



April 2023

Imposter Phenomenon: The Occupational Experiences of First-Generation College Students

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Recommended Citation

McCarthy, K., Chavez, K., Gastelum, K., Gomez, J., Salas, J., Severson, Y., & Zabat, J. (2023). Imposter Phenomenon: The Occupational Experiences of First-Generation College Students. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy, 11*(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.2011>

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Imposter Phenomenon: The Occupational Experiences of First-Generation College Students

Abstract

Background: First-generation college students (FGCS) represent an underserved population navigating higher education. There is a current gap in the literature regarding the interaction of occupational experiences, imposter phenomenon (IP), and FGCS. The purpose of this study is to use grounded theory to explore the occupational experience of IP among FGCS enrolled in a four-year university in California.

Method: This research is a qualitative study using grounded theory. Data was collected through a screening survey and interview with 11 participants who identified as FGCS.

Results: Thematic analysis generated five themes: (a) emotional aspects of IP, (b) collectivism, (c) balance, (d) communities of belonging, (e) othering. The theory of othering was created using grounded theory. FGCS's sense of being extended beyond the individual to the collective. Imposter phenomenon and intersectionality contributed to barriers to belonging. Although THE participants still experienced othering at the university level, they created smaller communities with peers where they felt they belonged.

Conclusion: This study contributes to occupational science literature by expanding the understanding of occupational experiences regarding IP. The theory of othering can be used by those working with FGCS to address othering and enhance belonging.

Comments

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Keywords

intersectionality, grounded theory, occupation, occupational science, othering, belonging

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DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.2011

First-generation college students (FGCS) remain an underserved class within the realm of academia (First-Generation Foundation, 2013). As the number of racial and ethnic minority students increases, the number of FGCS enrolled in higher education is also expected to increase (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In the academic year 2015–2016, 56% of undergraduates in the U.S. were first-generation college students, with neither parent having a four-year degree (RTI International, 2019). Because of the low percentage of universities collecting data on FGCS (28%) and the differing definitions of what it means to be first-generation, current numbers and demographics of FGCS are hard to determine (What to Become, 2021). Common App, a higher education application data source, reported a 21% increase in applications from first-generation students between the 2019–2020 and 2021–2022 academic years, noting that first-gen applicants increased at nearly twice the rate of continuing-gen applicants over the same period (Georgetown University, 2022). A higher percentage of FGCS are non-white and from lower-income backgrounds as compared to continuing-generation college students (CGCS) (Babineau, 2018). Compared to CGCS, FGCS are also less likely to attend 4-year colleges (26% v. 45%) and more likely to enroll in public two-year institutions (46% v. 26%) (Babineau, 2018). First-generation students are not only less likely to attend college but also to attain a degree (Engle, 2007), with only about half of first-generation students completing a bachelor's degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

The literature employs multiple definitions of the term first-generation college student. Gibbons et al. (2019) define FGCS as “those who are the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education, often lack information about the career development process” (p. 488). Huynh (2019) defines FGCS as “the first in their family to attend college and therefore have different characteristics than students whose parents attended college, or later generation students” (p. 125). For this research, FGCS is defined as a student whose parent or guardian has not obtained a degree from a four-year university.

Imposter Phenomenon (IP) can be described as a feeling of incompetence despite indications of competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Individuals who have or are experiencing IP view themselves as less capable than their peers, feel discomfort when they succeed, and attribute that success to external factors (Leary et al., 2000). Therefore, people experience notions of phoniness and fraudulence with thoughts that their peers will find out that they are not as competent (Lane, 2015). It is shown that people of many different experiences, backgrounds, and populations experience IP, but no research discusses how IP impacts FGCS and their occupational engagement.

Literature Review

The occupational experiences of FGCS in higher education can potentially reinforce inequity if not clearly understood or addressed. Whiteford (2017) argues that access to higher education is part of social inclusion. Whiteford (2017) postulates there has been little exploration in occupational science research on the “[transitional] occupation of being a university student,” and this is an occupational perspective worth exploring more in occupational science (p. 58). The absence of literature regarding college students' occupational experiences becomes a disservice to promoting social inclusion. Therefore, an occupational lens will provide a more holistic perspective for first-generation students who experience IP.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides peripheral insight as to why marginalized groups face adversity by extracting complex social categorizations and identities that comprise a person, such as socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, sexuality, and other oppressed identities/experiences, while also focusing on the interdependence by which these identities interact. As a result, the origin of marginalization against an individual, group, or population can be better understood (Secules et al., 2018). Crenshaw (1989) coined

the term intersectionality to explain the experience of black women, describing intersectional experiences as greater than merely adding up discrimination based on two identities: racism and sexism. Collins further explored intersectionality as critical social theory and defined intersectionality as “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2). College campuses are becoming increasingly diverse as more significant numbers of students from various backgrounds and experiences pursue higher education (Mitchell & Sawyer, 2014). These college students with multiple diverse identities will most likely face intersectional forms of discrimination. Havlik et al. (2017) examined students’ experiences at a mid-sized, predominantly White institution. The findings highlighted significant feelings of otherness related to three main identity traits: FGCS, SES, and race and ethnicity.

