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First generation college students' perception of parental attitudes: An exploratory study

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First Generation College Students' Perception of Parental Attitudes:

An Exploratory Study

by

Orion Peter Mowbray

Thesis

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Thesis Committee:

Donna Killingbeck, PhD, Chair

Robert Orrange, PhD

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ABSTRACT

Parental support among first generation college students is largely understudied. While some argue that many parents lack necessary information and knowledge to help their children succeed while in college, this work argues that parents of first generation college students contribute a large amount of emotional support towards their children while in college. There are several benefits of receiving a high degree of emotional support, one of which is constructing a potential buffer against identity threat that many first generation college students face while on campus. Through eleven case studies, this work examines the roles of parental support of first generation college students as well as both parents' and participants' views of college.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

Many students from an undervalued background tend to have problems transitioning to the culture within a college environment. These issues, usually resulting from social class positions, tend to leave minority students with challenges accessing useful information, navigating financial aid offices, interfacing with technology, and understanding the overall functioning of a higher education system (Inman & Mayes, 1999). In most students entering the college environment for the first time, these issues do not arise. Usually, students attending college are the not the first in their family to go. Usually, many students have the advice and knowledge of an experienced parent to rely on for learning how to navigate entrance into the college environment. However, for first generation college students, this is not the case.

First generation college students are usually left to find out on their own or rely on a more informal network of others to learn the necessary skills and knowledge needed for successful transition into a college environment. Aside from the technological deficits and instrumental knowledge that many students who are the first in their family to attend college enter with, first generation college students also tend to have academic challenges as well. First generation college students tend to have lower high school GPA's (Riehl, 1994), lower SAT scores (Reihl, 1994), and make fewer gains in reading skills throughout their college learning (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996).

Taken together, these challenges shape a grim prospect for individuals who need education the most. That is, in fact, what is shown. Prior evidence has shown that first

generation college students tend to have higher college drop out rates as well as higher rates of never returning to college after dropping out (USDE 1998, Hansen 1997, Ma 1999). However, despite the potentially destructive barriers many first generation college students face, many students do indeed integrate into the larger college environment, adopt new learning skills, achieve at the same level of their non-first generation peers and eventually graduate. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that while first generation college students who earned a bachelor's degree were less likely than non-first generation college students to be enrolled in a graduate school (23 percent vs. 30 percent), many first generation students do indeed move beyond the bachelor's level of educational attainment. While the low numbers of first generation college students pursuing advanced degrees at the graduate level are discouraging, the findings above do shed light on the academic success of many first generation college students and the aspirations found within first generation college students to achieve beyond the bachelor's level.

First generation college students face many structural barriers to academic success in their pursuit of a college degree. Many lack the social and cultural capital such as knowledge of the campus environment, knowledge of campus values, access to human and financial resources, and familiarity with terminology and the general functioning of a higher education setting that many other students with parents who have a college education come prepared with when beginning their college career (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Coleman, 1988; McDonough, 1997). This lack of knowledge can contribute to the feelings of culture shock when entering the college campus (Inman and Mayes, 1999). Aside from the structural barriers first generation college students face, which arise from minority status in terms of social class, race, or gender, many first generation college

students also face many situational (interpersonal) barriers that arise from distinctive identities usually found in first generation college student populations.

First generation college students are typically minority students at most colleges (Choy, 2001). For example, 16% of students at four-year colleges are first generation college students, and 9% have family incomes under $25,000 annually (Capriccioso, 2006). Furthermore, stereotypes do exist about people from lower income levels (Argyle, 1994), Therefore, first generation college students may face many interpersonal barriers of being distinctive in terms of social class and also distinctive in terms of possessing a devalued social identities. However, devalued identities in terms of social class are only one of the many interpersonal barriers that first generation college students may face. Taken together, first generation college students typically possess identities which originate from lower social class positions, from membership of minority racial and ethnic groups, and from undervalued gender identities (e.g. female).

In the context of education, each of these distinctive identities (social class, race, ethnicity, and gender) carries with it a negative stereotype concerning academic performance (Sekaquaptewa and Thompson, 2003; Croizet and Claire, 1998; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Spencer, Steele and Quinn, 1999). Prior research has shown that possessing an identity that carries a negative stereotype can affect academic performance. Usually, academic performance is affected due to the feelings of negativity arising from the notion that students with devalued identities are different or are somehow "less-off" than others in terms of their academic ability. Furthermore, feelings of negativity are also felt by others interacting with a student with a devalued identity. In essence, an interactive approach occurs whereby identity salience leads to negative perceptions from

others, which triggers negative feelings from the individual with a devalued identity. Feelings of negativity in an individual with a devalued identity may be due to the processes reported to account for social identity threat such as diminished working memory and lowered performance expectations (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003).

Much of the research on identity threat tends to focus on performance outcomes, which is regrettable. In terms of identity construction, many identity threat theorists take devalued identity status as a given and focus much of the research on identity salience and the perceptions of individuals with a devalued identity. There is surprisingly little research available that addresses the processes whereby members of typically devalued identities based on social class, race, ethnicity, and gender construct more positive and valued identities in an effort to combat identity threat.

