't have to worry about like food." It's hard that I've disappointed them so much, I'm disappointed in myself, that I've disappointed them, Like it's a lot of burden to hold. (Interview, November 6, 2018)

All the participants who acknowledged they had figuratively left the family in terms of new ways of thinking, increased knowledge, and other changes that were incongruent with where their families were in those same figurative areas also expressed, to some extent, the impossibility of returning to whatever state they were in previous to having their minds expanded. While they often expressed sadness about it, either during the interview or on item 27

of the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), none expressed they would like to return to where they figuratively were prior to their college attendance. In general, all the participants understood this type of growth was a purposeful part of the college experience. However, it seemed neither the participants nor their families anticipated it would occur prior to it happening. While most of the participants did not articulate how this figurative leaving might impact them after college, both Aliyah and Erikah speculated the experience of this type of growth would continue and it would cause them further separation from their families for the remainder of their lives. “The guilt present within the student doesn't end with the student's education” (Focus Group, October 5, 2018).

### **Dynamic Understanding of the College Experience**

The results of the data analysis indicated participants gained a greater understanding of their college experiences as they progressed. There were two sub-themes for this theme which included an evolving concept of opportunity and progression of employment of effective coping strategies the longer they remained at college.

**Evolving concept of opportunity.** An unexpected result for the researcher, during data analysis, was the realization participants did not all view the concept of opportunity in the same way. For some participants, the concept of opportunity was related to factors such as the freedoms provided by public transportation or being able to eat whenever they wanted to eat. Other participants viewed the concept more broadly in terms of future opportunities they would have as a result of attending college.

When asked about the emotions she felt when she compared the opportunities she had at college with those her family had at home, Gina's response indicated she thought about the concept of opportunity as something applicable to the current moment or to hobby-like activities.

I feel like there's not a lot of opportunities at home for sure. Here I can walk to anything, at home I have to drive everywhere, so it just ... I don't know, there's no...I mean my family members are a lot older so my sister has a lot of opportunities, because she's still in high school. So she has more opportunity kind of than I do, but when it comes to my mom and my dad, my dad is just too lazy to do any kind of opportunities. My mom on the other hand would love to do the opportunities, she would go on field trips. She would do sports. She would do all of those things. My sister would too and my grandmother would also, if she was physically able to. My grandfather, no, he would just sit in front of the TV. My dad would probably just nap. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

When asked the same question about emotions she felt regarding opportunity, Hazel also responded to indicate she considered the concept of opportunity in terms of the current moment while she equated opportunity with the availability of things to do.

Like here is different from being at home. I don't know, like it's different. The scenery's different, the people here. How do I explain? The best way I can explain it is being back home is more stuff to do...than being here. There's stuff to do, but it's not, since it's not like a city environment so and then I don't have a car up here so it's like, it limits certain things that I can do. (Interview, November 5, 2018)

Ike did not initially understand the question and asked the interviewer to elaborate and then explain what was meant by opportunity. Ike finally provided his sister had “passed up a good opportunity” (Interview, November 5, 2018) and that his mother was not able to take advantage of the opportunity for college due to getting pregnant. However, he maintained she still had the opportunity to attend college. Ike did not include his thoughts on how his mother could take advantage of the opportunity when she is a single mother with nine children to take



care of. Ike's concept of opportunity included his eating schedule preferences and he indicated he had more opportunity at home where he could eat whenever he wanted.

My mother, unfortunately didn't finish because she got pregnant, but she still has the opportunity to go back and finish. My brothers and sisters I know they'll go. At home I get to lay in my big head. I get to wake up to my siblings. Wake up to good breakfast. Well I can eat anything I want to when I wanted to. Here it is a specified plan. You get different times. You swipe your card and it's a different meal. I have a 14 meal plan a week. They're college student, you eat a lot. When you go to the refrigerator, you get something, you want to go back, and it's just ...more opportunity at home. (Interview, November 5, 2018)

In contrast, Fiona, a senior, understood the concept of opportunity to be something that exists beyond what is physically available in the current moment. She articulated the lack of opportunity had impacted her parents in the past, in the present, and will in the future. She compared her opportunities with those of her parents in that context. Unlike Gina, Hazel, or Ike, Fiona was able to identify negative emotions she felt, such as sadness, anger, and frustration when she considered her opportunities in light of her parents' opportunities. "I can't help but feel guilty when I think about all the things that I am experiencing or will experience that my parents could not." (Focus Group, November 8, 2018)

My parents don't have a lot of opportunity. My dad didn't get a high school diploma, so most of the jobs that he could've gotten he's automatically disqualified for because he doesn't have a high school diploma. My mom is ... I wish she would've went to college. She would've been so great. She loves kids, but she can't be a nurse because she doesn't have nursing background. She can't run a daycare because she doesn't have a business

degree. She can't be a vet tech because, again, no... education for that, but she ... If they were to teach her how to do that she would learn quickly because she's a fast learner. Then, just because I have this piece of paper for four and a half years of school, I can make five times more than what my parents can make. I don't know. It's, like, not fair, that just because I paid thousands of dollars for this one piece of paper that I have this whole other door that's open, whereas my mom is ... She's a fast learner, she's not illiterate. She's pretty comprehensive about most things. If you taught her something she'd be able to learn it. I think that should be good enough for a higher-paying job than retail. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Erikah's concept of opportunity was somewhere in the middle of considering it as something just in the current moment and something that impacted the past, present, and future.

It's really sad. A lot of my family members have never left Baltimore, or if they have, they've never even been to this part of Maryland. They don't know this exists. I'm just like, "Yeah, I'm here. Every day I get to see this beautiful campus. I get to meet all of these new people and learn all these different things," and they're just stuck. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Items eight and 11 on the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) asked about emotions and guilt regarding the participants' opportunities as compared to those opportunities their families have. Item eight specifies the emotion of sadness while item 11 asks about anger. Eight of the participants indicated high levels of sadness while only four indicated high levels of anger. In general, lower levels of both emotions relative to opportunity comparison were felt by the younger participants. The higher

levels of these emotions were primarily expressed by those participants who had progressed to their junior and senior years.

**Increased employment of effective coping strategies.** All participants provided responses to describe how college was a challenging experience for them. The four primary codes assigned to sub-question two which asked about impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives, four primary codes developed including changed family dynamics, negative emotions, unrealistic expectations, and two separate worlds.

During the interviews, both freshmen (Hazel and Ike) and one sophomore (Kiera) indicated they were not involved in campus activities and had not made appreciable efforts to establish new relationships at college. All three of these participants described how they believed becoming involved with campus activities and forming new relationships would distract from their academic responsibilities.

Friends, I try to keep it small. It's just too much to deal with but I've made a friend. Me and my roommate are really close. This is our second year of roommating together. I'm not really dealing with any of the extra curriculum at the moment only because if I get off task I know I'll probably end up focusing more on that rather than academics and I know that's not good for me right now. (Kiera, Interview, November 6, 2018)

Hazel and Ike had attended the same high school and had found each other at GU. Both indicated this relationship was essentially the only relationship either of them had at college. They spent all their free time together and tried to keep each other accountable to attending classes which both had already began skipping.

She helps me. Some days I'm not willing to go to class, she's like, "You got this friend. You can finish strong." Just like today she didn't want to go to math. I said, "You got it.

You can go. You can go. You could finish. It's only 50 minutes." (Ike, Interview, November 5, 2018)

The researcher perceived Hazel felt more responsibility for Ike than Ike felt for Hazel. During the interviews, both Hazel and Ike explained how they had signed up for all the same classes for the spring semester to help each other get to class. While Hazel verbalized this type of solution was probably not going to work throughout their entire college experience due to their differing majors, Ike did not seem to realize the problem associated with their problem solving. Ike had also already visited home four times during his first two months of college. As it turned out, the strategies employed by Hazel and Ike were not enough for Ike. At the end of the fall semester, Hazel texted to say Ike had decided not to return to college after the break.

The frequency of visiting home waned for all participants, except Charles, as they progressed. All participants, except for Ike who only attended college for one semester, described a situation where they initially visited home more frequently and described how they anticipated those visits. However, these participants also mostly indicated they were ready to return to college shortly after arriving at home. Except for Charles, all of the junior and senior participants indicated they very rarely visit home or do not visit at all. Most participants indicated they will continue to limit visits after college. Only one participant, Aliyah, a sophomore, has plans to return home after college. However, Aliyah was also the only participant who does not live with her family when she is at home. The remaining participants were all adamant they will not return and will settle elsewhere. Dana had already demonstrated that intention when she took an internship out of state after her sophomore year and has submitted applications for future internships across the country. Erikah is hoping to move "far away" (Interview, October 5, 2018) with hopes she will have an opportunity to make a life

outside of the country. Gina described how her family had reconfigured the house so she and her sister could live there as adults even though she was not planning to return. Several participants indicated their families were unaware they have no intentions to return home after college.

Reasons given for why participants chose to limit visits varied. However, most of the reasons focused on the avoidance of specific stressors the participant experienced while visiting home.

It's Frustrating. Very ... because my mom, she would be overpowering. She's like, when I'm home, it's kind of like a totally different scenario. I have like no freedom back there. Then I have all the freedom here. I almost never go home just because it's very frustrating. I lived in D.C. all summer long, and it was like the best time in my life. I came back for a week, and we ended up fighting over something that like ... It was really dumb, but it's just ... It's because she wants to control everything. When I do go home, my mom, we'll go get our nails done. We'll try to bond or whatever, but we both have very different views on everything, so it's very difficult to not argue, I should say. My mom, she gets frustrated because she can see that I'm open to more things. I want to go travel, and I want to go do things that are outside of her little bubble. She even calls it a bubble. But also the other day, she calls and says, "You're only allowed to find a job that's like a two-hour radius from (town deleted for anonymity)." I said no. I was like, "No, you're not doing that." I said, "I'm getting a job wherever I want, whenever I want." (Dana, Interview, September 29, 2018)

A common problem for the participants was they no longer felt a part of their families and this realization caused them to experience negative feelings when they visited home. Most of the older participants indicated this as a reason they chose to not visit home as often as they

previously had. Aliyah used the word “alien” (Interview, July 25, 2018) in both the interview and focus group responses. Erikah described how the loss of common experiences had caused her to feel separation.

I feel like we've all changed and because we weren't together to see the changes happen, we're just not used to it. When I was close with them I was like, "Oh yeah, we're in this tight-knit group. We ..." not like feel the same things, just like, "Oh, hey. You remember that time when ..." and I remember it. But now it's like if I go to this event, I wasn't there the last time they made this memory, so I'm like, "Oh, okay. I'm just here." It's really upsetting. I feel sad about it. It's like, "Yeah, they're my family." I would love to know them and be there for them, but I just don't know how to anymore. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Fiona described the guilt she felt for not going home as often as her parents wished she would. Her parents did not understand her academic workload, combined with her job, did not allow enough time for frequent visits.

