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Chasing Possibilities: First-Generation College Graduates Negotiate Past and Future Selves

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Abstract: The higher education literature highlights the retention and persistence of first-generation college students. This study explores the work-related experiences of first-generation college graduates. Findings suggest early-career first-generation graduates are engaged in a process of (re)understanding their past, negotiating their present work environment, and positioning themselves for long-term career satisfaction.

College students whose parents have not earned at least a bachelor's degree (first-generation college students) seem to face challenges that are different from non-first generation students (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), a finding that holds even when controlling for background characteristics (i.e., pre-college academics, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status; Ishitani, 2006). Within the literature related to first-generation college (FGC) students, much of the research has focused on pre-college or early college experiences, with the late-in-college or post-college transitions being the focus of only a few studies (e.g., Dillon, 2010; Huber, 2010).

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to describe the lived experience of early-career, first-generation college graduates in relation to the research question: How do first-generation college graduates who have obtained a bachelor's degree within the past two to five years make meaning in their work? In other words, what is it like for a first-generation college graduate to experience work? This paper explores themes related to the sub-question: How does the first-generation college graduate negotiate past and future understanding of work, class, and identity in the context of his or her work experiences?

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

van Manen (1997) highlighted the power of phenomenology to “disclose the worlds in which we dwell” (p. 52), a fitting goal for understanding the first-generation college graduate's emerging sense of self in the context of work. A phenomenological approach was selected for this study, in the hopes of capturing the unique, highly individualized post-college experiences of first-generation college graduates. Seeking a phenomenological understanding of the essence of these experiences provided a helpful lens for understanding and potentially unifying these diverse lived experiences.

Six individuals participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each participant had graduated between two and five years earlier, had been traditional-aged college students, and were working full-time at the time of the interviews. Phenomenological methods of data analysis were used, including my own bracketing, horizontalizing and coding, memoing, thematizing, and crafting textural and structural descriptions.

I initially explored participants' lived experiences at work and as first-generation college graduates without theoretical preconceptions about the nature of learning at work, in keeping with the

norms of phenomenology. As the initial process of analysis proceeded, I also examined the data through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), theories of young adult development (e.g., Arnett, 2000) and existing literature related to first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ishitani, 2006).

Findings and Conclusions

The literature related to first-generation students has focused on efforts to help students pursue and persist through college. This study highlights the ongoing challenges faced by first-generation college graduates, as their early-career experiences may not live up to the expectations of the “college for all” rhetoric. Of the four themes identified in the larger study, two relate to the sub-question presented in this paper: releasing the past and chasing a passion.

Releasing the Past

This theme expresses the sense in which first-generation students found themselves coming to terms with “where they came from,” in terms of socioeconomic status, work histories (e.g., blue collar, professional, white collar) and—although not always expressed as such—social class. Participants identified a sense of moving away from that past, both geographically and experientially. In describing their hometowns, many of the participants referred to “small” or “rural” settings; Kylie spoke of her town as “kind of dying.” Some of these descriptions seemed to mix childhood memories with maturing understandings, as in the case of Michael, who said:

When I was a kid, I knew [my hometown] was blue collar. I didn’t really know what that meant. But I grew up thinking of it as a very positive connotation. My dad and all of my friends’ dads, they all worked with their hands ... versus “pencil pushers.” ... You know, it’s like they, they worked for a living, where I was raised. ... It’s just what everybody did. I thought that was what middle-class America ... that those were the jobs that the majority of Americans worked. And in college, I really started to realize those were kind of lower-paying jobs. Um, you can still make it, but it was a lot harder.

This “moving away” expressed itself in a variety of ways, such as when Darlene recalled her mother declaring, “I’m not going to be able to help you [academically].” There was also a sense of moving away from one’s culture of origin, described most poignantly by Crystal, who married at 18, in keeping with the norms of the “fundamentalist Christian sect” (her terms) in which she was raised. Although her new husband “didn’t fight” Crystal’s pursuit of a college education, her in-laws “weren’t supportive at all,” and would make “snide ... underhanded, cutting comments [saying, ‘Crystal] thinks that she’s going to be *somebody*.’ ... ‘Why do you need to be better than everybody and go to school?’” Crystal and her husband divorced before she graduated from college. Crystal later referred to her college education as a “Pandora’s box” that had changed her thinking in such drastic ways that she no longer experienced “that simple acceptance” from her parents.

