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"You Never Become Fully Independent": Family Roles and Independence in First-Generation College Students

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Abstract
First-generation (FG) college students often confront cultural mismatches between their interdependent backgrounds and university contexts that promote independent norms. Past work has documented this mismatch with various methodologies (e.g., self-report, lab experiments, longitudinal designs), but behavioral explorations have been minimal. Thus, the current study examined students' interdependent familial roles and the ways in which they enact either soft (e.g., self-expression) or hard (e.g., self-reliance) forms of independence. In-depth semi-structured interviews with 34 low-income, Latinx and Asian American FG students (25 females, 8 males, 1 other; mean age = 19.89, *SD* = 1.35) were conducted. Grounded theory analysis revealed six family role themes. Students described providing parents with emotional support and advocacy, language brokering, financial support, physical care, life advice, and heavy sibling caretaking. FG students also shared enacting four types of soft independence—including gaining freedom, becoming self-expressive, pursuing their individual interests, and becoming mature—and five types of hard independence—including being resilient, being self-reliant,

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being tough, being mature, and breaking tradition. These findings provide novel understandings of the lived experiences of FG students and insights on behaviors universities should recognize as valuable strengths in FG students.

Keywords
college issues, education/school, family, qualitative methods, resilience, culture/ethnic practices

> Yeah, so my first year here [in college] . . . Um, my dad had just lost his job, and my mom had just started working at the, uh, hotel . . . whenever we talked on the phone, [my mom] talked to me about how difficult it was, how her back was hurting, how her hands were hurting, how they would cramp up, um, how my little brother got sick and she couldn't [get] time off of work. Because my dad wasn't working . . . she wasn't able to pay internet bills . . . And, I started to think about like, what if I just kind of like, uh, took from the savings account that I had made for myself . . . and I was considering using that money to help my mom . . .
>
> —Natalie, Latina First-Generation College Student, 19 years old

U.S. universities reflect middle-class norms and values (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). As such, as students transition into these settings, there is an expectation for them to separate from family, to pursue individual paths, and to focus on their personal academic and life goals (Stephens et al., 2012). In these independent learning contexts, being distinct and unique earns recognition. Yet, for low-income, first-generation (FG) college students (i.e., students with no 4-year college-educated parents/guardians), transitioning to the university may be driven by a cultural focus of interdependence, including maintaining relationships and obligations to family (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jehangir, 2010; London, 1989; Rendón, 1994; Stephens et al., 2012). Low-income contexts often foster interdependence because they entail fewer financial resources and greater environmental constraints that require people to work together for support and survival (Kusserow, 2012; Lareau, 2003; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014, but see Stephens, Cameron, & Townsend, 2014). As Natalie described in the opening quote, her family's economic struggles led her to reassess her individual motives as a college student and expand her efforts toward supporting her family at the potential risk of increasing her own financial challenges at the university. Indeed, many low-income, FG students often have to manage

the independent expectations of college and the interdependent norms of familial responsibilities (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015). As London (1989) found through life histories, FG students overwhelmingly felt unsettled while in college because of the separation they experience from family and their worry that college will change and distance them from family.

This central focus on family is an important consideration in FG student matriculation and persistence in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). For many reasons, FG students find it more challenging to persist in college relative to their continuing-generation (CG) college counterparts (i.e., students with at least one 4-year college-educated parent/guardian; Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, & Covarrubias, 2018; Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). In a longitudinal study, Ishitani (2003) found that FG students were 71% more likely not to continue at the university after their first year compared to CG students (see also Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017). To understand these patterns, insights into FG students' beliefs and practices as they simultaneously navigate familial responsibilities and the middle-class norms of the university context are needed.

Cultural (Mis)match Between Home and University Values and Settings

Cultural mismatch theory provides a framework for understanding how universities may unintentionally perpetuate attrition among FG students. This theory describes how students are at an advantage when their cultural beliefs mirror the university middle-class culture of independence and are disadvantaged when they mismatch these independent norms (Stephens et al., 2012). Based on surveys, Stephens et al. (2012) found that a majority of university administrators endorsed more independent expectations for students, such as self-expression and individual freedom. The authors then tested whether this privileging of independence aligned with students' motives for attending college. They found that both FG and CG students endorsed independent motives, such as seeing college as a place to grow as autonomous individuals. However, relative to CG students, FG students had more interdependent motives for attending college, such as helping family after graduating. Importantly, independent motives positively predicted grades for students in their first 2 years of college, while interdependent motives negatively predicted grades.

The harmful effects of a cultural mismatch on performance have also been demonstrated through lab experiments (Stephens et al., 2012) and responses to vignette scenarios (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Stephens et al. (2012) found that when students read a university welcome letter that included an

independent message highlighting individual choice, FG students did worse on a performance task relative to CG students. In a different methodological approach, Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) had 14 FG students—all from Latinx immigrant backgrounds—respond to a vignette that included a conflict scenario in which they had to choose between interdependent familial demands and independent university demands. They found that students ultimately chose university demands because they recognized this was the way to be successful at their elite institution. Subsequent focus-group interviews revealed that students encountered similar competing demands in their lives, such as making frequent visits home while trying to study for an exam, and that these conflicts undermined their performance. In examining the intersection of race and social class, Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) illustrated how the experiences of being from a low-income, immigrant, and Latinx background uniquely situates these students in a conflict where they have to collectively work with family despite the demands of the university context.

In general, this prior work on the cultural mismatch shows that although FG students model some forms of independence from their exposure to middle-class American norms in everyday life, they experience a mismatch when universities fail to recognize interdependence as a valuable way of being. While the mismatch has been documented with various methods, past work has not examined how FG students may encounter a cultural mismatch in the everyday behavioral practices they engage in at home and at school. That is, how do FG students' practices—both with family and while in college—align or misalign with the cultural expectations of the university context?