It is argued here that aside from the typically devalued identities that first generation college students possess, which arise from gender, race, ethnic, and social class positions, first generation college students also construct and possess achieved status sets such as that of a successful college student. This identity can be particularly useful in understanding the success that many first generation college students achieve. It is believed that through continual interaction with significant others (e.g. parents), these students continually refine their identities and give salience to the identities that significant others value. That is to say, as students receive support and aspirations from their parents in terms of being a successful college student, many may indeed come to see themselves as successful students, and in turn buffer against many of the identity threat issues which arise from other devalued identities.

Prior research has addressed the issue of academic performance outcomes in terms of identity threat, but little information is available on the particular strategies individuals with devalued identities use to shape and alter the perceptions and stereotypes of others, which can and do lower academic abilities and performance. Therefore, in order to understand the complex relationship(s) between first generation college students and academic success, the focus must move beyond the examination of outcomes in academic performances towards the process of identity development of first generation students within the college environment. By emphasizing the contexts of identity development, further insight will be gained into who achieves success and the potential reasons why many at-risk students overcome obstacles in their environment and achieve at the same level of more privileged and experienced students.

Perhaps the greatest force in the construction of identity is the role of significant others. In this case, parents are often the source of forming "the self" in many first generation college students. As students enter a new environment, first generation college students must not only learn new roles, they must construct identities that shift emphasis from previous undervalued identities towards new, positive identities that tend to be embraced by the larger group of students and college environment. It is believed here that as first generation college students begin to learn and acquire new roles and identities in the college environment, parents (or in some cases, only one parent) play a vital role in this process. By continually giving positive feedback and confirming parental aspirations, students are continually given feedback concerning their state of role acquisition and identity development.

Purpose of the Study

This research attempts to integrate the experiences of first generation college students within the contexts of identity theory from a social psychological standpoint. It is argued here that the support and aspirations that many of these students receive potentially shape identities, which emphasize the positive aspects of being a college student. This positive identity, in turn, may downplay the negative, devalued identities that many of them possess.

The purpose of the study is to begin the formation of a grounded framework for examining and addressing the experiences of first generation college students. By conducting interviews in a structured format, first generation participants are able to communicate their own experiences, while at the same time addressing many of the fundamental research questions. In this way, future hypotheses can also be generated from the responses of first generation college students to the structured interview questions.

Last, the final purpose of this study is to extend the exploration of identity construction. Much of the classic work on identity formation involves younger participants (children) and tends to be quantitatively driven. This present work examines the process of identity formation as a process one encounters throughout the life course. Rather than viewing identity as a fixed, immutable aspect of the self, which is formed in childhood, this work posits that identities are malleable and, given the context, are free to change. Finally, this work examines identity from a qualitative standpoint. Little is known concerning qualitative analyses of identity, but within this work, it is believed that identities are dynamic and, at some points, do not lend themselves to quantitative survey

design. It is hoped that through the work described here, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches to examining issues of identity, will gain a stronger foothold in the field and will become a regular tool for researchers in social psychology.

Limitations of the Study

Within the study, several limitations do exist. First, parental support is measured through student (participant) responses. While prior research (Paulson, 1994) has addressed the similarities between student reports of their parents and parental self-report, it is important to acknowledge the distinction here. Second, the research reported here is composed of structured interviews, with a participant sample of 12. Given the low number of participants and exploratory nature of the structured interview process, generalization to larger populations of college students will be difficult. Rather, the purpose of the data reported here is to provide further avenues for continued research on the academic experiences of first generation college students as well as other status groups in the minority.

Last, because only first generation college students will be selected for inclusion, no generalizations will be made between this population and other populations. The findings from this research are meant to fuel other, testable hypotheses, in an empirically grounded framework concerning the lives and experiences of first generation college students. Future work that is driven from the results described here should include a comparative sample as well as a large, inclusive population of first generation college students or similar minority group.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

First Generation College Student Demographics

First generation college students are distinct from other college students in many ways. They are more likely to be older and have lower family incomes than non-first generation college students (Choy, 2001). Furthermore, first generation college students are more likely to be female, married, from a minority group and independent in terms of financial status (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). In terms of general enrollment, many first generation college students are more likely to be enrolled part-time, as opposed to many non-first generation college students who tend to be enrolled full-time (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Furthermore, many first generation college students tend to live with family or relatives and work full-time while enrolled in college (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Many reasons first generation college students report for attending college are largely based on intellectual, economic, and social reasons (Terenzini, 1994). However, there is considerable variation between first and non-first generation college students concerning their reasons for attendance. Students whose parents are college-educated (e.g. non-first generation students) tend to view college as the next logical step in achievement and status. But for first generation college students, attending college is usually reported as an attempt to improve their social, economic, and employment mobility (Terrenzini, 1994). However, for these first-generation students, a college education offers both opportunity and risk, since it represents a departure from previous roles and entry into a totally new environment based on autonomy and proficiency with

technology and bureaucracy as well as other instrumental skills that first generation college students seem to lack.

Parental Support in First Generation College Students

Parental support for college students has been well documented in prior work. The role of parental support in college student success has been shown to be significant, but only when it takes the form of instrumental support for finding resources, gaining information, and receiving financial support. Many studies have undertaken the opposing side of parental support, namely emotional support, and have observed mixed success. These findings, however, can shed light on the situation of many first generation college students. The fact that their parents lack necessary instrumental knowledge of the college experience is a serious obstacle for these students, and what little their parents have to offer may mean very little in terms of helping their child succeed. Typically, parents of first generation college students cannot help their children directly with college tasks (Brooks-Terry, 1988), which means that levels of instrumental support to these students is usually very low.