In addition, given the focus of the study on work-related learning experiences, participants also identified a process of redefining “real work” in the context of their current white-collar occupations, when contrasted with the blue-collar and working-class experiences of their parents. These FGC graduates described the work done by parents and other family members using phrases such as “work with your back,” “sweat to earn your way in life,” and “they all worked with their hands.” In some cases, this

outlook on work emerged as the FGC student encountered the process of selecting a college major. Kylie's story highlights the tension between parental perceptions of work and a liberal arts education. Her oldest brother had begun college with an interest in dentistry that quickly changed once he started taking classes. As her brother was making his career decisions, she remembered:

[My parents] didn't understand what graphic design was, and they fought with him *all the time* to get a "real" job. You need to go into something *real*. And in their mindset, it's like doctors, lawyers, nurses—concrete, you know, you have a job when you're done. And graphic design, to them, they didn't get it at the time. So they fought with him.

He eventually graduated with a BFA in Graphic Design, another brother majored in philosophy and linguistics, and Kylie chose a double major in English Literature and German. She said, "By me, they were kind of like, 'Whatever. It's your life; it's your money. You find a job after college.'"

As these FGC graduates moved beyond college into occupations that were less physically demanding than the work done by their parents, they struggled to describe the nature of their own work and to convey the exertion required by the intellectual and emotional tasks of their new jobs. Darlene, a foster care case worker had learned that sharing "grown-up stuff" related to her cases had helped her mother develop an appreciation for the work Darlene was doing. Bruce explained that his family members have a general understanding of his work as a hospice chaplain, but he indicated that there were still times where someone would say, "Oh, I didn't know you deal with stuff like that in your job." Michael had observed that there seemed to be an acceptable level of response when he was asked about his job:

They want to know what's going on, but factually, but not like actual what's happening emotionally, mentally. ... My family doesn't really, I don't know, they don't really seem to show any interest in that aspect. They really, they haven't really asked those questions; they don't really know. I mean they just [ask], "Oh, so how you liking [suburban school district] now?" [And I say] "Oh, it's good; it's way better." ... If I go into detail, or start going off on it, then, I don't know, they kind of [look at me] like, "That's not what I asked." They just kind of get this look in their eyes, like "that's not what I asked."

Orbe (2008) described this as a tension between "reveal" and "conceal," indicating that the FGC student must "simultaneously negotiate a desire to reveal certain aspects of their collegiate experience and a need to keep some matters to themselves ... [they] are quick to learn that any response other than 'fine' is less than appropriate" (p. 91). Given Michael's description, it is possible that this tension continues even after the FGC graduate has left college and begins working.

Lubrano (2004) labeled men and women from blue-collar families who are now working in white-collar settings as "Straddlers" and describes the necessity of navigating between two worlds, with distinct expectations, aspirations, and ways of speaking and being. The participants in this study shared stories that echo this negotiation. They were not "rejecting the past" or "ignoring the past" or even "tied to the past." They were learning to be "facile in both realms" (Lubrano, 2004, p. 68)—freed to embrace something new because they were releasing the past.

Chasing a Passion

One participant used the phrase "chasing a passion" when describing his hopes for fulfillment in work, based on the opportunities provided by his college education. Throughout my process of data analysis, I found this phrase captured the sense of striving for more that each participant expressed, so I identified it

as a theme. Participants talked about the tension between the hope “for a better life” that they had assumed college would provide and the realities of day-to-day entry-level jobs.