My mom asks me at least once a month, "When are you coming back? Are you coming back anytime soon?" My grandma asks me, she's like, "Are you going to go see your mom?" I'm like- My mom's voice ... I can tell that it changes over the phone, and then I feel bad and guilty because you can hear that she's upset that I'm not coming back. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Fiona described how she had joined a sorority as a motivator to keep her grades up. As a result, she found herself in the position of having to sometimes choose between her parents and sorority events. She explained she feared she would not graduate without the encouragement her sorority

membership provided, but also felt guilt for choosing her sorority over her parents. Additionally, Fiona admitted she felt guilt over choosing to avoid the financial situation at home.

When they ... When I talk to my mom, she's like, "We don't have food at the house if you come home. We need to go food shopping, but I don't have money for food." Like, do you need me to buy food? She's like, "No, you don't have to," but then I feel obligated to because you just said that you don't have any, so if I come home we're not going to have anything to eat. Then, up here, I have to feed my dog, I have to feed myself, I have to put gas in my car. I have to pay for dog food. Managing my personal money with the money that I want to give to my parents is kind of hard, just because my mom kind of guilt trips me into buying food and stuff. She doesn't mean to, but she does. It's just hard.

(Interview, October 5, 2018)

Jessie, who had been banned from visiting home as the result of what she believed was the crime of becoming an adult while attending college shared her experience.

I was very integral part of the team of my family. I was everybody's girl, my dad could come and talk with me and be goofy, my mom could confide in me because she was like my best friend, my brother, he was also like my best friend, we would talk about my parents and like kind of like how absurd their rules were and I was like, listen, when you get to high school this is how it's going to be like, you know, like it's really hard, it's going to be easier for you than it was for me. And now I am not a part of the family. I feel terrible about it. For leaving the kids in that situation. My brother hates me for ruining the family. (Interview, November 6, 2018)

Despite all participants, except Charles, limiting home visits, all participants maintained daily contact with their parents and usually other extended family members. All participants

used their phones as the primary method of communication. Some participants were in contact with their families more than once per day. Gina reported calling her mother at least twice per day. “My mom is my best friend, so I call her a lot. She just puts the most stress on me. She doesn't mean to” (Interview, October 5, 2018). Dana explained sometimes she felt guilty for not wanting to talk to her family as much, but that she did it for them.

My grandma probably calls me like every two days. My mom calls me every day, but sometimes I just don't answer. I'll usually text her every few days though, just so she knows I'm alive, kind of. I feel guilty about it, but sometimes it be like that. Primary, I'd like to just text her and be like, "Hey, this happened today," or whatever. But I will call her after class sometimes. (Interview, September 29, 2018)

Despite the lack of campus involvement described by three of the four underclass participants, the final underclassman, Aliyah, and all of the upperclassmen, except Erikah, experienced extensive campus involvement. Most were members of fraternities or sororities, one played sports, and most were actively involved in clubs associated with their majors. All these participants credited their active campus involvement with their college success. All the participants, including Hazel, Ike, and Kiera, mentioned staying busy was important towards not feeling negative emotions. What evolved the longer they remained at college was the methods they employed to stay busy.

Erikah indicated she had created a “new family” (Interview, October 5, 2018) to provide the support she needed and clarified she kept that strategy secret from her real family so she would not feel guilty for having her new family. Both Charles and Jessie indicated they felt guilt when they used alcohol to relieve their stress. While Charles felt guilty for consuming alcohol because he knew doing so upset his mother, Jessie admitted she had once or twice overconsumed



in an effort to forget her family. Jessie also shared she had engaged in sexual activity as a distraction and felt ruined as a result. Her response to that emotion was to continue engaging in sexual activity with the rationalization it was too late to fix what she had done. When asked about campus counseling services, Jessie indicated she was aware counseling was available to her, but also did not have time, as a commuter student with multiple jobs, to participate.

None of the participants indicated they felt undeserving of their college experience. All the participants, at some point, used the phrase (or something very similar) “I worked hard to get here.” Bailey, Charles, and Dana who were among the participants who had been the longest at college and who were the most insistent they did not experience guilt, used the phrase with the most frequency. “I don’t feel guilty because I worked hard for this opportunity. I’m also making my mother proud so that makes me happy” (Charles, Interview, September 29, 2018).

When participants were provided the definition for family achievement guilt, the two participants who had been in college the least amount of time, along with Bailey, Charles, and Dana, responded they did not believe the theory was accurate. However, the researcher noted differences in their rationales seemed to correspond to the lengths of time participants had been in college. Hazel and Ike, the two freshmen participants, along with Bailey who was motivated to attend college by the insistence of his mother, responded they did not believe the theory was accurate due to them all having the support of their families.

I say this because my family are happy that I am here and I don’t think any less of them with me being in college and them being at home. I understand why they decided to not attend college and they understand my motivation and reasoning for attending and they support me. (Hazel, Focus Group, November 5, 2018).

The responses from the two older participants, who had been attending college the longest, focused on a different, but common to them, argument for why they did not believe the theory was accurate. Bailey and Dana argued their college attendance was due to choice. “I personally don't believe in this theory. I just do not feel sorry for them, because I get more opportunities. I feel bad that they are in their bubble and do not like to leave it” (Dana, Focus Group, October 4, 2018). All the other remaining participants indicated they believed the theory was true and was representative, at least to some extent, of their experience.

### **Pressure to Perform**

On the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*), item 25 garnered the highest level of response concerning negative emotion. This item asked about the pressure felt by participants to do well in order to not let their families down. Only Ike responded with a moderate to low score. Eight of the participants chose a four which is the highest level they could choose on the scale. The remaining two participants chose a level of three. Data analysis revealed the theme of pressure to perform had three sub-themes: family experience, previous family failures and being “the one”, and putting one’s self “out there.”

**College as a family experience.** The narratives of all participants in this study revealed college has been an experience felt by their entire families. Most participants indicated while their families may not have had significant roles in the act of applying to college, both their nuclear and extended families took them to college. Several participants used the word “our” when referring to their college experience; however, the researcher did notice this usage was more prevalent with the younger participants. Aliyah and Erikah shared they believed their families were expecting them to support them once they had graduated college.

Fiona explained pressure from the family does not just come from parents. When asked how she would change about the definition for family achievement guilt, she clarified the roles other family members have in terms of her own guilt.

I think that the only thing I would change is making it more clear that the "family" part does not just pertain to parents/guardians. In my experience the "family" part of this theory includes not only my parents, but my grandparents, aunt and uncle, and my brothers. My grandparents had to pay a portion of my last semester's tuition bill in order for me to finish my last semester of college. I feel as though I need to get the best grades of my college career due to the fact that they are paying for me to finish, and if I don't I will feel extreme bad and guilty for taking their money and not getting the grades. My aunt and uncle do the same thing almost. They will call me just to make sure that I have talked to my parents and made sure they are doing alright. When I don't talk to my parents they make me feel bad about it, like I am taking too much time for myself while I am at school and not thinking about my parents. My brothers tell me to be selfish and not worry about my parent's situation because soon enough it won't affect me. They tell me that I have to do what is best for me, and hearing that makes me feel bad because at the moment what happens to my parents does affect me. (Focus Group, October 5, 2018)

Fiona also described feelings of anger towards her family for applying the pressure. "In addition to guilt, students may feel angry towards their parents for putting pressure on them to go to college. Students may also feel depressed when they do not reach their families expectations. I have experienced both." (Focus Group, October 5, 2018)

The concept of college as a family experience contained factors for which participants indicated they felt guilt or other negative emotions about. Most participants, especially those in

their last two years, felt there was a division between what the family desired from the experience and their own individual goals. Dana explained her mother believed she would return home and start a life as a college graduate while Dana's personal goals did not consider those wishes. While Dana indicated she felt bad about that, she also insisted she will follow her dreams. Jessie had a more difficult time discerning what exactly her parents desired from the experience due to her assessment their expectations of what college is about were unrealistic and unreasonable. She was emphatic she understood whatever their goals for her at college were did not match her own personal goals.

All the older participants, except Charles, indicated their increasing levels of independence were a cause for discord in the family. Except for Charles, all the older participants had separated their own personal goals from the desires of their families. Charles had promised his mother a degree prior to entering college. "All I ask, you can do whatever, just please go to college and get good grades." So, I promised her a degree" (Interview, September 29, 2018). Charles recollected he had not done well his first semester of college.

Emotionally? I was hurt because my mom, all she asked was good grades. When I showed her my report card, I don't know what it's called. Whatever. She was really hurt because I never failed a class until freshman year. I had to retake college algebra, and I love math, so it actually hurt me too. So I just remember my mom crying and telling me I got to do good. So after that I been doing good. Emotionally it hurt me, because I hurt my mom. (Interview, September 29, 2018)

Throughout the interview, Charles expressed his own guilt for acts he had done at college he knew his mother would not approve of; however, the guilt was not enough for him to not

participate in those acts again. For example, he would drink with his fraternity brothers and then would call his mother the next day to confess and ask how to medicate his hangover.

Charles was the only upperclassman participant who did not seem to be concerned about gaining independence. He reported he called his mother daily to keep her updated on everything he was doing. Charles was the only participant who went home regularly, because his mother expected him to do so. He never missed seeing her on her birthday even when she lived in Texas and he had to miss school to do so. He drafted schedules for his time at school for purposes of making his mother aware of when she should plan things. Charles conveyed his entire motivation to attend and complete college was to satisfy the wishes of his mother. He indicated the guilt he felt when he did not satisfy her desires for his success was tremendous and used the word “hurt” (Interview, September 29, 2018) several times to describe how that guilt felt to him. It is puzzling to the researcher Charles indicated he does not have plans to return home after college.

The common narrative was these FGCS began college as part of a family experience, but that experience had rapidly disintegrated by their sophomore years. When asked about what could have been done by the university to better support her, Jessie’s response indicated she believed the whole family could be considered as part of the experience.

For me, I feel as though families should go through some kind of counseling or training to prepare the family prior to the student going to college and also during the college experience, if necessary. Everyone should attend and discuss the changes that will happen. Complete activities together. Everyone should be open and honest, without being criticized, nor put down for their true feelings. (Focus Group, November 6, 2018)

**Previous family failures and being “the one”.** Six of the participants shared they were not the first in the family to attempt college. These participants had siblings or other family

members who had made unsuccessful attempts. The overall perception of these participants was those failed attempts had influenced their own attempts. Hazel told the story of a cousin who had attempted college out of state.