FGCS also face challenges with cultural adaptation on campus where there is a disconnect between the values of their families and community and the campus culture (Engle, 2007), especially when their “interdependent backgrounds” and the “independent norms” of the university context clash (Covarrubias et al., 2019, p. 381). FGCS display more collectivist values and “interdependent motivations for attending college, such as helping family after graduating” (Covarrubias et al., 2019, p. 383). This clash leaves students having to navigate the independent expectations of college with their interdependent familial values and responsibilities. FGCS from minority backgrounds can often feel more isolated and alienated when they arrive on campus, while also viewing the campus as a place that is less concerned about them and feeling like college is “worlds apart” from their home environment (Engle, 2007, p. 35). Underrepresented students have acknowledged the need for a “sense of fit” or “belonging” on campus (Babineau, 2018, p. 9), which can impact their transition to college and persistence.

Lived Experience of FGCS

The daily experiences of FGCS are significant aspects of their lives that set them apart from the experiences of continuing-generation college students (CGCS), students whose parents did attain a degree from a four-year university. Ellis et al. (2019) discuss how microaggressions are the most pertinent encounters FGCS commonly face. Ellis et al. (2019) refer to microaggressions as a form of everyday discrimination that is discrete and indirect but serves as a discriminatory remark (Ellis et al., 2019). Microaggressions are not specific to the experience of the FGCS, but for most marginalized groups, these encounters inhibit FGCS from feeling a sense of belonging in higher education.

Many FGCS experience economic struggles that make them feel obligated to provide financial support for their families. Covarrubias et al. (2019) reported that FGCS feel that attending college as a member of a low-income family made them expand their efforts toward supporting their families at the potential risk of increasing their financial challenges at university. A higher percentage of FGCS than CGCS (65% vs. 49%) used financial aid services and were employed during college (66% vs. 61%) (RTI International, 2019). FGCS also worked on average 8 more hr a week than CGCS (RTI International, 2019). Babineau (2018) found that while employment can help address financial concerns, it can also be a barrier to participating in campus activities and having adequate time for coursework. Many FGCSs continue working to support themselves and their family, but this can also challenge the ability to balance the demands of school and work. Low-income and FGCS are less likely to be engaged in academic and social experiences on campus, such as joining study groups, interacting with faculty and students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). FGCS report that they often delay engaging in co-curricular activities until they feel more confident with their grades

(Engle & Tinto, 2008). This potentially impacts their occupational balance, as these academic and social experiences benefit their success in higher education.

Although families cannot always provide financial support, they continue to exert an important influence on the success of many FGCS, as the students often feel a responsibility or desire to stay connected to their families and value their opinions. While there is an array of attitudes on the value of education, some families of FGCS see higher education as an opportunity for success (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Babineau (2018) found that because of less cultural capital, including how to navigate higher education, there were fewer support structures for FGCS because their family might not be able to relate to college experiences and challenges. Research also highlights that family situations are more often cited as decisions to leave school for FGCS, speculating that they might have more family and caregiver responsibilities for dependent family members (Babineau, 2018). The pressures and conflicts in family relationships with family “may cause intense feelings of isolation, estrangement, confusion, guilt, and anguish for first-generation college students” (Engle, 2007, p. 36)

Support from College

FGCS have the ability and skills to succeed, but many FGCS lack the social and cultural capital and resources needed to be successful in higher education (Havlik et al., 2017). Students with little experience involving college culture may face more challenges in navigating college. Even when supports exist, fewer FGCS, as compared with CGCS, used health services (14% vs. 29%) or academic advising (55% vs. 72%) and less sought academic support (30% vs. 37%) (RTI International, 2019). For some students, in addition to the capacity to seek out and navigate resources, there is also a lack of resources tailored to the needs of FGCS. One of the essential sources of support for students experiencing hardships is support from the institution itself (Ellis et al., 2019). Training staff and faculty on the experiences of FGCS sets the stage for an inclusive university environment. Potential program interventions include transition programs, a structured freshman experience, a more active and persistent approach to advising, facilitating faculty-staff interactions, population-specific scholarships, and connecting them to mentors with similar first-generation experiences (Babineau, 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

IP

IP, also known as “imposter syndrome,” refers to an internal feeling of incompetency, although the person is competent in their setting. A prominent factor of IP is that those experiencing this phenomenon typically fear their peers will find out they are not equipped with the necessary knowledge to be competent in an academic or professional setting (Lane, 2015). IP was originally developed to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving women in the workforce (Clance & Imes, 1978). Lane (2015) explored IP for emerging adults transitioning into professional life and found that IP extends into feelings of fraudulence, which impedes one’s ability to accept or experience a sense of accomplishment. Typically, those experiencing IP who continue to earn achievements would attribute their success to intangible factors, such as luck, further preventing these individuals from internalizing any sense of accomplishment or competency (Lane, 2015). Regarding FGCS, students who identify with IP may have shared perceptions of incompetency and fraudulence in their academic environments.