However, these findings should not close the door on the support that parents of first generation college students have to offer their children. Although many studies continue to indicate a significant effect of socioeconomic status in attending college (Davies and Guppy, 1997; Hearn, 1991), many works demonstrate that parent-child relationships often influence the educational outcomes of children independent of socioeconomic characteristics (Coleman, 1988; McNeal, 1999; Morgan and Sorensen, 1999; Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Teachman, Paasch, and Carver, 1997). Prior work has indicated that there is a significant

component of emotional parental support in the achievement of education. For example, Peng and Wright (1994) examined levels of emotional parental support within homes of Asian Americans and found parental support to be a significant predictor of academic success of their children. Furthermore, Lopez (2001) found that often, parents have the potential to instill in their children the expectation of attending college and can also provide encouragement and emotional support throughout their child's experiences in college.

From his work on adolescent identity development, Meeus (1996) concluded that support from parents continues to be an important predictor of adjustment in late adolescence. Furthermore, Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, and Cardoza (2003) argue that a supportive relationship with parents is a significant predictor for maintaining psychological well-being. Other works have found a significant relationship between parental support and academic adjustment (Cabrera and Padilla, 2004; Schneider and Ward, 2003). Arellano and Padilla (1996) found that the key predictor that accounted for academic resilience of first generation Latino youth was, in fact, supportive family ties. Taken together, prior research can help clarify the potential mitigation parental support has concerning socioeconomic disparities. Finally, there is some evidence, both qualitative (Arellano and Padilla, 1996) and quantitative (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler, 1996; Solberg, Valdez, and Villarreal, 1994), that social support, including support from parents, is related specifically to adjustment in college for ethnic minority college students.

Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990) have suggested that social support is important because it provides a safety net to explore and experiment in the world.

Individuals who perceive high levels of support often have stronger feelings that they have someone to turn to when problems arise and have the ability to receive support and problem solving assistance. However, one such limitation to this assertion is that often the lack of a safety net is much more consequential than the presence and strength of parental support. That is, the lack of a safety net is much more salient than the presence of those available for support. However, there is little evidence regarding the role of social support on college outcomes for first generation college students (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005)

Clearly, the role of parental support can be a very large force in shaping the outcomes of first generation college students. Tracey and Sedlacek (1987) found that variables such as positive self-concept and the availability of supportive individuals are predictive of academic success in college for minority students and can sometimes be even more important than traditional measures of cognitive skills such as the SAT. However, these findings examined social support as a whole, opposed to focusing solely on the role of parental support. A major contribution of the research reported here is that the role of parental support is given full attention.

Furthermore, many studies examining the role of parental support give little weight to the dynamics of parental support. Often, parental support is measured in single-item questions or, at best, scale data. This study attempts to allow the first generation college students themselves to define just what parental support is and how much of it they receive. This is beneficial for further research as it re-examines many of the previous findings concerning emotional parental support and academic outcomes. In essence, when both levels of parental support and parental support itself are defined by the

research participant, the relationship between levels of support and educational achievement can be better understood.

Parental Aspirations in First Generation College Students

Prior research concerning parental aspirations in college students have found both parental expectations and parental encouragement to be related to the likelihood of a student's attending a postsecondary educational institution (Carpenter and Fleishman, 1987; Conklin and Dailey, 1981; Stage and Hossler, 1988). In one descriptive study of high school seniors and parents, Murphy (1981) noted that 43% of all students and 50% of all parents said that the idea of attending college was first initiated by parents. In modern models of status attainment, Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf (1980) and Qian and Blair (1999) identified educational aspirations as a critical variable influencing obtained education, but it was Kahl (1953) who first suggested the importance of parental encouragement in his study of the educational and occupational aspirations of "common-man" (working class) boys.

In his study, Kahl selected twenty-four participants from a larger sample of high school boys in the surrounding the area. These participants had high IQ scores and, by Kahl, were considered intelligent enough to succeed in college. While most upper-status boys aimed toward college as a matter of normative processes in the family, most working class boys tended to be uninterested in college. Consequently, working-class boys who aimed high were exceptions, and Kahl's study of these participants was aimed at discovering the source of their higher aspirations.

After he asserted that both intelligence and social class position accounted for college aspirations of boys of working-class origins, he claimed that attitudes held by

parents concerning the importance of occupational success for personal happiness was the critical determinant for educational success in working class boys.

Kahl's findings, although based on a very small sample, have led many social scientists to emphasize the importance of parental aspirations and other social-psychological variables in explaining the relation of social stratification to aspirations. However, few studies go beyond labeling parental aspirations as an important factor in educational attainment. Few if any known studies have attempted to explain the specific processes involved in the transformation of parental aspirations into academic success and educational attainment.

A major factor in the educational attainment of working class and first generation college students is socioeconomic status (SES). Typically, educational pursuits in college students rely heavily on the ability for students to delay entry to the workforce and have reliable economic support while in college. Furthermore, the possibility of parents of first generation college students becoming involved in their child's educational attainment may be seriously limited by many variables that accompany first generation college student status, such as lower SES, fewer resources, less parental integration into the professional workforce, and less familiarity with the college-going process (Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton et al., 2001).