My cousin, she went to college but she came home rather quickly. So, to see that I'm still there and I was telling them I don't really wanna come back home. I like being in college. I feel like I'm accomplishing things in college. They would take me for me because they probably was expecting me to be like her. You know what I'm sayin'? That I get home sick so I wanna run back home but I don't. She went far. Farther than here. I don't know where she went, but I know she went out of state. She went far. And she had told me she was there for like, cause she used to play basketball, so being at college I guess she had a basketball scholarship and she was playing on the team. But then she came home rather quickly and then she left all, they said that she left all of her stuff there and then just came back home. They think I will be like her. (Interview, November 5, 2018)

Four of the participants (Aliyah, Charles, Erikah, and Hazel) had older siblings or other young adults living in their family homes who never attempted or who had not been successful at college. All these participants, except Charles, believed their families expect they will also be unsuccessful. They felt as if they were being constantly watched by their nuclear and extended families who waiting for them to quit. While Charles was able to list various family members who had unsuccessfully attempted “My cousin, one of my cousins dropped out of Boston. Another one dropped out of Morgan because she had a child. My aunt dropped out of Compton.” (Interview, September 29, 2018), he maintained his mother’s support will get him through and that she believes he will finish.

Jessie explained how it felt to be “the one.”

I feel as though this definition of family achievement guilt is an accurate representation of the feelings that most first-generation college students experience. There is guilt associated with going to college and leaving behind your family since you know that it is steps toward becoming independent someday of those closest to your heart and that having an education is something you have and they do not, or that they are more limited in their education because you are the "one" in the family to do "great things". (Focus Group, November 6, 2018)

**Putting one's self "out there".** Many of the participants described feelings of anxiety they attributed to their visibility within their families as college students. Aliyah indicated she felt judged for trying to "achieve over the family limit" (Interview, July 25, 2018). Erikah described how her family demeaned her choice to attend college. While they were once excited she had decided to attend college, that excitement has been lost.

I guess I didn't do as well as they thought I was going to, so it's like, "Oh. Now you're just there wasting our time." Some of them, they think it's a really good thing to do. Others think it's a scam. It's just like, "Oh, you're just wasting all of this money to get a degree and you probably won't have a job when you leave, while we're back home. We're making money and all this other ..." Like, "Oh, we're making money. We're progressing in our career paths, so you're just wasting your time." Most of them are in trades, so they can do hair, they can do nails. (Interview, October 5, 2018)

Erikah was a fairly hesitant participant with several of the questions and chose not to elaborate on how this made her feel. After the interview, Erikah shared she believed her family was trying to pressure her more so they could work less. Even though she had no plans to return home to

support them, she felt their criticism came from their fear she would not be successful at college and would, therefore, not be able to support them.

Gina described her family's perception she believed she was smarter and "all that" (Interview, October 5, 2018) caused strife when she visited home and she felt the need to prove herself as a college student while being constantly criticized by her father for not being as successful as he thought she should be. Jessie described the loss of her safety net and now everything that would contribute to her success was hers alone to make happen. "...my brother always joked by saying, "I'm not going to college anyway, make sure you put the money into Jessie (pseudonym)." Now that I don't have their support, I'm sure they are watching me to see what I will do" (Interview, November 6, 2018). She believed her family was expecting she would abandon her journey towards becoming an adult, but she has chosen the opposite.

### **Summary**

FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university described their experiences with family achievement guilt. This transcendental phenomenology included 11 participants; two freshmen, two sophomores, three juniors, and four seniors. Three participants were male and eight were female. Four participants were White, five were African American, and two were mixed race.

The study was dependent on a triangulation of data which included an instrument intended to measure family achievement guilt, structured interviews, and a focus group. The instrument responses were recorded in pencil and paper format where participants also provided their demographic information. Except for one that was conducted in a high school guidance counselor's office, the interviews were all conducted in-person either on or within walking distance of GU's campus. All interviews were digitally recorded using two devices and were



professionally transcribed. The focus group was conducted online over a period of two months with participants using pseudonyms for anonymity.

While an instrument (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) was used to determine the presence of family achievement guilt, it is worthwhile to mention not all of the participants acknowledged the negative emotions they were experiencing were associated with guilt. Additionally, not all participants agreed the theory of family achievement guilt was a valid theory when it was explained during the focus group. Seven of the participants agreed with the explanation of the theory and indicated, to varying degrees, they believed the theory accurately described their experiences. It is interesting the five remaining participants were those who had either attended college for the least amount of time or who had been there the longest. The younger participants seemed to struggle more with understanding the concept of the theory while the oldest insisted it did not apply to them. Some who disagreed the theory applied to their experience did acknowledge it could apply to the experiences of others. For purposes of this study, it was presumed all participants were experiencing family achievement guilt as found by the family achievement guilt scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) regardless of whether the participants acknowledged it to be true.

The data was analyzed using a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994). This method called for the researcher to bracket herself out of the study by participating in the same data collection methods prior to collecting data participants (Moustakas, 1994). Through this process of bracketing, the researcher was able to easily recognize her own experiences were completely different from those of FGCS attending college in the traditional manner. All forms of participant data were reviewed multiple times prior to coding. Coding was accomplished through the lens of Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive

dissonance which describes a sequence of events that occurs when individuals experience dissonance. Codes were assigned by isolating the data that corresponded to the causes for, impacts of, and remediation attempts for the family achievement guilt.

Three themes and seven sub-themes emerged during the data analysis. The primary themes were: the journey of leaving, a dynamic understanding of the college experience, and pressure to perform. Participants described the journey of leaving as one marked by both the physical and figurative departures from their families. Negative emotions arose both when participants were not physically present to support the needs of their families and when participants' expanded worldviews conflicted with those held by their family members. Participants' understanding of the college experience was progressive as they advanced through the experience. These understandings were marked by an increasing awareness of their opportunities as compared to those opportunities available to their family members. Additionally, while all participants understood staying busy was an effective coping method for their negative emotions, it was observed participants developed more advanced and productive coping methods for staying busy the longer they remained at college. Finally, all participants articulated they experienced negative emotions related to pressures to perform. These emotions seemed to be fueled by the reality college for them was not an independent endeavor, but a family experience. The pressure to perform was exacerbated by the fact many of the participants perceived their families believed they would be unsuccessful at college due to previous, unsuccessful attempts by other family members. Lastly, participants described the pressure of putting themselves out there and being watched by their extended families as they attempted to accomplish what their family members had not.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe family achievement guilt as experienced by first-generation college students at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. A summary of the findings is presented in this chapter. Following this summary, a discussion is provided to relate this study to previous research as well as the theoretical framework. Implications and limitations, and recommendations for future research are then presented.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study was undertaken for the purpose of gaining information on how FGCS experience family achievement guilt at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. The summary of findings will be framed by the study's central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Research Question: How do FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university describe their experiences with family achievement guilt?

All 11 participants in this study experienced family achievement guilt. However, while some of experiences were similar or even mirrored those of other participants, the experience of family achievement guilt was generally an individual experience in terms of causes, severity of impact, and remediation efforts. The researcher perceives, for all participants, family achievement guilt was experienced progressively.

Prior to the study, the researcher had pondered whether college students who were experiencing family achievement guilt recognized their experience was related to guilt. The

researcher had pondered this due to her own experience of not realizing her own guilt until many years later. The results in this study were surprising with a predictable pattern.

The participants who had newly become college students did not seem to fully grasp the concept of family achievement guilt when the definition was provided during the focus group. For them, college was mostly about physically leaving home and starting a new adventure. While they articulated negative emotions about not being at home, most of those emotions were related to things they missed such as access to familiar routines like eating or the freedom provided by the availability of public transportation within a city environment. However, six of the remaining nine participants admitted they felt guilt and were able to specifically provide factors they believed caused that guilt. The final three participants, all upperclassmen, were adamant they did not feel guilt and that the guilt described by the definition was essentially irrational.

Four of the participants were underclassmen. Of those, two decided not to return to GU after the winter break. Of those remaining two underclassmen, one is a freshman who had not established relationships or participated in university life. The other, a sophomore, was employed by the university and was involved in several clubs and organizations on campus.

The participants who acknowledged their guilt, for the most part, seemed to struggle with how to deal with their guilt to varying degrees. The participants who were most visibly emotional during the interviews were those whose families were experiencing a dire situation at home such as food instability, physical illness, or acts by the family to fully separate from the participant.

All participants had some things in common. All participants articulated college was a choice they were actively pursuing and all indicated that pursuance was related to better job

opportunities in their adult lives. All freely described negative emotions resultant from interactions with their families. All communicated with their families on a daily basis. Thoughts of dropping out and wondering if college was worth it were admitted by all. Except for one participant, all explicitly stated they have no intentions of returning home after college. Except for the freshmen participants, all described at least one family relationship that had negatively changed as a result of them attending college.

SQ1: What factors do participants describe as contributors to their family achievement guilt?

Contributors for participants' family achievement guilt were assigned to three categories: independent privilege, becoming different, and financial pressures. Of interest to the researcher was participants did not all view these identifiers in the same way. For example, the younger participants viewed opportunities associated with independent privilege as more related to what was available to them in their environment, such as public transportation and things to do. The older participants understood opportunities associated with independent privilege as related to their freedom to do whatever they wanted away from and without parental authority as well as having access to better things. Several of the participants identified their family roles as obligatory to the functioning of the household and expressed guilt for not being at home to take care of siblings and other family members or to perform household tasks such as cleaning, yard work, and running errands.

In general, the younger participants were only vaguely able to describe how they had become different while the older participants were each able to provide several examples. The most common examples were adapting new beliefs as the result of exposure to new ideas at college and increased self-confidence as they navigated life situations on their own. All of the

older participants voluntarily expressed they could not return to the people they previously were while the younger participants did introduce that concept as relevant to their experience.

All participants discussed financial pressures, but their experiences were widely varied. Six of the participants indicated they had jobs while also attending college and some of these struggled with decisions about whether they should send some of their money home to help the family. Two participants believed their families were anticipating they would be financially supported by the participants after they completed college. While the freshmen participants did not acknowledge factors related to college debt, all the other participants generally seemed aware of the debt with some explaining plans for how they would pay back it back. Four participants expressed they felt guilty their parents or other family members had contributed financially to their college educations when they knew their families had to sacrifice something to do so.

SQ2: How do participants describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to both their home and college lives?

Four categories emerged to describe the impacts of family achievement guilt to their home and college lives: changed family dynamics, negative emotions, unrealistic expectations, and having to live in two separate worlds. The most concerning impacts to FGCS seemed to be the marred relationships associated with changes to their family dynamics. Participants described how they did not feel like they belonged in their families as a result of attending college. Some further clarified their families also realized they no longer belonged. Stories of broken relationships were common among all junior and senior participants. Explanations for why those relationships had been broken either pointed to participants and their families growing apart or resentment and other negative behaviors associated with their families not supporting changes in the participants as a result of them attending college. Participants expressed they had

experienced negative emotions such frustration, sadness, anger, anxiety, and depression as the result of not knowing how to fix those broken relationships.