The literature suggests that FGCS experience IP at a higher rate and more intensely than their CGCS peers (Martinez et al., 2009; Peteet et al., 2015). FGCS from racial and ethnic minority groups have been shown to identify with significant feelings of IP (Gardner & Holley, 2011). FGCS, and especially students who come from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, have reported lower self-esteem and academic self-efficacy and higher levels of anxiety and fear around academic failure (Peteet et al., 2015).

Current literature reflected that while college campuses see greater diversity in their student bodies, the range of barriers to overcome grew with it. While no current literature explicitly addresses how IP emerges, this unique experience could impact student occupational engagement within the FGCS population. Therefore, this study aims to use grounded theory to explore IP experiences among FGCS enrolled in four-year universities in California.

Method

This study used a grounded theory approach, which is a systematic analytic approach to generating theory (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). The purpose of generating theory is to “make explicit the reality of how people perceive particular situations in the context of their environment and culture” (Carpenter & Suto, 2008, p. 62). Grounded theory allows for purposeful research within “individual processes, interpersonal relations and the reciprocal effects between individuals and larger societal processes” (Charmaz, 1995, p. 28). The research question in grounded theory is initially broad, focused on the phenomenon to be studied, and centers on the process. This study aimed to explore the occupational experiences and feelings of IP among FGCS enrolled in a four-year university. Based on the current gap in the literature, the research question used to guide the study was: How do first-generation college students who identify with IP experience occupation?

Procedures

The method of this study was structured similarly to the study by Lane (2015), who researched the relationship between IP and emerging adults. An electronic screening survey was distributed through social media and email in February 2020. Students were asked to take a screening survey via google forms to collect demographic information, including the participant’s age, gender, ethnicity, what year they were in college, if they were attending a four-year university, enrollment status (full time or part time), sexuality, and their socio-economic status. The screening survey also included a passage about an individual with feelings of IP to screen for the participants who experienced IP. This passage was derived from Lane’s (2015) study with his permission. The participants were asked to respond to questions that determined whether they resonated with the IP’s feelings based on that narrative. If the participant identified with the narrative prompt, they could continue if they chose to participate in the semi-structured interview. They were excluded from the formal interview if they did not identify with the passage or meet the necessary inclusion criteria.

To build a theory around the research question, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews from March to May of 2020, with all 11 participants that qualified under the inclusion criteria who had chosen to proceed with the interview portion of the study. The initial interview questions were created using the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) (Polatajko et al., 2007), and the three components of person, environment, and occupation to recognize how these different dimensions can impact occupational engagement and performance (see Table 1). Not all of the corresponding domains under each component were addressed. Six of the researchers participated in the interviews, and all interviews were conducted with one interviewer. As the interviews were conducted, the researchers engaged in a more iterative process, allowing questions to adapt and new questions to emerge as the participants shared their experiences.

Table 1
Interview Questions

CMOP-E Domains	Interview Questions
Environment	
Cultural and Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the cultural environment at home. • Describe the cultural environment of your university. • How would you change the cultural environment of your campus/university? • Describe the values and traditions at home. • Describe the population of your university.
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your social life before college. • Describe your current social life/social environment as a college student.
Occupation	
Productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When are you most productive? • In what types of settings are you most productive? • Do you find yourself being more productive around certain people? • Do you ever find yourself losing motivation?
Self-Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you do for your everyday self-care? • What do you do for self-care under high-stress conditions? • Has the way you take care of yourself changed from before entering college to now?
Leisure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you participate in any social activities that are provided by the university? • Do you ever feel unproductive when engaging in leisure or self-care activities? • What do you like to do when you have free time? • Have your leisure activities/amount of time engaging in leisure time changed since entering college?
Person	
Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe your mental health now versus when you entered college? • Do you ever experience self-doubt? • Do you ever experience a change in mood or attitude when being around other university students? • What inspires you to pursue your college degree. • If you feel comfortable sharing, what are some of your personal struggles with being first-gen?
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you find your current courses challenging? If so, what resources do you use to support yourself? • What are your experiences working in groups?
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe your physical health prior to college versus right now?

Participants

Sampling in grounded theory occurs across two stages: purposive and theoretical (Nayar, 2014). Purposive sampling in this study began with the inclusion criteria of FGCS include students who have a parent or parents that did not attain a degree from a four-year university in the United States. In addition, the students themselves must be full or part time, attending a four-year university, and located in California. The exclusion criteria included alumni or graduate students at a four-year university. Moreover, community college, vocational, or trade school students did not meet this study’s inclusion criteria. The researchers distributed flyers that advertised the study around the campus. As data was collected, the researchers realized that ethnicity and “othering” were emerging as important constructs. Theoretical sampling then involved recruiting students from two local programs that targeted mainly first-generation minority students: the Students Rising Above Foundation and the Torch Leadership Program.