Past work has examined these behavioral mismatches in younger students (Kohn, 1963; Kusserow, 2012; Lareau, 2003). Through observations and interviews with parents and teachers of pre-school students, Kusserow (2012) noticed a class-based difference in children's socialization patterns at home and at school. In the upper- and middle-class neighborhoods, families endorsed *soft independence*: an emotion-focused sense of independence wherein children were nudged to explore their feelings and to express their preferences as they developed into unique individuals. In contrast, in the working-class neighborhoods, families valued *hard independence*: a survival-focused sense of self-reliance. With a limited or nonexistent safety net in working-class neighborhoods, children were taught to be tough individuals who respected hierarchy and followed rules. Despite different home practices, Kusserow found that students encountered values of soft independence, such as creativity and reflective thought, in their pre-school contexts. Children from middle- and upper-class neighborhoods completed tasks with imagination and verbal expression, skills that they had been encouraged to express from an early age. In contrast, children from working-class neighborhoods

often felt confused by the instructions to use imagination. Kusserow observed that middle- and upper-class students experienced a continuation of their home environment when adjusting to pre-school, whereas working-class students experienced an abrupt shift from the norms they were socialized to follow and the norms privileged in their classrooms.

To our knowledge, Kusserow (2012) is the only researcher to distinguish between hard and soft forms of independence, particularly within different social class settings. As such, the nuanced ways of enacting independence have not been documented for FG students, which is a contribution of the current work. Using this lens of class-based independence, we analyzed past work and found one paper documenting how low-income and FG students react to university norms of soft independence. In focus group interviews with first-year students, Covarrubias, Gallimore, and Okagaki (2018) noticed students' mixed reactions toward having more freedom and becoming more mature. Whereas some students saw their increased soft independence as a highlight of the college experience, others were hesitant to embrace this independence due to the difficulty in maintaining interdependent relations at home. Perhaps, for some students, experiencing soft independence was an abrupt shift from the hard independence experienced at home. Consequently, these expectations for soft independence may not fully include students' continued commitment to contribute to and to stay connected with family.

We examine these assumptions in the current study. Specifically, we investigate whether FG students' ways of understanding their own independence (i.e., soft or hard independence) mismatch the university's expectations for soft independence. That is, we ask: in what ways do FG students demonstrate soft and hard forms of independence, and are these practices similar to what universities expect of students? Kusserow (2012) found that working-class contexts facilitate hard forms of independence, such as being self-reliant, resilient, and tough, and that students raised in these contexts experience a mismatch between their home and school settings. FG students likely experience a similar mismatch. In particular, following Kusserow (2012), we argue that for FG students, engaging in hard independence is not only a way of navigating new territory and uncertain outcomes but also a way of supporting and staying connected to family. This continued commitment to family is a more common way in which literature has documented the mismatch; specifically, research has examined how interdependent commitments to family may create tension with the independent commitments expected in the school environment (Stephens et al., 2012; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). In addition to examining how forms of independence mismatch between family and the university, we also examine how interdependent

commitments, in the form of family roles, relate to a cultural mismatch for FG students.

The Role of Family in the FG Student Experience

Family is an important influence on the success of many FG students (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). FG students, mainly from Latinx and Asian backgrounds, often enter the university with the obligation or desire to stay connected to family (Benigno, 2012; Jackson, Galvez, Landa, Buonora, & Thoman, 2016; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015; Sy & Romero, 2008; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b). Using longitudinal daily diaries, Telzer and Fuligni (2009b) reported the amount of days Mexican American, White, and Chinese American high school students spent participating in family responsibilities, such as helping around the household, caring for siblings, and helping family with translation. They found that Mexican American and Chinese American students spent more days helping family than White students, which was negatively related to school grades. For White students, family assistance was unrelated to grades. Extending this work to college samples and taking an intersectional approach (see Collins, 2015), Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) documented how Latinx FG students' familial obligations conflicted with school demands. Despite these negative associations with family role engagement, it is important to note that Latinx adolescents and FG students do report positive associations with family roles, such as feeling pride for serving as cultural and language brokers for their families (Cooper, 2011).

Although valuable for understanding the mismatch between home and school obligations and values, this past work did not address the many roles that FG students engage in with their families. In the current study, we provide an in-depth analysis of the surrounding social contexts (e.g., financial assistance due to economic distress) in which FG students of color live and how this is related to the family roles they enact while fulfilling their academic tasks and goals. Specific family roles have been documented extensively in literature on parentification, a role reversal wherein a child takes on a parental role in their family (Burton, 2007; Gilford & Reynolds, 2011; Hooper, Wallace, Doehler, & Dantzler, 2012). Yet, this work is primarily focused on youth whose families have faced severe trauma (i.e., substance abuse, mental health crisis, divorce, or loss of employment among parents) that have led to parentification (Hooper, DeCoster, White, & Voltz, 2011; Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski, & Tomek, 2012). Through focus groups, Gilford and Reynolds (2011) examined the roles of parentified Black college women

and found that they reported participating in family roles such as caring for siblings, driving family members to the doctor's office, providing financial assistance, and offering advice on big family matters. Although the parentification literature provides examples of family roles, this work argues that these roles are problematic for children's development, well-being, and outcomes (Hooper et al., 2011; Hooper, Tomek, Bond, & Reif, 2015; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002) and can lead to inappropriate attachment relationships between parents and their children (Rothbaum et al., 2002).

Yet, children assuming familial roles is a normative practice in many non-Western societies (Burton, 2007; Correa-Chávez, Mejía-Arauz, & Rogoff, 2015; Leung, Wong, Wong, & McBride-Chang, 2010). In her ethnography with 10 low-income Latinx families, Valdés (1996) discussed the focus on *familismo*, or the importance of family ties (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). Older children were expected to assume caretaking responsibility for younger siblings and to enforce family rules. This act of "pitching in" is also evident in children from Indigenous and rural communities of Mexico and Guatemala (Fernández, 2015; Rogoff, 2014). Rogoff (2014) described the process of "pitching in" as children striving to become valued members of their families and communities by learning to help care for siblings and contributing to household chores through observation and practice. This work highlights how engaging in family roles draws families closer together, promotes well-being, and fosters educational resilience (Azmitia et al., 2018).