As they progressed through college, participants increasingly realized the impossibility of their situations in terms of their families' expectation for and of them. Some expressed opinions they could not go back to being the people they were prior to attending college even though that is who their parents wanted them to be. Most expressed frustration their families' goals for them did not align with their own personal goals. While none specifically admitted it applied to them, multiple participants indicated FGCS could experience anger their parents pressured them to attend college without having given thought to the changes that would occur.

All participants, even the freshmen, expressed an understanding they lived in two different worlds; an at home world and a college world. While explanations of differences varied, all provided examples from both worlds that could not exist in the other. Some participants used words like "alien" and "outsider" to describe how they felt when they visited home. Most described some level of anguish they felt while being pressured at school to come home. All participants said they had experienced looking forward to going home only to want to leave soon after they got there. Participants who had identified their family roles as those with obligatory responsibilities told how they worried those things were not being done in their absence.

SQ3: How do participants describe their efforts to minimize or remediate their family achievement guilt?

While there were many different methods employed by participants to remediate their guilt to levels that allowed them to progress, two were most striking. First, after their freshman year, most participants rarely, if ever, visited home. Second, all the participants spoke, or

attempted to speak, to their families on a daily basis. Whether acknowledged or not, all participants seemed to feel some guilt for not going home and attempted to remediate that with daily phone calls. For some participants, the phone calls occurred multiple times every day. When asked why they did not visit home, all of the participants past their freshmen year indicated doing so was too stressful for them. They felt it was best to just stay connected via phone. Some participants expressed they still felt guilty for not calling home often enough and that guilt was fueled by other family members insisting they needed to call more. One participant admitted to ignoring her mother's phone calls sometimes, but clarified she would then feel guilty about it and return the calls. While some participants had hidden their post-graduation plans from their families, only one of them had intentions to return home after college. For those not planning on returning home, it was not simply just a matter of not returning to the area, the intent was to move far away.

Participants who had responsibilities to the household generally tried to maintain those responsibilities from a distance. They described doing things such as trying to help with homework, settling family disputes, providing instruction on how to operate things such as the lawnmower, and verifying younger siblings had been cared for by older siblings over the phone. Some earned money and sent it home to help pay bills.

All participants conveyed they were very aware of the option to drop-out and all either explicitly admitted they had given thought to the option or gave more veiled responses that vaguely indicated they had, at some point, considered the option as possibly easier than remaining. Two participants, both underclassmen, did drop out at the end of the same semester the data collection took place. Most participants stated they would intentionally reflect on why



they were there and how much progress they had made as a strategy to stay. Others justified they had to stay so they did not disappoint their families who were happy they were there.

All participants indicated staying busy was what they had to do to not let their negative emotions get in the way of their college progress. Except for one, all upperclassmen were involved in at least four clubs and organizations. The one participant who was not involved in campus activities explained she had found a “new family” at school and they supported each other. Of the remaining two underclassmen, one is significantly engaged in campus life. The researcher is concerned about the remaining freshman who had not yet participated in campus activities and who was relying only on another participant, who dropped out, for support.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to describe family achievement guilt as experienced by FGCS at a less selective, public, mid-Atlantic university. Festinger’s (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance was used to frame the study. Because the concept of family achievement guilt is fairly new, the literature contains significant gaps including populations studied and theoretical frameworks applied. This study intended to address some of those gaps. To the researcher’s knowledge, no other studies have been conducted using Festinger’s theory as even part of their frameworks. Additionally, the researcher sought to use participants who were different than those previously studied in terms of both racial diversity, geographic location, and type of university attended. Some of the findings of this research were consistent with previous research, while others posed additional questions.

### **Theoretical**

Festinger’s (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance is a theory that describes a sequential process for the experience of dissonance by an individual from the acknowledgement of

dissonance to its remediation. Festinger believed individuals required consistency between their beliefs and actions and, if the individual was experiencing inconsistency, discomfort would be felt. Festinger used the term “dissonance” to describe the relationship between two elements of an individual’s cognition where contradiction exists. Festinger referred to cognition as information an individual possesses without regard for whether that information is an opinion or fact. A primary claim of Festinger was that individuals will strive to maintain consistency in order to avoid discomfort that could be felt as both mental anguish and physical pain. In order to remediate their dissonance, Festinger indicated some individuals would simply disassociate from the problem causing behavior. However, rationalizing behaviors were also frequently observed by Festinger as a method used to remediate dissonance.

The literature is unclear regarding an absolute definition of the emotion of guilt despite centuries of attempts by philosophers, theologians, and social scientists (Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, & Fulton, 2010). Stice (1992) reported both guilt and dissonance share key features including both being negative states of arousal that provoke the experiencing individual to engage in behaviors intended to reduce those negative feelings. The researcher was unable to locate any research to tie the theory of cognitive dissonance to family achievement guilt. However, the researcher perceives this type of guilt is either a form of or product of dissonance.

The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) is sequential in nature. It describes a series of behaviors individuals will engage in for purposes of negative emotion reduction. It was confirmed, through all three data collection methods, all 11 participants in this study were experiencing negative emotions associated with family achievement guilt. While all participants did not specifically verbalize or otherwise indicate they acknowledged their negative emotions were resultant from guilt, many did. Regardless, by applying Festinger’s theory to the narratives

of each participant, the remediation efforts of all were consistent to how the theory described they would be.

Just as Festinger (1962) indicated some individuals would disassociate from the problem causing behavior, two of the participants chose to discontinue their college attendance and returned home. It is worthwhile, here, to mention one of those participants became pregnant and the presumption she chose to intentionally disassociate could easily be argued. Regardless, the behavior of attending college was contributory to her guilt and that behavior has been ceased. Approximately seven participants could be described as still in the process of finding effective remediation strategies. Their struggle was articulated by each of them as well as observed by the researcher. The final three participants were among the oldest and insisted they did not have guilt despite the data indicating otherwise. All three of these participants verbally rationalized to the researcher they did not have any reason to feel guilt, they had worked hard to get to where they were, and their families were happy for them. Their rationalization was consistent with Festinger's explanation for forms rationalization might take.

Critics of Festinger maintained the theory had flaws including the fact the theory could not predict conditions for when or how dissonance would be experienced (Bem, 1967). While it is true variances existed between participants in this study, and the experiences of family achievement guilt were definitely individually felt, significant commonalities shared by these participants created a picture of family achievement guilt the researcher could nearly predict according to how Festinger (1962) explained the experience would progress. In the case of this study, the experience of family achievement guilt was progressive in nature and according to the length of time the participant had been attending college. More primitive strategies of remediation were observed in the younger participants and strategies that allowed participants to

deny the existence of their guilt were only observed in students who had been at college the longest. The researcher believes the use of Festinger's (1962) theory adds to the literature a new perspective in which future researchers might view family achievement guilt.

### **Empirical**

In general, research is lacking in the area of family achievement guilt. Only a handful of studies have been conducted since the phenomenon was described (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015). Prior to these, only one other study (Piorkowski, 1983) sought to study interpersonal guilt felt by college students and that study was conducted under the wider umbrella of survivor guilt. Existing studies have been limited to primarily Hispanic and Latino populations attending selective universities (Covarrubias et al., 2015, Moreno, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). In response to recommendations in the literature, the researcher sought to study a more diverse group of participants who were attending a less selective university in a different geographic area than had been previously studied.

Many of the findings in this study were consistent with those described in the literature. Most of the participants were either formally employed or working odd jobs while attending college which was consistent with Ishitani's (2016) assessment FGCS experience higher levels of employment need than do CGCS. All participants expressed their motivations for attending college were related to future employment and not simply to have a new experience (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Ishitani (2016) indicated FGCS who are most vulnerable to dropping out are second year students. Two participants dropped out of college during the course of this study; one was a freshman and the other a sophomore. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) speculated university involvement may be more important than parental attitudes towards FGCS retention.

Extensive campus involvement was identified as an effective strategy for remaining at college by almost all the participants in this study.

All participants identified negative emotions resultant from their family achievement guilt, whether they acknowledged the relationship or not, such as depression, frustration, anger, sadness, and anxiety. These emotions were consistent to those described in previous studies on family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015). Many participants, especially those who had progressed to upperclassman status, described how they lived in two different worlds and intentionally took efforts to hide one world from the other (Hinz, 2016). Broken relationships, loss of family membership and feelings of being separated and alone on their own without protection were described (Moreno, 2016; O'Connor et al., 1997; Woollum, 2015).

What is different and perceived valuable by the researcher is how each individual participant's story combined with the group to describe family achievement guilt as an experience one could liken to a journey. Two of the identified themes indicated the college experiences of these participants, who were experiencing family achievement guilt, were felt on a fairly predictable continuum that corresponded with the length of time the participants had been attending college. Much like Jehangir's (2010) description of the FGCS as a whole, the experience of family achievement guilt unfolded in phases. Emotions and family dynamics changed through the process of admittance, transition, and near completion of college. While the students who had attended college the least amount of time recognized they were experiencing negative emotions, they did not seem to connect those emotions with guilt. The connection to guilt, by participants, of these emotions was generally consistent for all of the participants who had progressed to the middle years or later of their college experience. The three participants

who maintained the most adamantly they did not feel bad and that they did not believe in the theory were all students who had reached upperclassman status. While the definition for family achievement guilt confines the phenomenon to the college experience, two participants seemed aware of the progressive nature of their experience and predicted they would experience the phenomenon throughout their post-college lives. The researcher perceives two types of guilt remediation occurred for these participants. Either they acknowledged and accepted their negative feelings were associated with a guilt they could not avoid if they wanted to progress towards graduation or they denied its existence.

The final theme of pressure to perform, while less obvious, was also progressive in nature. For participants who had been attending college the least amount of time, this pressure seemed to be most felt in the simple terms of academic performance and remaining at college. College was also more experienced by the whole family. While the pressure was still there after the freshman year, most of the participants indicated, by their sophomore year, they had figured out how to handle the academic demands of college and academic performance did not seem to be as significant of a pressure as it did for the freshmen participants.

As participants progressed, additional components to the pressure emerged. College became less of an experience the entire family shared together. Participants felt increased pressure to satisfy the needs and desires of their families while pursuing their personal goals. Older participants described pressures from the impossible demands they return to who they were prior to attending college or that their personal goals maintain congruence with those of the family. Some participants indicated they felt pressure from the expectation they would be the financial saviors for their families. Most of the junior and senior participants articulated pressures felt when they realized their families could no longer effectively support them due to

not understanding the kinds of support they needed. In most cases, as participants progressed, the pressure to perform increased while support from their families decreased. Several participants described their families were unhappy with this progression and participants experienced increased efforts of family control. Participants reported increased negative emotions such as guilt, frustration, and anger they attributed to those efforts.