The purpose of theoretical sampling is to “refine ideas, not to increase the size of the sampling” (Carpenter & Suto, 2008, p. 64). According to Charmaz (2000), data saturation is difficult to determine but is also influenced by the practical restraints of research, including time and access to participants. A sample size of 11 participants was determined throughout the process with ongoing analysis and comparison across the dataset to yield enough information power (Malterud et al., 2016) to answer the research question and generate theory while also experiencing the limitations of recruitment in one semester.

Before completing the screening survey, the participants were given a consent form from the researchers. In the consent form, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights and role in this research project. Snowball sampling was also expanded participation rates by asking the participants to identify and refer others. The participants chose their pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The Institutional Review Board's approval for the research was granted through the Dominican University of California.

Data Collection

The researchers collected data from a screening survey and follow-up interview. Data were transcribed verbatim via Otter, a live transcription software. All data collected through Otter was transferred into Dedoose Version 8.3.45 (2020), a qualitative software management program, and then deleted to protect all of the participants' confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) five phases of thematic analysis to generate themes most representative of the data collected. The researchers familiarized themselves with transcripts of the interviews to begin initial code generalization. Codes were identified and categorized by their relativity to the research question. Researcher triangulation was used where more than one researcher contributed to data analysis which can be seen as “an advantage as their different perspectives can enhance the research process” (Carpenter & Suto, 2008, p. 153). The researcher who conducted the interview completed the initial coding. A second researcher then reviewed existing initial codes and added codes. The two researchers then discussed the codes to reach an agreement. All of the researchers collaboratively participated in comparing the similarities and differences to combine codes into themes. Patterns and relationships in the data emerged naturally, which aided in the foundation of theoretical development. The core category was then determined by the themes to guide the direction of this study's theory (Nayar, 2014). The inductive processes performed were guided by thematic analysis and theoretical sampling to define, refine, and develop theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In accordance with grounded theory methods, data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached and the researchers felt that no “new data relating to the categories are emerging, that relationships between categories have been fully developed and all aspects of the theory are substantiated” (Nayar, 2014, p. 40).

Five out of the seven researchers identify as FGCS, and two identify as CGCS. To mitigate bias and enhance trustworthiness, the researchers reflected on their perspectives about FGCS and IP before and after the interview process to enhance reflexivity. Memoing is a central strategy to enhance rigor in a grounded theory study (Nayar, 2014). Reflexive memos were kept detailing researcher responses and reactions, and concerns, as well as keeping an audit trail of theory development and research decisions across data collection and analysis.

Findings

Twenty-three individuals participated in the initial screening survey. Out of the 23 participants, 22 identified with the narrative of IP. Out of the 22 individuals who identified with IP, three did not meet the study's inclusion criteria, and eight did not choose to progress with the interview portion. Eleven of the participants completed interviews, held over video chats and in-person sessions. The participants' characteristics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Year in College	Work/ Education Status	Socioeconomic Status
Natalia Arroyo	27	Female	Hispanic/Latino	4	Full-time student with a job	Middle
Priscilla Sanchez	20	Female	Hispanic/Latino	2	Full-time student with a job	Lower-middle
Elizabeth	18	Female	Hispanic/Latino	1	Full-time student with a job	Lower
Georgia Woods	21	Female	Asian	4	Full-time student with an internship and job	Lower-Middle
Spencer	21	Male	Hispanic/Latino	4	Full-time student	Lower-middle
Cardi B	22	Female	Asian	4	Full-time student with a job	Middle
Sonny Withers	21	Female	Asian	4	Full-Time student with a job	Middle
Briana Tolento	21	Female	Asian	4	Full-time student with an internship and job	Middle-higher
Meg	21	Female	Multicultural	4	Full-time student	Middle
Victoria Vega	18	Female	Hispanic/Latino	1	Full-time student	Lower-middle
Molly Shelton	22	Female	Hispanic/Latino	5	Full-time student	Middle

Five themes were identified through data analysis: emotional aspects of IP, collectivism, balance, campus community, and othering. These five themes revealed how first-generation college students who identify with IP experience their occupations and interact with their resources, social environments, and themselves.

Emotional Aspects of IP

Some common emotions that the participants of this study expressed were feelings of self-doubt, stress, anxiety, and pessimism. The participants felt incompetent attending college courses and thought they were not as bright as their classmates. Some of the participants had thoughts of dropping out of college because of this feeling. They expressed self-doubt during class discussions, feeling their opinion would not matter. They felt it was up to the same standard as their classmates for writing papers. One participant, Natalia, said:

I had to get myself prepared for what was I was going; what I was going to do, so I was going through a lot of things mentally, a lot of anxiety when I even enter school again because I thought that am I going to be able to do this?