No work, to our knowledge, has examined the everyday familial roles of low-income FG students and the ways of enacting independence as they navigate the middle-class university context. Although we focus our questions and analyses on the FG identity, we recognize that our entire sample is from both Latinx and Asian (primarily Southeast Asian) backgrounds—two cultural groups for which family is central to one's identity. This ethnic/racial sample constitutes the majority of the FG population at the university in which the study took place and reflects important intersectional identities that inform students' experiences with family roles and their educational and career ideation. That is, the experience of being a person of color from a low-income background facilitates a commitment to remain connected to and to support family members at home (see Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jackson et al., 2016; Jehangir et al., 2015; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015) and to reframe one's educational pursuits as beneficial to the family as a whole (i.e., as a potential mechanism for economic and class mobility). In examining this specific population of students, we shed light on the home and school experiences of a fast-growing new generation of college students.

Method

University Setting and Participants

Participants attended a public, west coast university serving approximately 18,063 undergraduate and graduate students. The student demographic at the time of the study was 33% White, 31% Latinx, 22% Asian, 7% two or more races, 4% International, 2% African American, and 1% Native American. In 2012, the university was designated a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and has worked toward developing and implementing a host of comprehensive student services aimed to facilitate the success of Latinx and other students. For example, there is one grant initiative dedicated to improving students' sense of belonging, reading and writing skills, and math comprehension and improving the quality of campus advising for students. In 2016, enrollment of FG undergraduate students reached 42%. Before the steady growth of FG students on campus and before the HSI designation, the university offered a number of services to support FG students. Some services included peer advising and mentoring, free printing, financial support in the form of emergency funds for housing and food, summer bridge programs, graduate and professional school workshops, a textbook lending library, a research experience program, and other critical services related to holistic student development. Because of the high cost of living in the surrounding city, students often struggle with food and housing insecurities (Azmitia et al., 2018). Although the programs listed provide some support toward these challenges, there is much room for growth in supporting students financially in order to be able to thrive in the classroom and on campus.

During Spring 2016, FG students were recruited either through the Psychology Subject Pool (n = 25) or via word of mouth from a classroom announcement or previous participants (n = 9). A total of 34 FG students (22 Latinx, 11 Asian, 1 Asian Latinx mixed-raced student; 25 women, 8 men, 1 non-binary; 11 freshmen, 11 sophomores, 5 juniors, 7 seniors; mean age = 19.89, SD = 1.35) participated in the study. On an 8-point income scale (1 = less than US$10,000; 2 = US$10,000–US$29,999; 3 = US$30,000–US$49,999; 4 = US$50,000–US$69,999; 5 = US$70,000–US$100,000; 6 = US$100,000–US$150,000; 7 = US$150,000–US$200,000; 8 = more than US$200,000), FG students reported a mean family household income of US$10,000–US$29,999 (SD = 0.79).

Procedure

The principal investigator (PI) who conducted all interviews is a female, Mexican American faculty member at the university and is also from a FG

background. The PI drew from theory and research on the cultural transition to college for FG students, as well as her own personal background and extensive experiences working with FG students to create the interview questions for participants. When interacting with participants, the PI was open about her FG identity, thus providing a welcoming environment to discuss related experiences.

Students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews that aimed to deepen our understanding of students' transition experiences to college. Through semi-structured interviews, participants could openly express their experiences (Josselson, 2004; Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013). In addition, the interviewer was able to modify questions and delve deeper into certain themes that reoccurred in previous interviews (Ponterotto et al., 2013). The interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded. After the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, received US$15 or course credit, and were thanked for their participation. A team of undergraduate research assistants transcribed the interview audio files verbatim and checked the transcriptions for accuracy. All procedures and materials were approved by and in compliance with the university's Institutional Review Board.

Coding Procedure

The research team, including two faculty members, two graduate student researchers, and two undergraduate researchers, developed codes through three stages of grounded-theory analysis: open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Fassinger, 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2013). In open-coding, the research team discussed several observations of similarities and dissimilarities among student responses. In the axial and selective coding phase, the team constructed two primary concepts: (a) *family role behaviors*—descriptions of family roles both prior to and during college, and (b) *soft and hard independence behaviors*—descriptions of independence both prior to and during college. As a form of analyst triangulation (Patton, 1999), the research team then workshopped a draft of the codebook with a research group of students and faculty across disciplines that specialize in narrative theory and methods. This allowed the research team to view the data from multiple perspectives (Patton, 1999) and to receive feedback on analytic and interpretive components of the coding categories.

After the codebook was finalized, two members of the research team independently coded interview transcripts using an encrypted, online qualitative analysis software, Dedoose. A "1" was applied if a code was present in the interview, and a "0" was applied if a code was absent. The two coders

initially coded interview transcripts for seven randomly selected interview transcripts and discussed any discrepant codes. Through detailed discussions, the coders refined the codebook. The coders then independently coded six randomly selected interview transcripts. Given that the data stem from semi-structured interviews, the researchers used percent agreement for its usefulness in extracting the specific subthemes from the larger narrative (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Percentages were calculated by comparing the frequency of codes by both researchers for each code; for the present study, this ranged between 66.7% and 100% agreement. The lead coder then coded the remaining 20 interview transcripts.

Findings and Discussion

Family Roles

Six family roles were identified by 27 (79.41%) of the 34 FG students. Of those who identified family roles, 58.82% reported being a source of emotional support and advocate for family, 38.24% a language and/or financial broker, 35.29% a source of physical support, 32.35% a sibling caretaker, 26.47% a source of financial support, and 14.71% an advice giver. The seven students who were identified as having no family roles typically described the heavy support they received from their parents. Although one of these students did partake in heavy caretaking of younger cousins, we did not include this role because our theme was specific to sibling caretaking.