The young men and women I spoke with were quick to confirm that both subtle and explicit messages regarding college had permeated their childhood. When talking about work and his children’s future plans, Kylie’s father would refer to his own work as a pipefitter and say, “You don’t want to do this all your life,” and Kendra and Darlene had both grown to believe that a job that required a four-year degree would not be boring.

For these FGC graduates, college had not always lived up to the expectations. Bruce recalled conversations with a friend where they spent time “wondering the benefit of the education or not.” I asked him about the conclusions they had arrived at, during these discussions. He said: “I really, really enjoyed my education, and I really, really hate all the debt I have right now.” He continued:

So, I have learned ... a degree in itself does not guarantee you a good job or a good-paying job.

It’s the taking what you’ve learned in those years and applying it, as well as just skills that you learn outside of the classroom that’s more effective in the work world.

In the stories of choosing a major and accepting a job, the stories these FGC graduates told revealed a deep sense of the high value they seemed to place on providing for themselves. When I asked Kylie what thought process she went through before accepting a job in a city where she did not think she wanted to live, she said that the deciding factors were that she needed a job, she needed money, and after living with her parents during her extended job search she knew she didn’t want to live with them “forever.” Michael took a job teaching in an under-resourced school district out-of-state. When he and his wife returned to his home state, he took a position in a similarly challenging school, to take advantage of a student loan forgiveness program. Bruce found that pursuing his specific career aspiration also meant taking on a second job, to provide adequately for his family.

The participants had gone to college; they had graduated. The work ethic they had observed growing up and assumed for themselves at times required pragmatic choices and sometimes resulted in less-than-ideal work settings. As Michael described his parents’ attitude toward his choice of major and eventual profession: “You have to put food on the table. And try to put food on the table doing something you enjoy, but number one, put food on the table.” And although Kylie did grow to hate her job and was in the middle of a career change when we spoke, these FGC graduates did not tell their stories with bitterness. There was, instead, a sense in which job and career should be, first and foremost, about provision.

Even though the drive to provide was strong, at the same time, these FGC graduates talked about the desire for meaningful work. Kylie spoke of this by saying, “I need a job that I am passionate about and aligns with the gifts that I’ve been given,” Michael repeatedly talked about his passion for teaching, and Bruce made the comment that “if overall your occupation or your career path is not in something that you’re pursuing a passion, then you’re never going to be happy in life.”

At times, though these early-career graduates also talked about future work and career prospects with a sense of ambivalence. Bruce and Michael each talked about the alignment between his talents and his work, and Kylie was changing careers to better align her career with her gifts. Crystal also described moments where she felt that all of her training had prepared her to do excellent work in her current job. Darlene and Kendra, on the other hand, had gained a level of proficiency and even recognition in their current jobs, but they gave no indication that their current work would provide long-term satisfaction. In contrast to the other participants, neither Darlene nor Kendra used the word passion in our conversations

(which lasted more than two hours with Kendra and nearly three hours with Darlene) and the future seemed ill-defined and puzzling. This ambiguity is perhaps best captured by Kendra's statement: "I'm still convinced the perfect job for me is something I've never heard of."

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Left unasked by this study, and therefore left unanswered, is the question of where the connection between performing work and pursuing passion originates. This outlook is almost certainly not the outlook held by the parents of these FGC graduates (Lubrano, 2004). Is the relationship between professional occupation and personal fulfillment a component of the go-to-college rhetoric? Is the pursuit of passion in career inherent to a middle-class way of being and therefore assumed or adopted during college and early career experiences? Or is this finding unique to this group of White students from the Upper Midwest who grew up in working-class families and who happened to graduate during challenging economic times? These are questions worthy of further exploration and research.

At times, the workplace learning and human resource development literature has tended to focus on the effective transfer of skills and knowledge to help both worker and organization function more effectively. This study highlights the challenges of "being" and "becoming" in the workplace. For the early-career, first-generation college student, the workplace may be experienced as a setting that creates ambiguity, more than it is seen as a place of opportunity. Adult educators in general, and human resource development professionals in particular, with an understanding of this phenomenon will be better equipped to meet the needs of these young adult learners.

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