The participant felt the need to be prepared to return to college because there was self-doubt about not overcoming the obstacles of obtaining a college degree. Elizabeth started doubting themselves, which impacted their mental health.

I started thinking I had like mental issues I was like oh no what if I forgot to turn in an assignment and I would overthink professors' comments I literally couldn't sleep at night like I couldn't breathe like I was like I need to see a doctor.

The participants felt overwhelmed, which impacted their motivation. “Sometimes there's just like a lot of things happening. And I feel like I get really overwhelmed and I get like lost in everything. It makes me like not want to do it right” (Sonny Withers). Molly shared that “every time I feel like I'm not motivated to do something, or I feel down about it . . . it's just that all these negative thoughts are coming in. So my motivation is going to be going down.”

Moreover, the other participants shared their mental health struggles, which involve personal life and the school environment. Most of the participants felt waves of insecurity, depression, and doubt. Molly expressed:

I had someone told me about like, [kinesiology] was not in my field, and it made me [feel] down about myself like a grade defines me, but like, well like, like no, a letter grade does not define how smart I am or how dumb I am or anything in that category.

The participants were in a situation where their school environment and personal life evolved into negativity, doubt, and sadness, which impacted their mental health. The participants spoke about coping strategies on how to combat their mental health. For example, a participant named Victoria stated, “I take the time to meditate, like, you know, or I take showers to cool myself down.” Another strategy that our participants used to care for themselves in moments of stress was talking to their families or friends. When asked about what kind of things you do to care for yourself, one participant, Briana stated,

I try and talk to either my mom or my sister or my friends cause I feel like that helps. Like talking about things that might be stressing you out or just even good things, keep you in a more positive mood.

Overall, the participants experienced situations that caused them to feel stress and had a variety of coping strategies to maintain their stress and anxiety levels low. They expressed that it was essential to take care of their mental health to feel relaxed and confident to engage as college students in pursuing their college degrees.

Collectivism

Collectivism includes an individual's prioritization of a group over the self. The participants prioritized their culture, background, and family over themselves. For example, when it came to career choice or attending college, the participants highly valued their family's desires for them. When asked what inspires her to pursue her college career, Briana stated, “My mom. I want to, but I also know that that's what she wants for me. It will make me happy to make her happy.” When asked about the struggles she experienced, Meg shared, “the expectation of my family, getting your bachelor's.” Family values and expectations around college were important factors in their college experience.

The participants internalized the idea that they needed to succeed in college because they owed it to their families. When asked what motivated them to pursue their college degree, one participant stated:

Both my parents went to college in the Philippines, and so I feel like, it's like, you've done it, now let me do it. And then, like, once I get my degree, I can give back to you as you've created for me. Also for my little cousins. I want to show them that, like, they can do higher education if they want to, because when my father was in college, he stopped. So I want them to be able to see that like, they can stop college, or they can keep going with it. (Sonny)

Many of the participants felt either imposed or internalized pressure from their families. They felt if they were to fail or not do well academically, they would let their families down, causing their sacrifices to go to waste. Because of this notion, several of the participants experienced a heightened motivation to prioritize all related work and school occupations. The feeling of being afraid to fail also manifested itself in far less engagement in self-care and leisure activities.

Whenever I disobey or if I want to do something instead of homework, my mom would always be like, um, 'you know, the life that you have right now, wasn't what it was like for your dad, and I had to work so hard to get where I am. I came to America with only \$500 and look where it's brought us, and you should always remember that.' And so my parents drilled that into our minds, that you know, you can't take this life for granted and you need to work harder or else you're gonna fail, and that feeling was my biggest fear. (Cardi B)

Wanting to succeed was often associated with leaving behind leisure and self-care activities and being hyper-focused on work and school occupations that were perceived as getting them ahead. These internalized ideas have impacted what and how they engage with an occupation, thus causing shifts in occupational balance.

Balance

As a result of the participants' effort to succeed in school, self-care and responsibilities were often neglected, and their sense of balance was impacted. When Cardi B was asked if she dedicates time to activities other than school, she expressed:

Just school and then studying. That's pretty much my day. I wish I could do more to take care of myself. I used to go to the gym a lot but now I feel like there's no time for anything.

In addition, it was common for the participants to feel stress as a result of their inability to engage in activities of their choice because of the excessive time demand of school. Cardi B expressed that it is challenging to participate in activities, such as speaking to family to the same extent that she was able to before attending college because of the amount of school-related activities and requirements. She stated, "Driving to [clinicals or work] is my only actual freedom where I can call people and call my family and it's just like right now there's so much demand from school."