However, SES may be a necessary but not sufficient predictor of educational attainment. Trusty (1998) examined the role of SES compared to parental involvement and found that regardless of SES, parental involvement influenced educational expectations of college-age students. According to Trusty's findings, parents fill a valuable role in preventing the loss of students' aspirations due to a low SES background.

This finding is particularly important in light of the fact that first-generation students are more likely to come from low SES backgrounds.

In agreement with Trusty's (1998) findings, Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) found that parental encouragement was more important than family income in predicting the educational attainment of working class students. Finally, Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, and Urajnik (2002).also made the distinction between SES and parental encouragement. They found that SES alone had no significant, direct influence on educational aspirations, but when combined with parental aspirations, a significant prediction could be made to account for the educational aspirations of children.

Clearly, parental aspiration is a powerful intervention between SES and educational aspirations. While parental aspirations do not differ significantly across social class positions, they do contribute to the differences in educational attainment within social class backgrounds. For example, it is well understood that within working class or first generation college student populations, students who have parents with high educational aspirations tend to have higher educational attainment. However, there is little evidence concerning the specific processes by which this happens. Many arguments return to social psychological theories concerning socialization but do not go beyond the mention of socialization as a possible mechanism through which parental aspirations transform educational attainment.

Identity Processes as a Factor in Educational Success

First generation college students face a difficult task, especially at the beginning of their college career. First generation college students must learn to adopt the identity of a college student. This is a complex role that entails the learning of professor and

academic expectations, financial opportunities, and independent management of time. These barriers are especially challenging when there are few others within the family who are able to help the student adopt this new identity. This is especially prevalent in first generation college students. Often, family members, as well as others involved directly in the first generation student's identity formation, do not have the prior experience and knowledge of a college environment that is necessary to assist the student navigate this new environment. In essence, many first generation college students struggle with adopting the identity of a college student, thus feeling marginalized and without support for their aspirations.

Carpenter and Fleishman (1987) focused on the processes of identity development in college students and concluded that parental aspirations influenced students' perceptions of subjective norms concerning educational attainment, which was strongly related to college enrollment. However, this study stopped short of analyzing the specific processes of identity integration and development, which has recently been shown to contribute significantly to the adoption of intergroup membership and norms (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner, 1982). These studies, which were directed towards understanding intergroup relations (e.g. prejudice, favoritism, etc.), also provide insight into the processes of identity development and evidence that individuals contain multiple identities that are malleable and subject to influence from external sources (e.g. parental aspirations). It is believed that as students learn the aspirations from their parents concerning education, students begin the process of identity development, which shapes the self and determines group membership.

It is assumed that this process is no different for first generation college students. Parental aspirations, combined with parental support, help shape these students sense of self, which shapes their group memberships. It is believed that first generation college students who achieve membership in normative, valued groups (e.g. college students, successful students, educated individuals, etc.) have the ability to shed, downplay, or even exclude, a prior devalued identity, such as a low SES identity, which tends to add to the perception of an individual with low academic ability.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Sample

Eleven participants were recruited for the sample. Participants were recruited on the campus of a small college in Michigan. Participants were purposefully selected based on their family background. Only participants who were the first in their family to attend a four-year college were selected to participate in the study. Therefore, in terms of family education status, the sample was relatively homogenous.

Participants responded to flyers posted around campus advertising $10 compensation for a one-hour interview examining their experiences in college. Participants were told they would be asked to complete an interview about their experiences while in college and the support and aspirations they receive from their parents. Participants were given the researcher's email address, and were asked to contact him to set up a time. All the participants who contacted the researcher for an interview opportunity were scheduled and completed. There was no attrition from the sample.

Participants were offered the opportunity to participate either in an audio-recorded interview or requested the researcher use a pen and paper to collect interview notes. In the sample of 11, 4 participants asked to participate in the pen and paper interview, while 9 consented to being recorded during the interview. In order to fulfill Human Subjects Review Board requirements, participants were asked to sign a consent form stating that their participation was voluntary, and there was no risk to the participation. The signed consent form was kept in a locked security box in the office of the researcher, and significant effort was made to keep separate the signed consent form and the participant's

responses. In short, significant efforts were made to assure the anonymity of each participant.

Of the 11 participants in the sample, 8 (72%) were female and 3 (28%) were male. The ages for participants ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean age of 20 years old. Concerning class status, 4 (37%) were freshman, 2 (18%) were sophomores, 3 (27%) were juniors, and 2 (18%) were seniors. Finally, concerning race, 4 (36%) of the participants were African American, and 7 (64%) were White (of non-Hispanic origin).

Data Collection

Participants completed a moderately structured interview consisting of seventeen (17) questions. The interview questions consisted of three distinct sections: seven questions concerning parents' beliefs/aspirations concerning college, two questions concerning participant's views of college, and seven questions concerning the nature of support participant's receive while in college. One final question asked "Is there anything else you would like to add before we are done?" See Appendix A for a full description of interview questions.

The instrument was designed from a grounded perspective concerning the research questions asked. The interview questions were written to be direct, but at the same time to allow participants to reflect on their own experiences and elaborate when necessary. To the researcher's knowledge, the interview questions for this research have never been asked; therefore, there is no assessment of validity of justification for use other than that the research questions asked were directed to answer the specific research questions outline above.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with several lasting less than one hour. During each interview, participants were given sufficient time to answer each question, elaborate on their own responses, and ask several follow up questions. Interviews were conducted in semi-public spaces such as a shared office, a quiet area of the college library, or an empty classroom. The locations for the interview were chosen by the researcher, with concern for the participant's needs. The researcher agreed to meet the participants in a location that was comfortable for them.