### **Implications**

The goal of this study was to describe how FGCS experienced family achievement guilt at a public, mid-Atlantic university. The study used 11 participants who shared their experiences through an instrument specifically used to identify family achievement guilt, structured interviews, and an online focus group. The data was analyzed to identify three themes to describe their experiences. Many findings in this research were consistent with those found in existing research. This study contributes to the literature by including a group of participants who were unrepresented in previous studies in terms of their racial diversity, geographic location, and type of university attended. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of this study are described in this section.

### **Theoretical**

To the researcher's knowledge, family achievement guilt has not been studied using Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory maintains individuals strive to maintain consistency between their beliefs and actions. If inconsistency is present, Festinger claimed individuals will experience discomfort and will take actions for purposes of reducing their pain. Existing research is unclear on the definition for the emotion of guilt (Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, & Fulton, 2010). While guilt may feel similar to dissonance, previous research has not determined if they are the same or if one may be the product of the other (Stice, 1992).

Stice (1992) claimed guilt and dissonance share key features including the requirement an individual must assume personal responsibility for something before they can feel either dissonance or guilt about it and that both can be relieved by self-affirming behaviors by the suffering individual. While the researcher believes the experience of feeling dissonance and guilt are the same, the struggle to claim dissonance and guilt are synonymous comes from her perception dissonance is more a state of something being and guilt is an emotion about it.

The findings of this study are consistent with Festinger's (1962) description of processes individuals suffering from dissonance will take to minimize or relieve it. Participants provided causal factors for their guilt. Their efforts for remediation were identified. However, the researcher continues to struggle with claiming family achievement guilt is, in fact, dissonance. At the least, this study provides a new context for which to consider cognitive dissonance. Despite the findings did not provide the researcher additional clarity on the relationship between dissonance and family achievement guilt, stakeholders should consider the experience of family achievement guilt is one that causes an adequate level of discomfort individuals will seek to alleviate and those remediation efforts may potentially limit the college success of FGCS. Future research should be conducted to further explore the relationship between dissonance and family achievement guilt.

### **Empirical**

Significant research has been conducted regarding the general makeup and achievement of FGCS; however, less attention has been given to the intrapersonal challenges this group encounters (Tate, Williams, & Hayden, 2013; Woollum, 2015). Very few studies have been conducted on family achievement guilt, partly because the concept is rather new (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015). With



such a small amount of existing research comes a limited focus in terms of populations studied. Most of the focus has been given to Hispanic and Latino participants who have attended selective universities. Future research was recommended to study family achievement guilt using different populations of FGCS including participants with more racial diversity (Moreno, 2016) and those who are attending less selective universities (Hinz, 2016). This study intended to use a more diverse group of participants who were attending a less selective university.

The findings of this study are consistent with what has been reported in the literature about FGCS and family achievement guilt. The contribution this study makes to research is the description for how these FGCS experienced family achievement on a continuum. The primary implication of this information, for the researcher, is a question now exists that asks where the continuum begins and ends. The endpoint is of specific interest to the researcher as two participants speculated their experiences with family achievement guilt would continue for the remainder of their lives. They openly wondered how family achievement guilt would impact their transitions from college to their careers. As such, future studies on family achievement guilt could consider how the transition out of college and other transitions associated with upward mobility are impacted by this guilt first experienced in college.

One participant in the study complained there is a general assumption on GU's campus FGCS are also socioeconomically disadvantaged. While GU offers services and supports on campus targeted to addressing issues impacting FGCS, she did not qualify to participate in those due to her family's financial status. She maintained while she understood she experienced family achievement guilt, she also understood the roots of that guilt were not motivated by factors related to money. She expressed frustration she was unable to find any type of support on campus to assist with her guilt due to these incorrect assumptions.

A review of the existing literature is consistent with her opinion. The researcher found only one instance of research where FGCS were not typically described as being associated with lower incomes. In that article, Ardoin (2016) described incorrect assumptions universities made about FGCS and the assumption all FGCS are low-income was provided as an example. Essentially, the literature has ignored the segment of FGCS who do not come from lower income backgrounds. The implication is those FGCS from higher income backgrounds are unable to access services intended to address FGCS challenges due to university stakeholders possibly not realizing FGCS may experience the same challenges similarly despite their different socioeconomic backgrounds. Additional research needs to be conducted for purposes of considering family achievement guilt beyond the demographic confines of what is generally reported about FGCS. Additionally, more research is needed to determine how socioeconomic status impacts the experience of family achievement guilt.

### **Practical**

The problem is FGCS are generally less successful and experience lower rates of graduation than CGCS (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfield, 2017; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Family achievement guilt (Covarrubias et al. 2015) was introduced as a concept to describe an emotion some FGCS experience when they compare their opportunities to attend college with a lack of the same opportunities for their family members. Existing research suggests family achievement guilt is related to the retention of FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012).

The findings of this study support existing research family achievement guilt is related to retention of FGCS. All participants were identified as experiencing family achievement guilt. All participants described times when they had thought about discontinuing college. Two

participants decided to drop out at the end of the semester the data for this study was collected. Ishitani (2016) reported FGCS were most vulnerable to dropping out during the second year. Of the two participants in this study who dropped out, one was in their first year and the other the second. When participants discussed their thoughts about dropping out, the younger participants discussed the concept more in the present tense while the older participants spoke more in past tense. This indicated to the researcher thoughts of dropping out were more prevalent during the first two years for the participants in this study which is consistent with Ishitani's (2016) claim. The implication for colleges and universities is more attention needs to be given to second year students instead of shifting all of the attention back to the new freshmen class each year.

There is frequently a large gap between the beliefs, values, and ideas promoted on college campuses than what is presented in the homes of FGCS (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Hinz, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). For most of the FGCS in this study, college began as something the entire family experienced. However, by their second year, these participants had already experienced broken family relationships and had begun living with altered identities with the hope of preserving as much of their remaining familial relationships as possible. The implication is colleges and universities need to understand many FGCS are coming from backgrounds that have less experience with accepting new ideas or that do not necessarily promote individualism in the same manner as academic environments or at all. Colleges and universities need to recognize, for some FGCS and their families, little preparation has been given in terms of what they can expect will happen during the college years. One participant suggested, in the focus group, it would have been beneficial if there had been something offered by GU, during their freshman year, that regularly included her family to prepare them for and support them through the changes they would

experience as a result of her attending college. While the researcher perceives that solution would not be viable at GU, due to GU's rural location being a minimum of two hours from most participants' families, it could be worthwhile for other stakeholders in education to consider. Regardless of challenges perceived, the researcher does acknowledge institutional methods and processes have not been consistent in addressing issues of social justice (Madyun & Jehangir, 2014) and it is not unreasonable to expect greater efforts be made.

Finally, the researcher perceives a gap exists, possibly due to these levels having differing goals, between K-12 and higher education in terms of addressing the needs of FGCS. As part of their programming, high school guidance offices and associated services could offer whole family support on a regular basis during the senior year of high school for students and their families who will be entering college as FGCS the following fall. Research at a high school located in the same state as publicly funded GU resulted in the discovery of two programs intended to support the transitions of FGCS from high school to college. Both of these programs provide some levels of support during high school and through college. However, after speaking with the heads of each program, it was determined student access to both programs is extremely limited due to program funding and subsequent availability. Additionally, resource constraints have necessitated these programs to limit their focus and, while students' families are included as part of the process, most of that focus is working directly with the individual students. As a strategy to addressing family achievement guilt at the family level, both levels of education need to increase collaboration and greater attention needs to be given to funding and making these programs accessible to all FGCS and their families.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations for this study were primarily the result of decisions made by the researcher for purposes of practicality. While there are several delimitations, participant and site selection factors comprise the bulk of them. Participants must have been at least 18, enrolled at GU, and identified as experiencing family achievement guilt. While it is reality some college students have not yet reached the age of 18, the researcher determined their potential contributions to this study would likely not be significant due to their limited time already spent attending college. Participants were identified as experiencing family achievement guilt using only one instrument, the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*). While other measures, such as the IGQ (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997), have been used, the Family Achievement Guilt Scale was specifically developed to isolate family achievement guilt from other types of interpersonal guilt. The researcher chose to only include participants from one university solely for purposes of limiting the scope of the study. GU was selected as the research site due to its rural location within only a couple of hours from major cities and its less selective admission requirements. Finally, the researcher chose one of the several definitions of FGCS as a delimiter. In order to be considered a FGCS, participants were simply required to not have a parent who had earned a four-year college degree.

This study has several limitations many of which are generally associated with qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). The most obvious limitation is the fact qualitative research typically relies on small sample sizes and is, therefore, not generalizable (Patton, 2002). In the case of this study, not only was the sample size small with only 11 participants, those participants all grew up within a geographical radius of six adjoining counties. The researcher acknowledges some of the participants knew each other either prior to college or as the result of meeting on GU's small

campus. It is conceivable the experiences of some participants may have mirrored those of other participants simply due to their existence within shared relationships.

The lack of existing literature on the topic of family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; Moreno, 2016; Piorkowski, 1983; Wallace, 2018; Woollum, 2015) posed another limitation. The concept of family achievement guilt has only been recently defined (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Significant variances in the literature in terms of defining and measuring guilt, as well as defining FGCS, are present. Additionally, because participants only needed to have parents who had not earned four-year, college degrees to apply, not all participants were the first in their families to attempt or graduate college. For example, one participant was the youngest of three siblings with her older brothers already having earned college degrees.

Another limitation is the perception of the researcher the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) is a subjective type of instrument. The instrument does not use a formula to calculate participant responses for purposes of determining whether they are experiencing family achievement guilt. Instead, the researcher used her own method of analysis to make that determination. The instrument consists of a five-point Likert scale attached to 27 questions divided into three categories. The researcher isolated those responses that were represented by the highest two points of the scale. It is acknowledged other researchers may make their determinations using some other method that may have different results than were produced in this study. Additionally, it is recognized guilt and its remediation is an individual experience that is difficult to measure.

The timing and sequence of the data collection could have influenced the outcomes of the study. In all cases, the interviews were conducted within a short time of participants completing

the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*). The researcher speculates participants' interview and focus group responses regarding their experiences could have been more extensive due to having been influenced by concepts they may not have thought about prior to being introduced to them by the instrument. It was observed nearly all participants reported higher levels of emotion as they progressed through the instrument.