Providing emotional support and advocacy. The most common family role that students described enacting was offering emotional support for obstacles faced at home and being an advocate, oftentimes for mothers. Bella, a 19-year-old Latina student, described the support she gave her mother:

> She has always kind of depended on me for whatever she needs or whenever she needs to talk she is dependent on me. And it's like I have the role where sometimes it feels like she puts stuff on me.

Bella described how she felt responsible to take on this role because, as she stated further in the interview, her mother disclosed to her that she could not handle all of the pressures of life. Melanie, a 22-year-old Southeast Asian student, discussed her role as her mother's voice,

> . . . my dad's a little stubborn, at times, and my mom's very passive and very sweet. She never speaks up if she's frustrated. She tells me a lot of it. So, I stand up for her and say, "Dad, that's really mean," and then I get yelled at (laughs).

Like Bella and Melanie, students described their role as listeners, confidants, emotional caretakers, and advocates. Prior research has discussed the different types of support FG students receive from family members (Azmitia et al., 2018; Bui, 2002; Nichols & Islas, 2016; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011), but has not fully documented the emotional support offered by students to families. These findings suggest that family support is a reciprocal process among students and their family members.

Being a language and financial broker. Students shared experiences as language and financial brokers for various needs such as writing checks, filling out paperwork, and being the point of contact for the family's language needs. Language brokering includes the translation and interpretation of information for members of the family (Love & Buriel, 2007). Tina, a 19-year-old Southeast Asian student, described her translation role:

> Um, I think um, my role's like a secretary in the house. Like, I do all the paperwork, like, I talk to my mom's social worker. I talk to her dentist. I talk to her doctor. I talk to everyone . . . wherever she goes, she takes me with her.

Carla, a 19-year-old Latina FG student, shared a similar sentiment of having to continually help with translation:

> I think, honestly, that I play like a big role. Because since my parents do not speak English, like I have to like always be the one interpreting. Like, usually I am the one that goes into the computer and pays the bills, or do like the phone calls and what not. So, I feel like I do play a big part of it, because still while being over here [in college], my dad still calls me and says "can you pay the car?"

For Carla, translation was the primary contribution to her family so much so that it dictated her college selection because it allowed her to stay close to home (see Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The role of a broker took on many forms among students. For some, the role was minimal and "normal," as they had held the role from a young age. Angela, a 22-year-old Latina student, reflected on her language broker role as fairly consistent in her life, "I wouldn't say I have a specific role in the family, but usually I have helped my parents in terms of translation because they don't speak English, so that's something that we, my siblings have had to do." For others, the responsibility to be a broker was time-consuming. Hannah, an 18-year-old Southeast Asian student, described how normal translation duties became more difficult while in college:

> I'm the oldest and, um, like in my family dynamic, it was like I dealt with a lot when I was little because it was like, "Oh, you're our first child and you know English more than us." So, I guess it started in middle school where I would be the one to be at home with my siblings and if they had any questions about bills or anything like insurance or stuff like that they wouldn't know, like they would try asking me and I would try looking it up. So, now that they're working like, um, more than they did before it's kind of weird, because my role is now in college and it's a lot harder to do here than at home.

Tina expressed a similar difficulty when she described a situation in which she had to leave class and return home, 45 minutes away, to complete paperwork for her family. These findings are consistent with extensive literature on language brokering with children from immigrant families (Acoach & Webb, 2004; Love & Buriel, 2007; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Weisskirch & Alva-Alatorre, 2002).

Providing financial support. Students discussed being a financial resource to help parents with reoccurring financial struggles. Although there is scarce work in this area, Jehangir et al. (2015) found a common theme of financial responsibilities in their interviews with low-income, FG students. To illustrate this experience, Cristal, an 18-year-old Southeast Asian student in the current study, mentioned, "I had to take on like small tutoring jobs here and there to like help my mom out." Similar to Jehangir et al.'s (2015) observations, financially providing for themselves and family members was an expected pattern in the family for Cristal and other students. Rose, a 20-year-old Latina student, described, "Sure you're their child but they rely on you for either emotional support, financial support. [You're] another person to work for the family."

Still, students recognized how this expectation or practice was different from the experiences of their peers. Anna, a 22-year-old Latina student, recalled,

> . . . well one of the things was when I started working and I saw all [the] other people and they weren't working. And I was like, "why do they get to not work and why do- why do I have to work?" But I always say I had to work because I had, I was helping my parents with like bills and stuff. Not because they told me, but because I wanted to, and I knew they were struggling financially so I was like, okay, maybe I can help you out in this sort of way . . . so there's this thing where I have a job and still go to school, but then like other people don't . . .

Anna articulated how her family's financial need propelled her to continue working so that she could support herself and her family while balancing the

demands of school. This also came with an awareness that others at the university did not have to support themselves or families in similar ways while being full-time students.

Providing physical support. Students offered physical acts of support, including tending to their parents' home, helping family navigate technology, or transporting family members to and from medical appointments. Telzer and Fuligni (2009a) captured similar acts of physical support (e.g., helping with cooking, running errands, and cleaning) in daily diary studies with Latinx and Asian high school students, but not with FG populations. Gilford and Reynolds (2011) discussed how one familial role of the Black college women in their sample, many who were FG students, was to drive family members to doctors' visits. Extending this work with a particular focus on FG students, we found that students in our study shared other such examples.

For Jennifer, a 19-year-old Latina, the responsibility of handling general difficulties at home was a frequent task that she navigated from college,

> . . . with technology, her phone, she tells me "Oh, I don't know why I took a picture. I don't know where it is." And I'm like, "I'm not there, Mom, I don't know." But when I go see her I have to fix it and I have to teach her how to do things. So, yeah that's been throughout these two years, that's always happened.