Last, participants were asked to be audio recorded during the interview process. If the participant was not comfortable with being audio recorded, then pen and paper was used to take notes. While it was highly desired to capture the participant's response on an audio recording, participants were free to choose the interview method they were most comfortable with. Upon completion of the interview, interviews were numbered and fully transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were examined for themes involving three main areas: parents' beliefs/aspirations concerning college, participant's views of college, and the nature of support participant's received from their parents while in college. Data were then extrapolated from each interview, which shed light on these three main themes. When data were reduced along the three main themes, descriptive information was collected, which provided insight into the frequency, type, and form within the three main themes.

However, within the three main themes emerged further themes. Within the theme "Parents' beliefs/aspirations concerning college," the sub-themes titled "parents' beliefs about what college is," "parents' perceptions of college educated individuals," "college

aspirations concerning participant," and "outcomes of a college education" also emerged. Within the theme "Participant's views of college," the sub-themes titled "participant's beliefs about what college is," "participant's perceptions of college educated individuals," "participant's aspirations concerning college," and "participant's view of success while in college" also emerged. Within the theme "The nature of support participant's received while in college," the sub-themes titled "instrumental support received while in college," and "emotional support received while in college" also emerged. The following sections present the results gathered from examining the data along these themes and sub-themes.

Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of Data

Parents' Beliefs/Aspirations Concerning College

After an initial construction of themes was developed, the data were analyzed. The first theme examined in the data was "Parents beliefs/aspirations concerning college." This theme was broken down into several sub-themes titled: "parents' beliefs about college," "parents' perceptions of college educated individuals," "college aspirations concerning participant," and "outcomes of a college education."

Parents' beliefs about college. Many participants reported that their parents knew little about what happens at college. Eight out of eleven (73%) participants reported that their parents see college as the beginning step towards securing a good job after graduation. Many participants reported that while their parents expressed a high interest in their current grades and progress towards a degree, little interest is expressed in other facets of college life (e.g., moving towards independence, developing a social life, etc.). For example, one participant stated:

> "When I got into college, they didn't understand what I had to do. I can go
>
> home and explain things to them, but they don't get it. They just want to
>
> hear the end result – what grade I got - that's it. They see college as a
>
> stepping stone, they don't want me to have to ask anybody for help."

This finding can often put the participant in a particularly difficult situation. If many parents seem only to see the end goal of achieving high grades and earning a degree, then much of the experience of being a college student is not well understood. Often, socializing, networking, and developing an identity as

an individual are significant experiences while in college. Therefore, the limited view that many parents hold may produce much tension and impatience while the participant is in pursuit of higher education.

Parents' perceptions of college educated individuals. Participants reported that their parents had very little negativity concerning college-educated individuals. Mostly, parents saw college-educated individuals as equals or suitable role models. Also, participants reported very few changes, if any, concerning their parents' attitudes toward the participant upon entering college. Many participants stated that while their parents were intensely proud of their accomplishments, participants did not feel they were treated differently after entering college. One participant stated:

> "My parents see those with a college degree as an equal. But they also feel
> that they are the ones who took an extra step to get a degree. My parents
> don't see someone who is college-educated as someone who is smarter
> than anyone else, but rather, a college educated individual is a dedicated,
> hard working individual who is willing to sacrifice."

However, positive perceptions were not unanimous. Two participants reported subtle feelings of negativity towards college students. These subtle feelings included a fear that college-educated individuals might some day take their job, or that there is an air of superiority in college-educated individuals, when interacting with non-college-educated individuals. While these feelings of negativity are the exceptions to the norm of the sample, it is worth noting that in this sample, there were some subtle signs of disdain towards college educated individuals – even while the participant was in college.

College aspirations concerning participant. Nine out of eleven participants reported a strong yet subtle desire by their parents for them to attend college. For example, many students reported that their parents had aspirations for them to attend college after finishing high school. While most participants reported that there was little overt pressure, the desire for them to attend college when finishing high school was implied. For example, one participant reported:

"My parents had been very open to telling me to go on to college for quite a few years now, because neither of them had gone to college. So they were both stressing how important it was to not be like them, living paycheck to paycheck. But they weren't really pressuring. They were very excited when they found out I wanted to, they supported that. You can't really find any meaningful work without college these days. I mean if you're lucky, or if you know someone who is in a good position with a company, then fine. But other than that, it's kind of necessary. Also, I just love education. I didn't want to let it stop at high school when I could keep on going."

Despite the fact that many participants reported a subtle yet strong desire by their parents to attend college, 10 out of 11 participants reported no instrumental assistance from their parents to go to college. For example, many participants reported receiving little help from their parents in terms of searching for information concerning universities, help securing funding for attendance, and adjusting to college life away from home.

Outcomes of a college education. Many participants reported that their parents see outcomes of a college education in terms of the gainful employment attained after graduation. Many participants reported an intense parental focus on securing employment, not living from paycheck to paycheck, and having a better life than their parents. One participant stated:

> "They believe college opens up a lot of doors. They always tell us they want us to do better than how they're doing. My dad has worked the same job his entire life. He works 80 hours a week. I think he doesn't want to see us working like that. He thinks the way to get paid a good amount for working a 40 hour week, opposed to an 80 hour week, is to get a college degree."