Lastly, the limitation of participants being studied versus the identified problem is not entirely consistent. The problem of this study is FGCS are not as successful and do not experience the same rates of graduation as CGCS. While it is true two participants decided to discontinue their educational journeys at GU, all participants were actively enrolled and at the time of data collection. The majority of participants indicated they were doing well or, at least performing at an acceptable level, academically. Most of the junior and senior participants reported they were on track to graduate in four years or, in the case of one participant, even sooner. When comparing this data to the GU's reported low, four-year graduation rates, all of these participants were doing remarkably well. While the data collected from these participants provides insight to strategies of guilt remediation, their success and corresponding experience is likely not informative of those students who are experiencing lower rates of success and who may ultimately not graduate.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because there is such a limited amount of existing research in the area of family achievement guilt, the options of potential research options that could be of potential value towards understanding how the phenomenon impacts FGCS are numerous. This study could be replicated in another geographical context or even with different participants at the same

research site. As the Family Achievement Guilt Scale (Covarrubias et al., *Manuscript in preparation*) has been minimally used, more studies should be conducted that rely on the instrument to identify FGCS who are experiencing the phenomenon.

When proposing this study, the researcher speculated collecting data from participants who had progressed further in college and who were closer to graduation would yield more valuable information in terms of understanding how FGCS remediated their family achievement guilt. The researcher did not take into account the success of these participants would not fully inform the relationship of the guilt to FGCS who experience lower levels of success and graduation rates. Further research should seek to study participants who are experiencing family achievement guilt and who are not experiencing high levels of success. Both participants who decided to discontinue college were underclassmen. Additional research should focus on underclassmen who are the most vulnerable in terms of dropping out.

Two of the participants had legally protected emotional support animals that lived with them at college. While the narratives of these participants shared similarities with those of the other participants, the researcher struggled with the intersectionality of emotional issues which may have existed prior to college attendance and those that arose as the result of family achievement guilt. It was unclear, to the researcher, whether the impacts of the family achievement guilt were more severe for these participants than the others or if their overall, visibly upset affect would have presented in other conversations regardless of topic. The researcher is intrigued two of the 11 participants had legally protected support animals. Further research could be conducted to study the intersectionality of FGCS and preexisting emotional conditions.



Finally, two participants speculated the family achievement guilt they understood they experienced would not end at the conclusion of their college experience. These participants predicted they would continue to move forward and have greater opportunities than their family members after graduation. Both described their expectations further separation from their families would occur. Both argued, during the focus group discussion, the definition for family achievement guilt was too narrow as it only considered the college years. Research should be conducted on perceptions of family achievement guilt experiences for FGCS who have graduated college.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe family achievement guilt as it is experienced by FGCS at a public, less selective, mid-Atlantic university. Although significant attention has been given to other aspects of FGCS, minimal research has been conducted to study the intrapersonal problems this population encounters. Family achievement guilt describes a type of guilt FGCS feel when they compare their opportunities to attend college with those opportunities available to their family members at home. Family achievement guilt has been associated with the lack of retention of FGCS. The concept of family achievement guilt was developed recently, within the past few years, and, as a result, only a few studies exist to describe it. Most of the existing studies have focused on Hispanic or Latino populations attending selective universities. This study intended to add to this limited body of knowledge by including participants who were more racially diverse than those previously studied and who attended a less selective university.

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance provided the theoretical framework. Festinger maintained individuals strive to have consistency between their beliefs and actions. If

inconsistency exists, the individual will experience discomfort in the form of mental anguish that may lead to physical pain if unresolved. Festinger used the term dissonance to describe that inconsistency. Festinger's theory describes processes individuals will undertake in order to remediate their dissonance. The literature is unclear on the exact definition of guilt; however, it was determined dissonance and guilt share key features. The researcher perceives family achievement guilt is either a form of or resultant from dissonance.

Data was collected using three methods including an instrument specifically designed to measure family achievement guilt, structured interviews, and an online focus group. The data was analyzed according to the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method described by Moustakas. Three themes emerged from the analysis including the journey of leaving, a dynamic understanding of the college experience, and pressure to perform. These themes may assist various stakeholders as they support FGCS to their academic goals.

Two primary implications presented from this study. First, for FGCS, the college experience is frequently one that involves the entire family. Problems occur for the FGCS when their families have not been prepared for and supported towards realistic expectations. Additionally, many FGCS experience broken relationships and lose a sense of familial belonging as they continue to make decisions that are beneficial to their college progression, but that cause further separation from their families. Second, the findings in this study are consistent with the research most FGCS drop out of college within the first two years with the most vulnerability for doing so being during the second year. While colleges and universities recognize the lack of retention of FGCS is a concern and have increased their focus on the development of strategies to address the problem, their efforts typically target first year college students. Instead of providing those supports through the second year, colleges and universities tend to shift their

focus to the incoming freshmen. These institutions need to recognize many second year FGCS need the same or similar supports to continue experiencing success.

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**APPENDIX A: Research Site Permission**

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To: Melissa Cloyd  
From: Christopher Masciocchi, IRB Chair  
Date: Monday, July 09, 2018  
Subject: Notice of Protocol Review

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We have received your human research protocol application and reviewed it. Thank you for submitting this proposal in compliance with FSU and USM policy.

**Title:** Doctoral Dissertation: FAMILY ACHIEVEMENT GUILT AS EXPERIENCED BY FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGY

**Number Assigned:** H2018-048

**Received on:** 7/6/2018

The Institutional Review Board has determined that the research you describe in your application qualifies as research that is exempt from the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46) under §46.101(b). As long as you follow the protocol described in your submission, no further action on your part is necessary at this time.

Note that this determination does not mean that the IRB has approved the research. It means that IRB approval is not necessary and the investigators are responsible for conducting the research in an ethical manner.

If you make substantial changes to this project or begin another research project involving human participants, the IRB will be required to review that project, as well.

Reviewer Comments:  
(None)

## APPENDIX B: IRB Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 19, 2018

Melissa C. Cloyd

IRB Approval 3376.071918: Family Achievement Guilt as Experienced by First-Generation College Students: A Phenomenology

Dear Melissa C. Cloyd,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

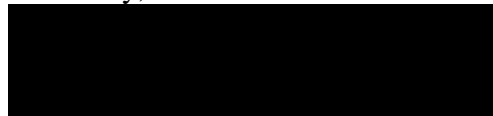
Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**The Graduate School**

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UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*



## APPENDIX C: Recruitment Flier

# Research Participants Needed

## Family Achievement Guilt Study

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you the first person in your family to attend college?

If you answered **yes** to both of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a family achievement guilt research study.

The purpose of this research study is to describe family achievement guilt as experienced by first-generation college students. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview, a focus group, and to share a meme that describes their experience. Participants will receive a gift card to Chipotle for their participation.

First-generation students 18 years of age or older are eligible to participate.

The study is being conducted at Frostburg State University.  
101 Braddock Road  
Frostburg, MD 21532

**Please contact Melissa Cloyd at (301) 471-8858 or [mcloyd3@liberty.edu](mailto:mcloyd3@liberty.edu) for more information.**

## APPENDIX D: Informed Consent

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use  
from 7/19/2018 to 7/18/2019  
Protocol # 3376.071918

### CONSENT FORM

Family Achievement Guilt as Experienced by First-Generation College Students: A  
Phenomenology  
Melissa C. Cloyd  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on family achievement guilt as experienced by first-generation college students at a less selective, mid-Atlantic university. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled at the research site and have identified yourself as a first-generation college student. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Melissa Cloyd, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to describe how first-generation college students at a mid-Atlantic, less selective university experience family achievement guilt.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete survey, approximately 10 minutes in length, to determine your eligibility to participate in the study.
2. Participate in an interview approximately 45 minutes in length. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.
3. Create a meme or other graphical representation to describe your experience.
4. Participate in an on-line focus group for approximately 30 minutes. The transcripts of the focus group will be printed by the researcher.
5. You will have the opportunity to read the transcribed data from your interview and focus group contributions.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Some questions might make you feel positive and/or negative as you are asked to reflect on your experiences.

**Benefits:**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include:

This study has the potential to inform universities about the impacts of family achievement guilt to first-generation college students. This further understanding may result in changing or creating practices to help students who experience family achievement guilt.

**Compensation:** Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the study, participants will each receive a \$20 gift card to a local fast food restaurant. Participants should expect to receive this compensation within one week of completing the focus group activity. This compensation will not be pro-rated for partial participation. The completion and subsequent scoring of the initial instrument will determine eligibility to participate in the study. Only participants eligible to participate and who complete the study will be compensated.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and a professional transcriptionist will have access to these recordings. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcribed data.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning (past or present) child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Frostburg State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Melissa Cloyd. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 301-482-1510 or at [mcloyd3@liberty.edu](mailto:mcloyd3@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Fred Milacci at [fmilacci@liberty.edu](mailto:fmilacci@liberty.edu).

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Frostburg State University. For research-related problems or questions regarding participants' rights, contact the IRB through the Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 301-687-3101.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol****Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me about yourself including where you are from, your progress in college, your major, and whether you live at home or at school.
2. What made you decide to attend college?
3. What are your goals for after college?
4. What emotions would you use to describe your experiences during your transition into college?
5. How did your family react when you started college?
6. What are your family's general thoughts about higher education?
7. How often are you in contact with your family members?
8. What forms of communication do you use when you communicate with your family?
9. If you live away from home, how often do you visit home?
10. Describe the connections you have been able to make with peers, faculty, and staff since you have been in college.
11. Describe how you have been doing academically.
12. Tell me more about your extracurricular involvements including any clubs, leadership, or volunteer experiences.
13. What do your parents do?
14. What do your siblings do?
15. What would you say is your role in the family and how do you contribute to the family dynamic?
16. How is your life different when you are school from when you are at home?
17. In what ways is college changing you?

18. When you are at home, how would you describe your family's reaction to the person you are becoming?
19. What are your experiences when you talk about school with your family?
20. Please describe the emotions you feel if you experience challenges with managing your responsibilities both at school and at home.
21. When you think about the opportunities available to you in college and the opportunities available to your family members at home, what emotions do you feel?
22. What types of emotions do you experience when you visit your family at home?
23. When you have experienced negative emotions related to attending college and not being home with your family, what did you do?
24. When you have experienced negative emotions about attending college, while at home, what did you do?
25. When you think about the most challenging or difficult times you have experienced in college, what has helped you persist through those challenges?
26. What other thoughts or experiences would you like to share?

**APPENDIX F: Focus Group Questions**

1. Some researchers have a theory called family achievement guilt. They say this is an emotion that first in their family college students experience when they have better educational opportunities than other family members. The researchers say a person feels guilty if they get more privileges and independence, because family members back home might not enjoy the same. Please describe what you think about this theory.
2. Describe how this theory of family achievement guilt makes sense to you.
3. How do you relate to this theory?
4. How would you change any part of the definition for the theory?
5. What other ideas do you have about negative emotions students might experience that may be related to being the first in their family to go to college?
6. What recommendations do you have on how to improve experiences for first-generation college students on campus?