Manny, a 22-year-old Latino, also shared his role in solving technology-related difficulties for his parents, ". . . I took on that role ever since I was eleven or twelve . . . like they still call me whenever . . ." Since Manny engaged in this role at an early age, the expectation to continue this role was clear for him. Manny then spoke about the tension he experienced if he did not provide such help, ". . . now it's more of a thing of 'whenever you get the time' [to help], but I feel like if I don't do it, they're gonna get a little upset."

Similar tensions arose for other students. Students simultaneously recognized the need to support their families in daily tasks while having to be physically present at the university. Natalie, a 19-year-old Latina, mentioned her family's difficult shift to only having one "head of the house" and her desire to alleviate that role through physical support when at home:

> So whenever I would go home . . . I would pick up my little brother from school, so my mom wouldn't have to do it, do a lot of cooking. That was mainly what I would be doing, especially last year, too . . . whenever I go home, do the cooking, do the cleaning, uh go get groceries . . .

Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) found a similar tension shared by their sample of Latinx FG students when they described the conflict of deciding how

to support family, such as attending family events, while meeting school obligations.

Sibling caregiving. Students held substantial roles beyond babysitting in various aspects of their siblings' lives, such as being responsible for their health, transportation, schooling, and, at times, disciplinary decisions. Building on work demonstrating the extensive involvement with siblings for Latinx students (Rogoff, 2014; Valdés, 1996), FG students in this study shared ways in which they tried to maintain these roles while being the first to attend college. Ashley, a 21-year-old Asian student, shared her concern for her sisters' well-being:

> Were they being cared for well? Because, you know I used to be the one to pick them up from school. I would feed them. So, I was worried, you know, I'm not there anymore. I was just worried, are they eating enough? Are they sleeping well? Because I feel like I was really involved with their lives.

Students who had come into college as current sibling caretakers shared the difficulty of leaving their roles and of trying to maintain these roles through different means, such as communicating over the phone. For example, Natalie shared that her sibling caretaker role took on a "long distance" form when she returned to college:

> . . . my brother was constantly kind of rebelling against my mom, and my mom was constantly tired. So, she didn't really have energy to deal with it. So, I was kind of trying to, like, from long-distance trying to communicate with my brother constantly to like make him understand, kind of like mothering him when my mom was kind of like tired and like doing her own thing . . .

This stress in trying to care for siblings from afar was a shared experience among participants. This was particularly true for those who described themselves as parental figures to their siblings before transitioning to college, like Natalie, who emphasized being "second mom" to her brothers from a young age: "I grew up helping my mom raise both of them."

Giving advice. Finally, students shared being sought after by parents to provide advice for big life decisions. Often, this was because parents thought their children were gaining extensive knowledge in college that could inform decisions in the home context. Frank, an 18-year old Latino student, reflected on his newfound role as an advice giver to his parents since starting college, "They see me as a higher person they could go to, so that feels nice." Different

from an emotional support, students who were advice givers in their family were specifically sought out to weigh in on decisions for the family's future, such as moving to a new house or buying a car, that usually only concern the heads of household. Nelson et al. (2006) also documented the role of advice giving in their study of low-income, ethnically diverse professors; they noted that as these professors moved through college, they benefited from providing such advice to family.

Summary. Engaging in family roles was a typical practice for many FG students in our sample, which supports prior literature with certain racial-ethnic groups (Cooper, 2011; Rogoff, 2014; Valdés, 1996). However, when students spoke of these practices that helped them to remain connected to families, they also spoke of the tension they experienced to maintain these roles once they transitioned to the university. Once at the university, students described wanting to continue their contributions to family while still keeping on track with academic tasks and demands (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). These findings demonstrate how the desire and commitment to engage in family roles might run counter to, or mismatch, the university expectation to dedicate one's time to pursuing individual goals. Furthermore, they highlight the associated stress in trying to manage both demands (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015).

Soft and Hard Independence Behaviors

Not only did FG students experience a disconnect in their interdependent values with the university-specific norms of soft independence, they also experienced a disconnect in how they engage in both soft and hard independence before and during the transition to college. All student participants (100%) described enacting both soft and hard independence. We identified four themes of soft independence such as experiencing freedom (94.12%), pursuing their own interest (76.47%), becoming more mature (73.53%), and engaging in self-expression (41.18%). Extending literature, we also found that all FG students in our sample shared themes of hard independence. We identified five themes, including showing resilience (76.47%), being self-reliant (61.76%), being "tough" for family (47.06%), recognizing their maturity coming into college (29.41%), and breaking traditional family norms (23.53%).

The high frequency of soft independence is expected, given that students, regardless of social class, engage in American contexts that reflect soft independence (e.g., through media, public schooling; Arnett, 1995; Stephens et al., 2012). Yet, students shared that these behaviors developed as a result of transitioning to college. Hard independence, however, was described as

primarily occurring in relation to family back home or before transitioning to college. There were only a few explicit examples of ways in which they enacted hard independence in the college setting.

Soft Independence

Gaining freedom. All students shared gaining freedom in college, including being free to dictate their own schedules without worrying about parental guidelines or expectations, which may be typical of the college experience (Lowe & Dotterer, 2017). Ashley said, “Here, I don’t have to worry about my mom. So, I don’t have to worry about getting home on time.” For some students, however, freedom took on a different meaning related to changes in environmental factors such as having more space or safety. Angela shared,

> I don’t have my own room. I had to share with my sister. So, I didn’t feel like I had privacy. Coming here, it gave me that privacy. When I’m here, like, I can always go out for walks. I can walk. I can go to the store. I can get the bus, and feel safe, you know. So, that feels very nice just to be able to go out and not be scared that someone’s going to point a gun at you or tell you like, “hey give me all your money.”