Participant's Views of College

The second theme examined was how the participant views college. This theme was constructed as a basis for examining the similarity or difference between the participant's views of college and their parents' views of college. Furthermore, by examining both the parents' attitudes as well as the participant's attitudes towards college, we can begin to establish what support the participant receives, what support the participant lacks, and the degree to which participants influence parental perceptions of college and vice versa.

Participant's beliefs about college. Many participants see college as a place to achieve a good life following college. Many participants expressed the belief that getting a good job after college was fundamental concerning the college experience. To this extent, the participants' beliefs concerning college were highly similar to their parents'

views of college. Many parents also believed that the function of college was to secure of

good job after graduation. For example, one participant stated:

> "The bigger part of college is being able to go to the work market and be
>
> marketable. That's the ultimate success of college – to get a good job."

However, participants' beliefs about college encompassed more than just the

belief that college will provide a good job after graduation. Many participants also

responded that college was a place to learn the valuable skills of independence and make

friends. While many participants reported that they still see their parents at least once a

week (9 out of 11), they also reported that one of their beliefs about college is to meet

new people, branch out, and learn how to live on their own. One participant stated:

> "While in college, I want to do as much as I can. I want to do as much
>
> community service as I can, I want to have a whole dorm full of people
>
> who know my name, and who recognize me. I want everything to be
>
> perfect."

This is one large difference between how participants and their parents see

college. Participants tend to have a holistic view of the college experience. They see

college as a place to learn critical thinking skills and specific knowledge applicable to a

field but also to learn how to be responsible, independent, and autonomous. While many

participants reported that their parents tended to focus on the belief that the function of

college was to get a good job, most participants affirmed this belief but also possessed

expanded beliefs about college, which included the belief that college was a place to develop and grow as an individual.

Participant's perceptions of college educated individuals. Many participants held college-educated individuals in high esteem. No participants viewed college-educated individuals with disdain, and most participants characterized college-educated individuals as hard-working and dedicated. Furthermore, when participants were asked how their parents' views of college-educated individuals influence their pursuit of a college degree, many participants reported that there was a significant influence. Many participants reported that their parents have highly positive views of college-educated individuals, and this, in turn, provides the participants with feelings of positivity concerning their pursuit of a college education. Even among the few (2) who reported subtle feelings of negativity concerning parental views of college-educated individuals, participants still reported similar beliefs of college-educated individuals. When participants reported subtle feelings of negativity held by their parents concerning college-educated individuals, participants also stated that their beliefs concerning college-educated individuals were that they were no better than anyone else and possessed a degree that anyone could attain. In sum, there seemed to be a very strong relationship between the participants' views of college-educated individuals and their parents' views of college-educated individuals.

Participant's aspirations concerning college. Many participants reported a strong desire to attain employment after completion of their undergraduate program. However, three students (of 11) reported a desire to pursue graduate degrees. For example, one participant stated:

"My plans after I graduate are to go to graduate school. I am going into

Educational Leadership, so that's going to be another three years of

school. My parents are happy with that, they think it's a good place to be."

Despite the low numbers of participants aspiring to do graduate work, many

participants are optimistic about their life after college. Many participants aspire to have a

meaningful job full of work they enjoy. Many participants reported parents who have low

wage, unfulfilling jobs. For these participants, having a meaningful job was highly

important. Interestingly enough, many participants cited a job in the field they like as the

definition of meaningful work. Income was rarely mentioned as a defining property of

meaningful work. This is in sharp contrast to parents' aspirations concerning college –

where earning gainful employment with a high paying job was traditionally cited.

Participants' view of success while in college. Participants were asked "what does

it mean to you to succeed in college?" and "Would you say you are succeeding in

college?" Often, participants' definitions of success while in college encompassed much

more than attaining good grades. Often, participants stated that learning the skills of

independence, having a social life, and learning the ebb and flow of the college campus

were just as important as achieving high grades. When defining success in college, one

student stated:

"I suppose it's something of personal success, exercising my personal

growth. I suppose it would be a feeling of accomplishment, you know, that

I could take on something and actually put it into motion and do it."

When students were asked if they felt like they were succeeding in school, many said that they did, regardless of the grades they were achieving. Most students stated that they felt they could do better, but overall, they were happy with their achievements so far. When asked if they felt they were succeeding while in college, one student stated:

"Overall yes, I am succeeding. College is not difficult, but it is new. I am not reminded in college as much as I am in high school. The dorms can be very distracting, and there is no privacy there. I am learning the importance of not procrastinating."

The Nature of Support Participants Received While in College

Participants reported an overwhelming amount of support received from their parents while in college. Many participants reported consistently being reminded of how proud their parents are that they have a child in college. This consistent reminder seemed to have a motivating effect on the participants. Several stated that they did not want to disappoint their family; others stated that they wanted to go to college, get a good job, and take care of their parents – just like their parents cared for them while in school. Other participants reported that even during their hardest days at school, they could still come home, tell their parents about what happened, and feel better about it. When asked about the support they received while in college, one participant stated:

"Support. It's not really anything they say, but it's comforting to go home. Being able to go home and talk to my parents about my experiences makes

me feel better. They're a great support system to have at home, and they

make me feel better."