## APPENDIX G: Epoche

### Researcher's Answers to Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself including where you are from, your progress in college, your major, and whether you live at home or at school.

*I am 45 years old. I was born in Iowa, but lived in several different places as a child after my mother joined the military. I am 45 years old and married with two children who are of college age or nearly so. I am pursuing a doctoral degree in education. I have pursued several different career paths and am currently a teacher.*

2. What made you decide to attend college?

*I was an enlisted airman in the military when I decided to take my first college course. I made the decision, because I had decided a military career was not for me and I knew my options were extremely limited without a college degree.*

3. What are your goals for after college?

*When I began college, my goal was to become educated enough to be able to get out of the military and to pursue another career for financial support. When I pursued the master's degree, the goal was to obtain enough education to become a certified teacher. There is not a goal associated with what I would like to do after I have earned the doctorate degree.*

4. What emotions would you use to describe your experiences during your transition into college?

*When I began college, I was 20 years old. I did not pursue college the traditional way and was taking courses with mostly higher ranking military people who were preparing for post-retirement careers. I was nervous when I started due to not having been terribly successful at the high school level. I was also proud of what I was doing, because going to college seemed like a productive thing to do.*

5. How did your family react when you started college?

*By the time I began college, my mother was working on her four-year degree. All of my family, in general, expressed approval I was going to college and being otherwise productive. However, because I was also serving in the military (an act that continued a long history of military service in my family), I was probably not viewed as being unproductive at the time I was also pursuing college. I experienced general approval simply for joining the military and I do not perceive, at this age, that approval was increased by my taking college classes. As I got older, the message I received from extended family members was one that conveyed their opinion I was lucky and was able to engage in productive activities whereas most of the other family members in my*



*generation did not experience that same luck. It has never really been acknowledged I engaged in work in order to obtain my education. In their opinion, the education came as a result of luck.*

6. What are your family's general thoughts about higher education?

*My parents value higher education in terms of its relationship to financial security. My brother dropped out of high school in ninth grade and eventually earned a high school equivalency certificate. He also served a term in the military and then separated from the military to pursue trade work as an electrician. I think my extended family realizes there is a relationship between higher education and financial stability, but there is so much rationalizing the choices of the rest of the family to not pursue college it is difficult to nail down their real opinions on the matter. I think they view it as something valuable, but also believe not everybody needs it. My paternal grandparents are consumed with the idea the "rich man" is always trying to get all the money from the "poor man" and charging for education is one of the rich man's tactics. In general, I think the majority of my family associates educated people with wealth and believes all educated people are rich. Being rich, while frequently expressed as a personal goal, is not looked upon favorably if actually achieved.*

7. How often are you in contact with your family members?

*When I began college, I was living in Alaska and my parents were living in Maryland. I probably called them a couple of times per month. I was in contact with my grandparents in Iowa also probably a couple of times per month by phone. Internet and associated technologies relative to communication did not exist at that time.*

8. What forms of communication do you use when you communicate with your family?

*I called them by phone.*

9. If you live away from home, how often do you visit home?

*"Home" is a complicated concept for me. Iowa was my home for the first 13 years of my life and then we moved away when my mom joined the military. My parents never returned home to live and I have never lived again in Iowa as an adult even though I probably considered Iowa my home well into adulthood. I did not visit my parents for five years after I joined the military and then, when I did visit, I visited them in Iowa where they had not lived for ten years. When I reflect now, I am not sure why I didn't make more of an effort to visit my family members during that time of my life. I suspect I believed the logistics of doing so were too much and I just did not pursue it. However, I also know I was attending college full-time while serving full-time in the military and I had two part-time jobs to help pay my tuition. I probably did not have time to visit family. After I graduated, I separated from the military and we moved to the east coast from Alaska to be closer to both mine and my husband's parents. I try to visit Iowa every*

*year. Sometimes, I skip a year. Sometimes, I visit twice in the same year. I no longer consider Iowa "home." I do not consider anywhere "home."*

10. Describe the connections you have been able to make with peers, faculty, and staff since you have been in college.

*Because I did not pursue college in the traditional manner, I have never really formed relationships with faculty or staff with a couple of exceptions. Much of my education has been completed electronically and forming relationships on the platform is difficult. Also, I have the personality I do not necessarily seek out human relationships; it is more a case those relationships find me. I suppose I have viewed education as an activity where human interaction is optional. I have recently engaged in a relationship with a professor and have decided my educational career could have perhaps been enhanced by other such relationships. However, I am not sure how or why that would have occurred. In terms of peer relationships, I have sometimes engaged with other students in my courses, but that engagement has been limited. Typically, my peers are also trying to fit school into their busy lives and none of us have time for being social with one another. That said, it is important to realize when I have attended college, I have also been involved with other life pursuits and have had those avenues for relationship building.*

11. Describe how you have been doing academically.

*I have done well in all of my college courses.*

12. Tell me more about your extracurricular involvements including any clubs, leadership, or volunteer experiences.

*I have never been involved with anything outside of actual coursework in terms of college participation. I have always been busy working, raising kids, etc...*

13. What do your parents do?

*My parents just retired in the last month. My dad worked for the military doing warehouse work. My mom was a project manager in the information technology field.*

14. What do your siblings do?

*My brother does electrical work on ships for the Coast Guard.*

15. What would you say is your role in the family and how do you contribute to the family dynamic?

*I do not know what my role was. I was the oldest child and was supposed to be responsible for my brother and cousins when I was younger. All of us grew up with minimal supervision and accountability, though, so it is difficult for me to figure out where I fit in that. I was considered the "smart one" when I was child. Later in life, my*

*parents have referred to my brother as “the smart one,” so it is possible being that was not my role. I suppose, an important part of the answer lies in the fact I have been married for more than 25 years and I no longer have a role in my biological family. My overall role is wife to my husband and mother to my children. I work and bring home money to combine with my husband’s income. I subscribe to traditional gender roles and my life is consumed by taking care of the family and house when I am not at work. I also pursue education. I do not know how that factors into my role. It is likely it does not and is just an extension outside of what I am supposed to be doing.*

16. How is your life different when you are school from when you are at home?

*I have never left home to attend school, so this question is not applicable to my experience.*

17. In what ways is college changing you?

*College changed me in several ways. I do not think I was very confident when I was a young adult and attending college helped with my confidence. I think, in the overall picture, my going to college has allowed me to have the life that I have. Because I have the life that I have, I am fairly removed from the lives of most of my family members in terms of being able to relate to how they live, how they think, their motivations, etc... I am not sure college caused me to think differently or if my participation has caused me to do anything different than I would have otherwise done. When I reflect upon what I have obtained, it is mostly tangible things (a piece of paper) that have allowed me to do what I want to do.*

18. When you are at home, how would you describe your family’s reaction to the person you are becoming?

*When I am at “home” in Iowa, I do not feel like I fit in with the family. I feel like an outsider. Every other year, my whole extended family gathers from around the country for a three-day reunion and I also feel like an outsider. Throughout my childhood, my cousins and I were very close. I do not feel like I know them anymore. We do not have the same philosophy of life. We do not want the same kind of life. I guess I should rephrase that to say I do not know what kind of life they want. The kind of life they have is not what I want and there is not really any way for them to have the life I have. We are cordial with each other and everyone makes attempts to interact, etc... However, they all share experiences I do not and vice versa. Connecting with one another is difficult. The same is true for the relationship between my brother and me with the exception we are not as patient with each other. He does not understand me and frequently expressed contempt about the things I do.*

19. What are your experiences when you talk about school with your family?

*I pick and choose who I talk about school with and censor what I say. Everyone is aware I continue to participate in higher education. I suppose that is how they know me. For*

*most, I leave everything very generally. When most ask, I perceive they are asking out of politeness. Even if they are not, they do not have enough perspective or experience with education to be able to effectively digest what I could tell them. Sometimes, I have tried. As I have previously mentioned, my family members believe educated people are also rich. That belief gets in the way of any discussions I might be interested in having about education.*

20. Please describe the emotions you feel if you experience challenges with managing your responsibilities both at school and at home.

*When I began attending college, I was 20 years old. My husband was also 20 and began attending soon after. Both of us were working full-time in the military and had part-time jobs to keep the bills paid. I did not have responsibilities to my biological family or to any children. Most of what needed to be managed was time. When I look back, I do not know how we were able to do that. I do not think we slept very much during that time.*

21. When you think about the opportunities available to you in college and the opportunities available to your family members at home, what emotions do you feel?

*I used to feel angry my brother and cousins did not pursue something more than what they did and spent a lot of time criticizing those choices in light of recognizing the cause and effect relationships of their lives. When I was younger, I believed people could do whatever they wanted to do. As I have gotten older, I recognize that is maybe not always the case in terms of how I subscribed to it (because I still believe people can do whatever they want to do if they want it enough). When all of us were young, I did not feel any of us were relegated to certain positions forever. Now that all of my cousins and I are around middle age, I acknowledge opportunities are far more limited. It's not just age. Where I live, there are many opportunities that are flexible enough for people in various circumstances to pursue. Where they live, there are fewer opportunities. Additionally, fear and mistrust there causes a wariness that prevents people from trying to move forward. When I think about where everyone is in life now, it makes me sad. I realize they will never have a life other than the kind of life I do not want. When I am there, I feel guilty for having what I have. I feel guilty when I think about how much I get paid per hour in comparison to the little bit they are paid for doing manual labor all day. I do acknowledge they may be happy enough with that life. However, I am skeptical about that happiness, because I definitely do not want that life.*

22. What types of emotions do you experience when you visit your family at home?

*Usually, when I am planning a visit to my Iowa family, I am excited and looking forward to it. I experience positive emotions up until the point I am actually there. I usually spend the majority of my time split between the homes of my grandparents. Once I am there, the negative emotions began to present. I might feel sadness or guilt. I get annoyed with their limited perspectives. Almost always the visits feature significant arguing and bad feelings after the first few hours. It is as if they feel a need to justify the choices they have made and will not let it go. We get along much better when we just talk*

*from a distance. The time I spend with my cousins is usually limited for a variety of reasons. First, they all have factory jobs, if they work, and their time off does not always align with when I am available. Second, we do not have anything in common anymore and it is a lot of work to spend time with each other. Usually, if I see them, I see them all at once at a dinner or something. I think all of us are aware of how awkward meeting just one on one would be and we, therefore, do not even attempt that.*

23. When you have experienced negative emotions related to attending college and not being home with your family, what did you do?