When the participants had the opportunity to participate in leisure and self-care activities, they experienced a difference in the quality of engagement. This difference in the quality of engagement occurred because the participants were not mentally present in the activity in which they were engaging. Instead of being present, they thought about school-related tasks, such as assignments, they had yet to

complete. Elizabeth recognized that when she dedicates time to self-care activities, she feels unproductive and is hard on herself because there are many school-related tasks she can complete:

When I do work out and stuff like that I get everything done because then I can't focus on my workout. If I say I'm gonna go work out I cannot work out, I'll be thinking about the things that I need to do and get done. Normally, I don't like doing anything other than schoolwork because if I am not doing school work then I feel like I am falling behind.

Furthermore, some of the participants experienced a sense of guilt and stress when engaging in self-care and leisure activities. For example, Sonny stated:

I guess easily overwhelmed. I also feel like I should constantly be doing something with school. School becomes so fast-paced that when I'm not doing anything, I, like, feel like I should be. And then sometimes I'll stress [when] I'm not doing anything because I feel like I need to be doing something.

Internalized pressure to succeed induced feelings of guilt when engaging in leisure occupations with peers, as this may be viewed as an inappropriate use of time. Meg said, "And sometimes I feel guilty for not being so stressed out all the time." This feeling negatively impacted their perception of leisure activities with friends. Similarly, when asked if she ever felt guilty or unproductive when engaging in leisure or self-care activities, Sonny stated:

Sometimes, if I have something really important that week, or like the next day or something. Then I feel like I'm wasting my time if I go and do these things. But then I will then try to reason myself and say that, like, oh, this is a break, like a mental break self-care.

A balance between self-care and school responsibilities proved to be an ongoing struggle for the participants. The desire to succeed in school leads them to dedicate the majority of their daily life to the occupation of education. This results in difficulty participating in meaningful occupations, which causes an imbalance in their lives.

Communities of Belonging

The participants' experiences with peers either created feelings of belonging or feelings of othering, both of which directly impacted their occupational experiences. Peers who helped create a sense of belonging were seen as a community on campus. In particular, peers in their major/program cohort who had a similar experience and were at the same level academically were seen as supportive. Cardi B shares about this experience of support:

I feel like for me I need to surround myself around, people who are going through the same thing, so definitely surrounding myself around, like, other nursing students, and, like them, knowing that they're also going through the same stuff is really comforting for me, because it's a reminder that you know, I'm not the only one going through this stuff.

When Georgia Woods was feeling isolated, she shared that she would confide in a peer going through similar feelings: "Then you find another person, they're also lost, you don't feel as lost. So, like, I took refuge in her feelings of her also feeling, not being adequate enough for the program and that self-doubt." Sonny highlighted this divide in their cohort when deciding with whom to study.

So it'd be more beneficial for me so I can study with my friends, as opposed to, like, if it were a class for smart people, like, I wasn't really close to and I wouldn't want to, like, approach and be, like, hey, can you study, you know.

The participants also shared that they could create a sense of community outside their classmates through the groups they joined, activities they did, or connections they made. Molly shared about the potential to create your own community.

Everyone's comfortable finding their own people, I guess you could say. There's never a time, like, there's nobody there here for them. But if there isn't, then there's also, like, you can make a club to make it your own if you wanted to [be] more in-depth.

Getting involved on campus helps create a sense of belonging, with some students having a campus job and others being a part of a student organization and student leadership. For the other participants, being around others with similar racial identities or backgrounds and being surrounded by diversity helped them feel like they belonged. Victoria shared that on her college campus, "The population is very diverse. There's a lot of different cultures. So I feel like that helps a lot." Molly also shared about the openness of her campus culture: "there's actually a lot of cultures here that are very beautiful or very open, and then everybody's engaged in each one of them." Sonny also shared that having a variety of organizations on campus can be a great way to feel included, "There is a lot of acceptance for, like, everybody coming from different places and being of different cultures. There's a lot of cultural clubs, cultural groups that people can be involved in."

These self-made communities of belonging are also used to support success in college. The participants knew about and sometimes accessed campus resources, such as tutoring, office hours, food banks, and various mental health/wellness resources. Still, they seemed more comfortable using their networks as a preferred option. These campus resources were supportive but did not have the same sense of collaboration and belonging.

With my cohort, um, like, you know, like, we've all taken the same classes, we all are going through the same thing, we're all getting the same emails like, you know, of course, there's that availability to collaborate with each other until, like, work things out and problem solve, like, how can we, how can we, like, succeed through all this madness, like, you know, that really helped me. (Cardi B)

In summary, the participants felt belonging when they had a sense of community. They found this community in their cohort with people who are struggling or going through the same thing, on campus with diverse groups, or they created a sense of belonging by forming their own groups.

Othering

In addition to feeling a sense of belonging in specific communities on campus, the participants also felt like they did not belong, which researchers coded "othering." Othering encompasses the actions, behaviors, and perceived judgment of others that leads to feeling like an outsider. Some of the participants felt othered as first-generation students who struggled in college and faced different challenges than traditional students. Elizabeth shared,

Sometimes I wonder what is going on, like, there's nobody like me, like, I feel stupid, like, I feel like I don't belong at [university name], I don't know, like, I just feel there's, like, not a lot of, like, first gens make it. Like, I feel like people view us and expect us to not make it and graduate. I feel like I am the only one struggling.