It is important to note the difference in Ashley’s and Angela’s description of freedom. Ashley’s experience of freedom of choice and of not “being home on time” most closely aligns with soft independence, even though her experiences were tied to worrying about being at home for her mother. Angela spoke of freedom from danger and from non-private quarters, which aligns with working-class socialization and lived experiences (Kusserow, 2012). This finding suggests that even though FG students may experience soft forms of independence, such as freedom, their social class backgrounds can determine how soft independence is experienced in the university.

Becoming self-expressive. Students also shared being able to express themselves and, at times, how that affected their interactions at home. Frank reflected on the conflicting comments he received from family once he began expressing himself in new ways, “I started dyeing my hair and wearing like different clothes and my parents were like, ‘You are White now.’” Although he embraced this form of soft independence, Frank had to negotiate this change with his family, “. . . now they are very accepting of me developing my own ideas but they are still questioning [my appearance] physically.” For Eric, a 22-year-old mixed-race student, attending college was a place where “I get to be me and enjoy without being judged.” Eric recognized that this newfound opportunity to express himself was different than the opportunities

available at home, "I'm just saying, I get to express myself more and get to do stuff that I don't get to do at home."

Becoming self-expressive was a common expectation reported by university administrators (Stephens et al., 2012) and although FG students reported experiencing this as a result of transitioning to the university, in some instances it created tension at home. Being overly self-expressive might contrast respect norms within working-class (Kusserow, 2012; Lareau, 2003) and Latinx (Valdés, 1996) families. Valdés (1996), for example, described how respect was demonstrated in low-income Latinx families by what young children *did not do*. To demonstrate respect for their mothers, young children were expected to not interrupt conversations among adults, act out, or demand attention. They were expected to sit quietly and listen to the surrounding conversation, rather than to express their preferences or opinions about discussion topics. In becoming more self-expressive in university settings, FG students are likely to experience a mismatch with the clear norms of some working-class home settings.

Pursuing their own interests. Students discussed pursuing their own academic and career interests. Destiny, a 21-year-old Latina, shared,

> Um, so yeah that, too, like the opportunities of like you know just pursuing a higher education, and then having a better job and like a [more stable] job than like you know, um, my parents, which they would want me to have, you know.

Some students explicitly mentioned the opportunity to be happy as a result of pursuing their interests. Reflecting on the opportunities he pursued coming from a low-income community, Frank mentioned, "I feel like, um, one of the biggest opportunities that like wasn't really available for, um, for people back home, in general, is the opportunity for happiness."

Although the importance of pursuing individual interests in college for FG students is captured in prior work (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Stephens et al., 2012), students in the current study also shared how these pursuits came at a cost interpersonally (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). In his interview, Frank recognized the difficulty of making ends meet in his community and how this contrasted with the opportunity he had in college to place happiness as a central pursuit in life rather than financial concerns. This contrast can likely result in experiences of guilt for FG students (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Piorkowski, 1983).

Gaining maturity. Students mentioned becoming more mature or responsible in college as they weathered challenges, learned to actively pursue resources,

and navigated turning points in their lives and educational pathways. This is a common theme among college students (Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Aaron, a 20-year-old Latino, shared, "I'm more mature. Like, I feel like I know a lot more. So, I take things a little more serious now, for sure." Jennifer shared when she became more mature:

> [L]ast year I wasn't um . . . I didn't manage my time or my money well. And now, this year, I just- I realized that I had to get it together. I always make sure I'm early to my classes. I'm passing all my classes with good grades. And I'm making sure that the money I get from leftover loans last throughout the whole quarter, so I don't have to ask my mom for money or anything.

Jennifer shared an example of individual growth and mentioned reducing burden to her mother as a motivating factor. That is, although some FG students experience soft independence, they reference family as an underlying motivation for these behaviors. Some students also noted that an important aspect of becoming more responsible involved anticipating deadlines, such as those required for obtaining financial aid, and initiating connections with mentors and organizations that could help them apply for internships and positions at the university, the community, other states, and other countries.

Summary. In general, although all FG students mentioned engaging in soft independence, these behaviors did not completely align with notions of soft independence as described by Kusserow (2012) or as prioritized in university settings (Stephens et al., 2012). For some students, behaviors of soft independence were informed by their working-class backgrounds. Having freedom or pursuing one's own happiness were framed as privileges, as students recognized that their parents were not afforded the same opportunities. For some students, experiencing freedom went beyond choosing a schedule, but was rather the privilege of having more living space and safer spaces to take walks or having enough food to eat than what was available at home. Soft independence also came at an interpersonal cost. When engaging in self-expression (e.g., dyeing one's hair), students had to negotiate comments from family members who mentioned students were "changing." These mixed reactions to soft independence are consistent with past work with FG and low-income students at elite universities (Covarrubias et al., 2018), where students remarked on the difficulty of balancing freedom and maturity with interdependent relations at home.

Hard Independence

Being resilient. Resilience and overcoming challenge was the most commonly described behavior of hard independence. Resilience is often thought of as

the ability to thrive and persist through adverse life situations and circumstances (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). As one example of this resilience, Perla, a 19-year-old Southeast Asian student, shared,

> . . . at this time, it was junior year of high school . . . almost every single day there'd be a problem at home, so that really made me feel down and also me trying to work hard in school. And, on top of that, the small space that we have . . . There's one time where I was just so out of it I had to get my stuff and study in the laundry room [of the apartment complex] because it was just so hard. And I feel like the way I coped with it was to work harder in school and spend more time at school.

Rather than giving in to the immense stress she felt, Perla found a space to work, even if it was through temporary means. Bella described her family's resilience in the aftermath of her father's recent deportation, "he has been deported three times already, and he always makes it back anyways. So, it's kind of just like we are going to have to tighten the money and the house." Resilience was often described in response to class-based or immigration-based circumstances. The notion of resilience among FG students is consistent with past longitudinal survey studies, which also demonstrated a link with academic success (Azmitia et al., 2018).