*I used to just redirect myself to other things. I have always had a lot going on and it is easy to block all of that out if I feel like doing that. As I have gotten older, my guilt over avoiding visiting has increased. I try to visit more often. However, my guilt is not necessarily singularly related to attending college. College has just been part of what I have done to be where I am.*

24. When you have experienced negative emotions about attending college, while at home, what did you do?

*Specific to college, I do not talk about it there. I try to not bring up college in any context, because doing so is just going to cause a problem. I do not bring up my child being in college. If it comes up, I try to steer the conversation to working and having a job. It should be mentioned pretty much all of them do not consider the jobs my husband or I do as actual work, because it's not manual labor. For obvious reasons, I then try to navigate the conversation to not go in the direction of how my husband and I would not be able to survive a job that requires real work. In general, visiting my family is an exercise of avoiding anything beyond surface level of what might be safe topics to discuss. Many times, I have cut the visit short. Last year, for the first time ever, my family stayed in a hotel in the next town over and that was helpful to some extent. Usually, when things become really negative at one house, I will go to my other grandparents' house. The negative emotions I feel are not related to regret. I do not regret doing what I have done. I regret the breakdown of the relationships which was the result. I feel I could not have had both.*

25. When you think about the most challenging or difficult times you have experienced in college, what has helped you persist through those challenges?

*I do not feel as if I have encountered challenges, other than a lack of time, during any of my college pursuits. The majority of college has occurred for me as a result of me using it as a way out of whatever situation I was in at the time. The exception to that is the doctorate. I do not have an exact reason for pursuing it and I do not have any goals that require having it. My husband believes in me finishing it. Until the dissertation, I had not ever felt any responsibility towards finishing a course. Now that I have a chair who has given me his time, I would feel guilty for not finishing what I started. Knowing that keeps me from even considering not persisting.*

26. What other thoughts or experiences would you like to share?

*I do not think I really have any other thoughts relative to the first-generation college experience. It is difficult for me to separate singularly the component of college attendance within the whole picture of achievement guilt. I did not have the same experience as my participants. I am also 45 years old which means I have had a significant amount of time to contemplate where I am, how I got here, and how I feel about all of that. I recognize my participants are almost all less than half my age and their act of pursuing college attendance is more singular in nature due to their traditional manner of attending. Lastly, I had the benefit of having parents who also left the extended family. Nearly all of my achievement guilt is related to what I feel towards my extended family. Engaging with my biological, nuclear family is a much different experience than when I engage with or think about my extended family.*

#### Researcher's Answers to Focus Group Questions

1. Some researchers have a theory called family achievement guilt. They say this is an emotion that first in their family college students experience when they have better educational opportunities than other family members. The researchers say a person feels guilty if they get more privileges and independence, because family members back home might not enjoy the same. Please describe what you think about this theory.

*I think, based on my own experiences with achievement guilt, this theory is valid.*

2. Describe how this theory of family achievement guilt makes sense to you.

*The theory makes sense to me, because I have a different life than almost all of my extended family members due to pursuing college and I have experienced guilt for it. Additionally, I can look at the lives of my parents and compare those with the lives of their siblings, etc... My parents and I have had recent conversations, as a result of my study, about them feeling guilt for having more opportunities and for not being "stuck" in the situation they lived in when they left the family to pursue college and other activities associated with class mobility.*

3. How do you relate to this theory?

*I have personally experienced achievement guilt. However, I think this theory is narrower in focus than I probably perceive it to be and I have difficulty narrowing my college experience to exactly fit this theory due to my non-traditional methods of obtaining a college education.*

4. How would you change any part of the definition for the theory?

*I think I would change it to be broader. My opinion is college is not the only avenue that individuals can travel that may lead to having more independence and privileges than their family members. For example, my brother, who essentially dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, has figured out a way to have the life he wants that includes financial stability. While his guilt has manifested differently than mine, I have no question it is there. I do not*

*think his guilt is different than mine, I just think he chooses to do something else with it. While I do a lot of avoiding, he always tries to buy them things. While I participate more with middle class people (I do not feel like I fit in the middle class.), he continues to participate with working class people (I suppose to keep the gap smaller between where he started and where he now is.). Still, I have observed the same problems with his methods as mine. Neither of us really feel like we fit in either class and we both recognize we do not really have a lot in common with those in the family we used to be close to.*

*Of course, in terms of this study, the actual problem is FGCS do not graduate college at the same rates as CGCS. I recognize college changes people in many different ways and those ways are more extreme than just achieving due to the foreign concepts, processes, etc... to those family who did not attend college. I could argue the guilt from this activity is perhaps more extreme than other options of achievement.*

*Lastly, I think the theory is narrow in terms of time. What happens to the student once they have graduated? They will do other things that also cause them to achieve. When does family achievement guilt, in terms of just the college attendance aspect, stop and when does that guilt get labeled some other type of survivor guilt? What is that other survivor guilt called?*

5. What other ideas do you have about negative emotions students might experience that may be related to being the first in their family to go to college?

*The financial aspect of attending college is so significant I wonder how family achievement guilt (from attending college) might look if that financial aspect was removed. Is it simply a matter of just having more privileges and independence or could it also be those things combined with the using of resources that are needed elsewhere?*

6. What recommendations do you have on how to improve experiences for first-generation college students on campus?

*I do not have experience with being a FGCS on campus, so this question is not applicable to me.*

## **APPENDIX H: Interview Protocol Authorization**

**From:** Rebecca Covarrubias <rebeccac@ucsc.edu>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 25, 2017 10:15:59 AM  
**To:** Cloyd, Melissa  
**Subject:** Re: Research Questions

Hi Melissa,

It would be nice to replicate some questions so that we may draw some observations about how your sample may be similar or may differ from the sample I collected at UCSC. So, yes, feel free to use some of the items. Feel free to send me a draft of the final protocol so I can see which items we may compare later.

I found the item, "what role do you play in your family" to be really interesting! I recommend using this item.

Becca

Rebecca Covarrubias, Ph.D.  
 Assistant Professor  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of California, Santa Cruz

**Transition Narratives - Spring 2016**  
*Interview Protocol*  
**Rebecca Covarrubias**  
**University of California/Santa Cruz**

### **Introduction to Study:**

Thanks for helping us. We want to ask you about your experiences transitioning from high school to college. The goal is to help students who are the first in their families to go to college. We're asking about your experiences to help us do a better job for you and future students.

We audio record the interviews. What you say will be kept strictly confidential. We transcribe the sessions and identify speakers with a made-up name. **Your name will not be identified** and what is shared in the interview is never shared elsewhere. Our discussion takes approximately 90 minutes, depending on how much you have to share. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Focus Group Questions**

### **Introduction Questions**



Tell me a little more about yourself. Where are you from? What year are you? What is your major? Do you live on campus or at home?

### University Transition Experiences

- Motivations to Attend College
  - What made you decide to attend college? *Were there any people that helped to influence your decision?*
  - What are your goals for after college?
- Tell me more about the transition process for you.
  - What emotions would you use to describe your experiences during the transition into college?
  - How did your family react when you started college? What are your family's general thoughts about higher education?
  - How often are you in contact with your family members? What forms do you use?
  - How often do you visit home, if you live away from home?

### Experiences in College

- Let's talk about how you are doing in college so far.
  - Have you been able to make connections with peers? Faculty and staff?
  - How are you doing academically?
  - Tell me more about your extracurricular involvements, including any clubs, leadership, volunteer experiences.
- Let's talk about differences in life at home and life at UCSC.
  - What do your parents do? What do your siblings do?
  - What would you say is your role in the family? How do you contribute to the family dynamic?
  - What are some differences in your lifestyle when you're at home and when you're at school? Are there any similarities?
  - In what ways, if any, is college changing you? Do you feel like you are becoming different than your family members? Have your family members ever mentioned this to you?
    - Any follow-up questions on "Independence"
  - Do you talk about school with your family?
  - Do you ever have issues with managing your responsibilities at school and at home? If so, elaborate on your experience.
  - When you think about the opportunities available to you because you are in college and the opportunities available to your family at home, what thoughts come to mind?
- Let's talk a little about the neighborhood in which you were raised.
  - Can you describe your neighborhood? What was it like growing up in that neighborhood?
  - Are there many people from your neighborhood that did well in school? That went to college?
  - How would you describe your high school? Did it help prepare you for college? Are there many people from your high school that went to college?

### Guilt Experiences

- Think about going to college and family members back home.
  - Have you ever had any regrets about going away to college?

- Some researchers have a theory called Family Achievement Guilt. They say this is an emotion that first in their family college students experience when they have better educational opportunities than other family members. The researchers say a person feels guilty if they get more privileges and independence because family members back home might not enjoy the same.
  - Does theory of family achievement guilt make sense to you? Can you relate to this?
  - Would you change any part of this definition? Do you have some other ideas?

### **Wrap-Up Questions**

- When you think about the most challenging or difficult times that you experience in college, what helps you persist through these challenges? That is, what values or beliefs do you draw from, what do you think about, or what do you do in order to help you keep persisting through these challenges?
- Do you have any recommendations on how to improve experiences for first-generation college students on campus?
- Are there any other experiences or thoughts that you want to share?

APPENDIX I: Family Achievement Guilt Scale Analysis

	independent Pevelage													Family Achievement Guilt Scale Responses													A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26											
Aliyah	1	3	3	4	1	2	4	4	3	3	1	3	3	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	1	1	1	4	2	4									
Bailey	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	1	1	1	1	3	3	4	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	4	3	4								
Charles	2	3	4	4	1	1	2	3	4	1	1	1	1	3	3	4	3	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	4	3	4									
Dana	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	4	3	4	3	1	1	1	1	4	3	4	4	3	1								
Erikah	2	2	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	1	1	1	1	4	0	0	0	4	0	4								
Fiona	2	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3								
Gina	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3								
Hazel	2	2	2	1	2	4	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4								
Ike	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	3	3	2	1	1	2	1	2	3	1	4	1	3	4								
Jessie	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	2	2	4	4	4								
Kiera	1	2	4	3	1	1	1	3	4	1	1	3	2	4	3	4	1	4	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	3	1	1	1								

- # 27) All but Kiera & Charles (sad) (exposed to things/opportunity)
- # 25) All but IKE (Pressure) (IKE said 2)
- # 15) <sup>except</sup> Charles, Fiona, IKE (frustrated) (Family doesn't understand)
- # 8) (sad) (opportunities) Dana, Hazel & Ike

# of highest reactions		Fresh	soph	Jun	sen
Aliyah - 10/8	Gina - 27	Hazel 2/5	Aliyah 10/8	Bailey 4/5	Charles 6/6
Bailey - 4/5	Hazel - 2/5	Ike 8/1	Kiera 4/4	Jessie 4/10	<del>Charles 6/6</del>
Charles - 6/6	Ike - 8/1			Dana 7/2	Erikah 15/10
Dana - 7/2	Jessie - 4/10				Fiona 13/4
Erikah - 15/10	Kiera - 4/4				Gina 27
Fiona - 13/4					