Other participants felt othered when they noticed that their peers had better technology and were from a higher socioeconomic status. Priscilla shared, "I come from a low SES background, and because of that, I felt like I never fit in or belonged socially because of technology. And I know people would judge, too." The privilege of those around them influenced belonging, something they felt was more pronounced on campus than outside. Priscilla shared:

At the beginning of [university name], it was a reminder that this isn't where I belong, especially when I was dorming. Because this was when I was surrounded by people of different ethnicities, backgrounds, and privileges that I wish I had to deal with my stuff. Especially when people would have their laptops and nice phones, I always felt like I was not privileged enough to be at [university name]. But once I got off campus, I started to feel better and I think it's because I can step away from that scene.

Because of a lack of belonging in their campus community, many of the participants expressed that academic performance and participation were directly affected. Elizabeth recognized a disconnect with her colleagues and described her experience as such: "When I'm in class I don't like to share my opinions because I feel like others are smarter than me and I sound dumb, like I won't be valued."

Othering happened when the participants did not see their race or ethnicity represented. When she first visited her university, Elizabeth shared, "I was like, damn, there's, like, no Hispanics. I felt so out of place." She also shared about feeling more comfortable with people in her ethnic group, "If I'm around other Hispanics or Latinos, I feel good, but if I'm around other white people or Asians, I feel out of place, like they're looking down at me." Lack of representation impacted her social occupations, leading her to socialize less. Priscilla shared about feeling a lack of belonging because of culture: "The cultural environment here sucks, it is all white and Filipino. I felt insecure about it, especially because I am not of those ethnicities." Elizabeth also shared about her first semester in college: "I don't really go out, since I was a freshman, it's like I'm still getting used to it, like the first semester I was so like, close-minded. I feel like there's nobody like me." The participants need to see themselves represented to feel like they belong and to feel comfortable engaging with others.

In addition to the integrity of one's relationships, cultural identity may impact one's sense of belonging in their groups and environment. Dominating groups may also have similar effects on those that do not belong to such groups. For example, students who are not part of a cultural group or dominant program or major on campus may feel a disconnect that leads to a further lack of belonging. As referenced by Priscilla, these gaps not only impacted her self-concept but also resulted in her feeling othered on campus: "I feel insecure about it. Especially since I am not of those ethnicities or [in] nursing." When the participants' cultural identity and race did not fit into the majority, the students felt like they did not belong.

As the participants began to recognize various ways in which they felt othered or disconnected from their peers and environments, mental health and occupational experiences were impacted. Thus,

although each participant was on their own academic path, the concept of othering was a significant theme that impacted each of their college experiences.

Discussion

The findings that link IP and FGCS are highly influenced by the emotional impact on the student. This research supports Lane's (2015) study of IP in that there is a heightened level of incompetence felt by those who identify with experiencing this phenomenon. Many of the participants felt intimidated and disconnected inside the classroom. This manifested in the participants not feeling confident enough to speak aloud in class because their classmates would think poorly of them. Outside of the classroom, they felt feelings of failing in their specific career field. Overall, these experiences contributed to greater feelings of distress and general anxiety when it came to tasks pertaining to their education. In addition to Lane's (2015) and Gibbons et al. (2019) study, this research examined some tools used by the participants that negate some of the negative emotions or feelings that came along with IP. Engaging in meaningful leisure self-care activities while finding support systems in friends and family allowed them to stay motivated while striving toward their college degrees.

Intersectionality provided insight into why certain groups may face adversity and why the participants experienced feelings of being othered. The participants discussed how their different socioeconomic status from their peers made them feel isolated on campus and how access to costly materials they might need for their education was a source of stress for some. This stress of not having the latest technology made some of the participants feel like outliers compared to the rest of the students who attended their university and had access to the tools and materials needed to succeed in school. The majority of the students worked while in school. FGCS often experience financial struggles that result in feeling obligated to support not only themselves but also their family's needs (Covarrubias et al., 2019). In this study, the participants expressed increased difficulty balancing work and school but emphasized the struggle to balance their self-care occupations alongside work and school. Engle (2007) highlighted that FGCS might prioritize work or school over opportunities for student engagement that can enhance success. The participants addressed this by finding their communities of belonging with their peers or by getting involved on campus through work and student engagement. The participants felt belonging in these self-created or existing groups, but a sense of belonging at a larger institutional level was not expressed.