Being self-reliant. Students also shared being self-reliant when navigating challenges. Being self-reliant was a common theme that Kusserow (2012) observed among her sample of working-class families; parents encouraged their children to be self-reliant in order to deal with the inevitable challenges of life (e.g., low wages, little vacation, loss). FG students shared different examples of their self-reliance when trying to navigate university resources and spaces alone. Frank navigated the college application process alone with limited resources,

> I was still kind of independent in a way back home. Like, I did all my like financial stuff alone. And, like, I did all these different things alone cause [my parents] couldn't really help, cause they didn't go through the process . . .

Students also shared the pressures to solely fulfill personal and familial goals. Perla shared the pressure she feels to attain a college degree for herself and for her family:

> Basically, I know that my parents have great expectations for me, of me succeeding . . . we're a low-income family. It's not enough money for them to save up. Whatever money they save up they invest in me, so I kinda feel that

> pressure . . . I can't afford to mess up because my parents put so much in me . . . they look at me as somebody that will help them in the future . . . like eventually they wouldn't have to work, and I'll be the daughter that would help them, and you know, give them a better life . . .

Perla was committed to fulfilling her parents' wishes, even knowing she had limited support. In her reflection, she shared that she must rely on herself to not "mess up" for her family. The tendency to rely on oneself to navigate the university setting is one potential concern for the success of FG students. If students rely on themselves to navigate unclear rules of the university, they might miss out on campus resource opportunities that are critical for students' success (Azmitia et al., 2018; Azmitia et al., 2013; Stephens, Hamedani et al., 2014).

Being tough. Students spoke of the necessity to "be tough" for the family as to not create unnecessary burden or stress on one's family or to not let family down. Kusserow (2012) observed toughness in working-class homes when parents often teased, punished, or issued direct demands to children without treating them as fragile beings. Working-class parents treated children in stern ways because they believed their children were already tough to begin with, or "tough to start." Similarly, in the current study, some FG students mentioned toughness as a cultural strength valued in their families. Melanie shared,

> Um, I think like before when I was really stressed or something, I felt like I couldn't do it. I felt like "Man, what am I doing? College is so hard," but I've never been one to completely give up on anything. And, I feel that it's because my parents, it's the thing with immigrant, like immigrant children.

Melanie described how her parents taught her toughness by example, "I remember . . . all the things [my mom has] been through, how hard it is, and how she's still going through it." When Melanie felt down, she was reminded of their struggle and of the strength to not give up, "If there are challenges, you have to persist through these things . . ." Rose, a 20-year-old Latina, shared similar views on her culture's influence as she described the reasoning behind her decision to keep her struggles from her family: "To this day, my mom doesn't know that I struggled in college . . . at least in my culture, you're taught to be a strong woman." Although being tough requires some resilience and self-reliance among FG students to persist through challenging situations, we argue that being tough is different in that it is a desire to not show weakness to others or to show that you are tough to start, as Kusserow (2012) observed. In some ways, FG students were also motivated to be tough to protect families from further concern or worry about their experiences in college.

Being responsible. In addition to becoming more mature in college, students also shared how the adversity they faced early on contributed to being responsible even before entering college. Different from becoming more mature, a softer form of independence, being responsible demonstrated hard independence because it highlighted the ways in which FG students already engaged in heavy family commitments before coming to college (Valdés, 1996). This is illustrated by Manny when he explained, "I mean, in terms of being independent, that didn't change much for me because I grew independent once I started helping out my family . . . once I started becoming a head of the household." Michael, a 20-year-old Latino, concisely described the necessity of maturity in decision-making when reflecting on his decision to remove himself from gang affiliation as a young boy, "Because I work so hard, I saw where I needed to change . . ." Liz, an 18-year-old Latina, shared a defining moment in her maturing at a young age, "Well, back home, I was pretty independent since my mom left when, um, I was still in high school. So, I was senior, so I guess I had to be independent." She later described how her maturity set her apart from other students, "I see that other people say that they have to be independent when they [come] to college, but I feel like I was already independent when I came to college." For many FG students, this independence started in childhood, when they had to make decisions while caring for siblings, serving as translators and scribes for their parents as they filled out forms or communicated with employers, physicians, or school administrators and teachers, or found jobs to earn money for the family and college.

Breaking tradition. A few students shared that they "broke tradition" by attending college because the expectation was to fulfill a traditional or pressing role within the family. Rose shared some of the conflicting responses she received from not following this tradition:

> And I think it definitely has to do with, like, the traditional way of thinking . . . that your daughter doesn't leave home until she gets married. So, usually that happens until your daughter is 25, 26. So, having your daughter leave when she's 18, like, that was very hard on [my mom]. And then, I don't have a good relationship with my dad, so he doesn't support me going to college. He's also very traditional in his way of thinking.

The research team attributed this act of breaking tradition as hard independence for two reasons. First, it is not a behavior consistent with middle-class independence described by Kusserow (2012), which instead described a delicate flourishing of personal growth through emotional expression. Second, students mentioned that breaking tradition would potentially benefit the

family in the long run. As such, this behavior aligned with the family-oriented behaviors of hard independence than self-oriented behaviors of soft independence typical of the college experience.

Summary. When demonstrating both soft and hard independence, helping family continued to be an important consideration. Students remained resilient by reminding themselves of their goals to support their family in the future. Anna described this best when she shared how her independence was a means to achieving her parents' American dream, "I don't feel independent from them, I feel very much tied to them, which motivates me more . . . I feel [that] because I'm succeeding, they're going to succeed too . . ." Students also demonstrated being tenacious in finding work opportunities to self-fund their education so as not to be a financial burden to their families. As Bella, a 19-year-old Latina, mentioned, "You have to get a job and you have to like pay for your own stuff. You can't be depending on your family the entire time."