However, despite the overwhelming amount of emotional support these participants received, many reported that they received very little instrumental support. Often, parents were not able to help with the financial costs of college, or the student received little, but not consistent, financial support from their parents. Other participants reported that parents are often unable to help with class topics and have difficulty counseling their child in navigating the academic environment. Of course, this stands to reason – as the participant's parents have little knowledge of a college campus and classroom workings.

Therefore, the support received from parents of first generation college students is a mixed bag. Often, participants received a high degree of emotional support, as well as any possible instrumental support the parent could provide. However, consistent, insightful instrumental support was often not present. Unfortunately, many of these students are forced to rely on the informal network of friends and faculty for navigating the college environment. When asked about the support they received from their parents while in college, one participant reported:

"Well, they've never been to college, so they don't understand. So for

financial aid, class work, schedules, and all that stuff – I am on my own."

Chapter 5: Summary and Recommendations for Further Research and Action

Summary

Overall, parents of first generation college students tend to hold the pursuit of a college degree in high esteem. While many parents of first generation college students seemed unaware of the inner-workings of this pursuit, they still expressed a large amount of pride and respect for their children pursuing a college education. Furthermore, these parents placed a large focus on outcomes of pursuing a college education. Current class grades and employment opportunities took precedent over individual growth and development as reasons for pursuing a college degree. Furthermore, many participants reported that the main goal of a college education, according to their parents, was to secure gainful employment with high pay. This was quite different from the participant responses, which typically favored securing employment in a field they liked, regardless of pay.

Overall, parents expressed little negativity or disdain for college-educated individuals. Many parents saw them as role models or as equals for their children to emulate. Also, participants reported little if any changes in how their parents perceived them after entering college. In essence, when examining parental attitudes toward college-educated individuals, very few negative distinctions were made.

Parents reported subtle yet strong desires for their children to attend college, which were never explicitly stated. Last, many parents of first generation college students seemed to see college as a means for achieving success in later life. Many parents saw having a college degree as a useful tool in the labor market, as well as a way to learn the

necessary and valuable skills needed to secure high paying job. Many parents expressed a high interest in their children having to work fewer hours for higher pay than they do.

Similar to their parents, many first generation college students also saw college as a place to learn the valuable skills to be competitive in the labor market and achieve a high paying job after graduation. However, many participants also saw college as a place to grow and develop the skills of independence and self-sufficiency. To this extent, their attitudes concerning college were markedly different than their parents'. Furthermore, many participants saw having a college degree as an esteemed accomplishment. No participant revealed any disdain for college-educated individuals.

Several college students aspired to move beyond the undergraduate level of college and achieve a master's degree or some other advanced degree. Many participants aspired to achieve gainful employment after graduation and looked forward to a career where they didn't have to work as much (80 hours plus) as their parents. Last, many participants defined success while in college as something much larger than just getting high grades. They stated that learning the skills of independence, having a social life, and learning the ebb and flow of the college campus were just as important as achieving high grades when defining success while in college.

When examining the nature of support first generation college students receive while in college, many participants reported an overwhelming amount of support from their parents. While this support didn't take the form of instrumental support (such as help with course work or receiving economic assistance), participants often reported a large amount of emotional support. Participants were continually reminded of how proud their parents were of them, and how much of a motivator this emotional support can be.

The high amount of emotional support that first generation college students receive can have multiple rewards. First, continual praise for achievement can provide reinforcement for future pursuits. Second, continually receiving praise and support for being in college can reduce the negative stereotypes many first generation college students must continually face. When interacting with significant others, having an identity of a college student carries with it rewarding interactions. This, in turn, may buffer against any negative associations being a first generation college student while on campus may carry with it.

Recommendations for Future Research and Action

Clearly, within the population of first generation college students, there are strengths. While many of these students face a culture shock when they enter college and experience many problems when faced with navigating the college bureaucracy, many of them have a strong reference group to reinforce their pursuit of an education. Parental support as a source for success has been largely studied in younger populations, but older populations are not exempt from the benefits of parental support. Future research concerning parental support should move to include both younger and college-age populations.

Furthermore, when examining parental support, distinctions must be made. On the one hand, parental roles dictate that children are to be taught about the world around them. For many younger children, these lessons are simple. However, in older populations, especially first generation college students, it is very difficult for parents to teach their children about the collegiate world they are about to enter. However, this does not mean that parents of first generation college students have nothing to offer. Even

when unable to offer instrumental support, many parents are still able to offer support in an emotional form. Future work concerning parental support should offer distinctions between emotional and instrumental support.

When examining populations that are vulnerable to identity threat, such as the group studied here, it is necessary to examine potential buffers that may ameliorate the outcomes of identity threat. Little is known concerning the buffers of identity threat; hopefully, this work provides a small amount of insight towards understanding that there are potential buffers that are yet unreported that vulnerable populations might benefit from. In this study, it was argued that parental support might provide a buffer to the identity threat that many first generation college students face while on campus. While this work cannot establish a direct link between the high levels of emotional support first generation college students face and the identity threat they tend to suffer from, it does establish several positive areas that tend to be understudied in vulnerable populations in education. Future work should provide converging evidence of the level of support first generation college students receive and work to establish a link between the high levels of support and potential benefits.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to understand how first generation college students view their educational experience. My goal is to understand how first generation college students view the support and aspirations from their parents, and whether these factors influence the academic success of first generation college students.