Implications and Future Research

Our interviews shed light onto the specific interdependent and independent behaviors that Latinx and Asian FG students engage in with their families and in the middle-class university setting, which provides a novel, nuanced view of the cultural mismatch for FG students. While transitioning to a new social context that requires adapting to new beliefs, practices, and norms (Jehangir, 2010; Rendón, 1994), these students are working to maintain and honor their family commitments. Latinx and Asian FG students shared that these family roles are part of a larger cultural norm to remain connected with family (Burton, 2007; Valdés, 1996) and not atypical as parentification literature would suggest.

In drawing attention to these heavy family roles, universities can begin to recognize and respond to the experiences of a new generation of college students: those from low-income, FG, and ethnic/racial minority backgrounds. These students bring with them pre-existing cultural, financial, and tangible responsibilities and, as such, there is institutional need to create networks of support for students and families (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Jehangir et al., 2015). As one example, FG students shared engaging in self-reliant behaviors before transitioning to college. Yet, because these behaviors are driven by social contexts outside of academia, they are not rewarded or considered viable ways of thinking in the university. To illustrate, in interviews with 18 low-income high school students, Hatt (2007) described how several self-reliant behaviors related to survival and making

ends meet were recognized as "street smarts" rather than "book smarts" by adolescents. For these marginalized youth, the educational system did not recognize the everyday self-reliant behaviors related to survival as smartness—leading students to feel alienated and disengage from school. As such, in not valuing forms of hard independence as a viable way of behaving, universities may be alienating their FG populations and undermining the skillsets that students bring.

Relatedly, in not recognizing these hard forms of independence, universities may be reinforcing deficit narratives of FG students, such as misconstruing self-reliant behavior as a lack of motivation to seek help. If FG students are accustomed to being self-reliant, they may be less likely to seek help once in college. Indeed, past work has documented that FG students are less likely to seek campus resources than CG students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Azmitia et al., 2013; Stephens, Hamedani et al., 2014), which can undermine performance. In addressing this specific form of hard independence, universities can better respond to students' needs by bringing resources to students to improve help-seeking. Campus programming (e.g., orientations) and initiatives (e.g., leadership events, workshops) can work to demystify what campus resources are available and, more specifically, why students might want to utilize such resources. Programs that serve a large number of FG students can implement appointments for all program participants at the beginning of the academic term. These strategies normalize the process of connecting with university personnel and build a culture in which help-seeking is a necessary, collaborative process.

More generally, universities should move toward learning to leverage the strengths of FG students, including their strong connections to family. One way to do this is to recognize that college may be a time of increased family communication and to include opportunities for students to incorporate family into their college experience. There have been some nationwide efforts on this front. Several colleges and universities have parent programs and family-based conferences for FG students and their families. Similarly, academic outreach programs for high school students can include family as part of the college transition process (Cooper, 2011). These approaches highlight the college journey as a family endeavor and affirm the importance of interdependent connections with family that are valued and endorsed by FG students (see Stephens et al., 2012).

Understanding the heavy family roles that FG students engage in serves as an important consideration for supporting FG students, including how to aid in managing these demands. Faculty and staff can offer rigorous expectations with flexibility to allow for students with heavy responsibilities the opportunity to meet the high demands. This can include not making course deadlines

during the weekend, when many FG students may need to work to financially support themselves and their families. Faculty and staff can also be flexible with meeting times to adjust to the work schedules of FG students. Finally, and most importantly, faculty and staff can develop compassion and understanding for the heavy responsibilities that FG students may encounter.

Although this study sheds light on the familial and university behaviors of FG students, our participants were predominantly female, which may explain the heavy family roles reported in the sample. Research finds that women are socialized and expected to partake in family roles consistent with caregiving more often than men (Arnett, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Sy & Romero, 2008). Our work was also focused on low-income, FG students from Latinx and Asian backgrounds, which past work has shown come from highly interdependent cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b). The investigation of these populations is important given their rapid growth in universities and colleges nationwide (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) and in society more generally (Brown, 2014). Yet, we do not know if FG or CG students from other racial/ethnic (e.g., European American) or social class (e.g., middle class) backgrounds—which are documented as endorsing more independent views and practices (Kusserow, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012)—show similar family roles and independent behaviors. In examining diverse racial-ethnic, social class, and gender groups, research can understand how these important intersections of identity relate to students' family roles and independence. Increasing attention to social class will also allow researchers to focus an intersectional lens on FG students' identities as they navigate college. To date, in the United States, research on FG students has privileged gender and ethnicity, but as we and others have shown, social class is a prevalent theme in these students' narratives.

Finally, we focus on family roles and independence, but future research should further examine how these family roles affect students' academic and mental health outcomes. Recent research has found that Latinx FG students experience family achievement guilt—guilt related to "leaving family members behind" to pursue college (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015)—which is associated with negative mental health (e.g., depressive symptoms) (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2014). Throughout the interviews, students mentioned the negative effects of the college transition on their mental health, including guilt for leaving family members without the appropriate support at home they once gave. Future research should examine how universities can respond to students' commitments as a strategy for improving college adjustment.

In the current work, Latinx and Asian FG students shared powerful ways in which they remain connected with family while negotiating the cultural norms of independence in college. Although most universities expect students to

become independent thinkers and pursue their own interests, FG students are powerfully reshaping this dominant narrative. Rose, a 20-year-old Latina student, made this point when reflecting on her own independence:

> . . . I'm working hard towards this goal, but even this goal is not solely just for myself. This goal is also, I want to help out my parents. I want to support them, so even then, you never become fully independent . . .

Not only are FG students demonstrating a different form of independence that is not recognized or rewarded in the classroom, Rose's reflection makes a larger point that the expectation to become independent and autonomous can never fully be reached when a student's daily lived experience is to remain connected with family. Institutions *can* and *should* recognize multiple ways of enacting both interdependence and independence and acknowledge the different cultural strengths that students bring with them to the classrooms.

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