1. When you were about to finish high school, do you remember your parents pressuring you or expecting you to continue on to college?
2. What are your parent's beliefs about college?
3. What are your parent's beliefs about people who are college educated?
4. Do you think your parents will feel that way about you when you have a college education?
5. How do your parent's views of people who are college educated influence your pursuit of a college degree?
6. Do your parents ever make comments about you being a different person now that you are in college?
7. Is there anything you would like to add about your parent's views of college educated individuals?
8. What does it mean to succeed in college?
9. Would you say you are succeeding academically in college?
10. How do your parents help you succeed in college?
11. How often do your parents tell you they are proud of you that you are in college?
12. How often do your parents tell you they are happy you are in college?
13. How often do your parents give you praise when you do well in college?
14. How often do your parents talk to you about what it's like being in school?
15. Do your parents help you to succeed in college?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add about the support you receive from your parents while in college?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add before we are done?

Thank you very much for your time. Your answers are a valuable tool in understanding how to help improve the educational experiences and outcomes of first generation college students.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

Orion Mowbray (Principal Investigator)   Dr. Donna Killingbeck (Faculty Supervisor)
Eastern Michigan University   Eastern Michigan University
Department of Sociology   Department of Sociology,
Ypsilanti, MI 48189   Ypsilanti, MI 48189
(734) 260-4730   (734) 487-0012
omowbray@emich.edu   dkillingb@emich.edu

This form allows you to give your informed consent to participate in this research given the following information:

Purpose of the research: This research examines the role of first generation college students' experience. It is designed to help educators understand both the benefits and barriers that arise from particular family dynamics and social backgrounds.

Duration of participation: Participation for completing the interview session will last one hour.

Description of the research project: Participants in this study will be asked to participate in an interview discussing academic experiences in college. A request will be made to tape record the interview, but you may decline to have your interview tape recorded without penalty.

Means of Public Dissemination: Research results will be disseminated through publication and public presentation at national/regional conferences. This research is part of the researcher's master's thesis, so data will also be presented to the researcher's thesis committee, for professional review.

Risks and Benefits: This research involves no foreseeable levels of undue risk or discomfort. Participants can benefit from the study by helping the researcher further understand the benefits and barriers that affect educational attainment.

Confidentiality of information collected: You will not be identified in any reports on this study. The records will be kept confidential. All responses of participants will be destroyed after the data are collected and data analysis has been complete.

Voluntary nature of participation. You will be compensated $10.00 for your time spent during the interview process. However, your participation in this project is voluntary. Subsequent to your consent, you have the right to refuse to answer particular questions, without penalty, in addition you have the right to stop participation, to not participate at all, or to revoke participation at any time prior to publication of the data. Also, you have the right to refuse to participate in or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss.

I have read [or been informed] of the information given above. I understand the meaning of this information. The researcher has offered to answer any questions I may have concerning the study. Please sign below if you are willing to participate in an interview.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Please sign below if you agree to have this interview tape recorded.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

This research protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb deLaski-Smith (734.487.0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu)

Appendix C: HSRB Approval Letter

From ▶ <u>Dennis Grady Patrick <dpatrick1@emich.edu></u>
Sent Thursday, May 24, 2007 10:59 am
  To <u>omowbray@emich.edu</u>
  Cc
  Bcc
Subject Human Subjects Review

Dear Mr. Mowbray: The College of Arts and Sciences Human Subjects Review Committee has read your proposal, "First Generation College Students' Perception of Parental Attitudes: An Exploratory Study" and has rated it as EXEMPT. An exempt rating means that the proposal does not need further review by the university's human subjects committee. We are, however, asking you to make one minor change to the consent form before proceeding with data collection. That change is described below.

One of the reviewers asked for a stronger statement on the consent form indicating that results will be reported anonymously by using pseudonyms in the final document.

Unless I hear from you otherwise, I will assume that you agree to the above change and that you will revise your consent form accordingly before doing the exploratory interviews.

Please keep a copy of this email for your records.

Best of luck as you continue to work on your project.
Sincerely,
Dennis Patrick, Chair
CAS-HSRC

Dennis Patrick, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Communication and Theatre Arts
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Phone (734)487-4199
Fax (734) 487-3443

From ▸ Dennis Grady Patrick <dpatrick1@emich.edu>

Sent Thursday, May 24, 2007 1:14 pm

To Orion Peter Mowbray <omowbray@emich.edu>

Cc

Bcc

Subject Re: Human Subjects Review

You're welcome! Since the change is so minor, there's no need to resubmit.
Dennis

Dennis Patrick, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Communication and Theatre Arts
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Phone (734)487-4199
Fax (734) 487-3443

----- Original Message -----
From: Orion Peter Mowbray <omowbray@emich.edu>
Date: Thursday, May 24, 2007 11:53 am
Subject: Re: Human Subjects Review

> That's fantastic news. So I assume that I do not need to re-submit
> after I have added the language on the consent form "that results
> will
> be reported anonymously by using pseudonyms in the final document"
> as
> indicated by the reviewer?
>
> Thank you for your feedback.
> _____
> Orion Mowbray
> Graduate Student
> Department of Sociology
> 712F Pray-Harrold
> Eastern Michigan University
> 734-260-4730