Another aspect of intersectionality was culture. All of the participants came from collectivist cultures and shared their experience of feeling pressured or motivated to succeed because of their family, placing value on family above individual needs. Covarrubias et al. (2019) stated that FGCS feel an internalized expectation or desire to stay connected to where they came from when leaving for college. The participants of this study were heavily influenced by their families and culture in terms of what occupations in which they would or would not engage. The collectivist background was also a significant role in what motivated them to pursue college in the first place. This aligns with an article by Blackwell and Pinder (2014), where they stated that many families of FGCS saw their students going to college as an opportunity for greater success. The participants of this study often felt pressure from their families to do well in college. This served as an internalized motivation to keep going with their college career.

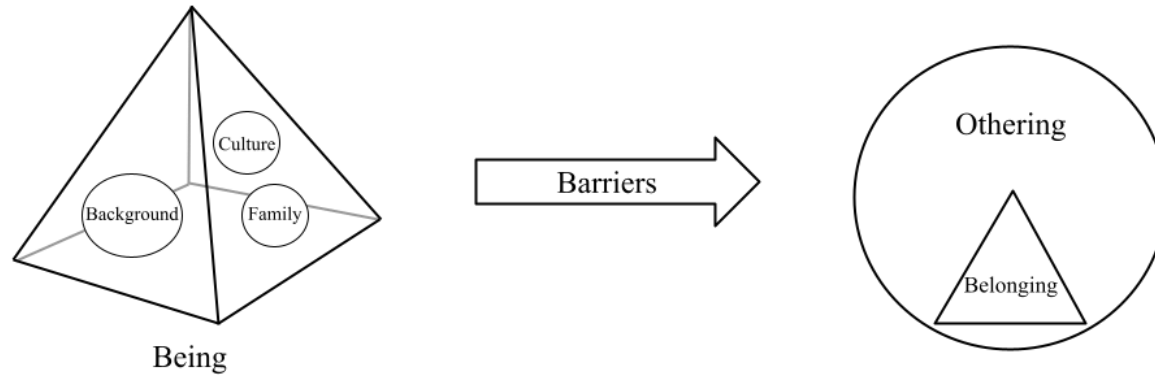
Regarding support, the participants sometimes used formal campus resources, but they preferred their self-made communities for help. Ellis et al. (2019) highlight that personalized supports, where faculty and advisors scaffolded resources to show they cared, were more effective for students. This research further adds to Ellis et al.'s (2019) study that FGCS benefits from personalized support and supportive communities where belonging is enhanced. The participants did know about and sometimes accessed these

resources from their school, but it was found that the participants relied on their communities of belonging for information, tools, and resources. The support from other students that then turned into self-made communities gave students a feeling of belonging in a micro sense in a broader space where they felt othered by their university.

Although this study used a grounded theory approach, concepts of the doing, being, becoming, and belonging (DBBB) framework emerged through data analysis as a finding of this study (Hitch et al., 2014; Wilcock, 1999). In its original form, doing, being, and becoming (Wilcock, 1999) was created to describe an individual's positionality, values, and contexts to understand how they may occupationally impact a person's pursuits. "Doing" evaluates one's actions, more specifically, their occupational engagement and disengagement (Wilcock, 1999). "Being" represents the ability to think, reflect, and understand ourselves and how our existence may influence our relationships and outward presentation (Wilcock, 1999). "Becoming" stands for the process of pursuing growth through "transformation and self-actualization" (Wilcock, 1999). "Belonging," as the final construct, serves as the mechanism between the person, the occupation, and the environment to gain value, connectedness, and purpose in oneself and their surroundings (Hitch et al., 2014). Therefore, when functioning in unison, the concept of DBBB pushed to expand the way we understand an individual and how they interact with themselves, their environments, and their occupations. The concept of DBBB served as a tool to understand the relationship between FGCS and higher education. However, there were limitations with this theoretical framework that did not fully represent the unique experiences and intersections of the FGCS population.

From the findings, the conceptual framework of DBBB related to the experiences of the participants but the concepts of doing, being, becoming, and belonging did not fully align with the diverse cultural backgrounds and collective values that were embodied by the participants in this study. All of the participants identified as being non-white or multicultural and coming from a collectivist culture. The application of collectivist values did not fit into the structure of DBBB as the assumption was that the individual would do, be, and become for themselves. Doing was characterized as a balance of occupations, including self-care, productive, and leisure occupations. Balance was described not only in terms of finding time for doing but also the quality of doing, where the restorative aspects that occupations provided were being influenced by feelings of guilt or preoccupation with school tasks that needed to be completed. Doing was also described as doing for others, achieving in school to honor their family, or not doing occupations and neglecting self-care or leisure so that they would succeed academically for their family. Moreover, the essence of belonging was driven by an individual perspective and did not consider a group's sense of belonging and growth. Belonging was limited as a concept because it focused on whether the person felt belonging and failed to represent the process of exclusion that the participants experienced. Othering happened when the participants felt unrepresented, intimidated, and financially disadvantaged, and when they were with others who did not understand what it meant to be first generation. Becoming did not emerge as a salient theme for the participants. The participants seemed to focus more on the here and now, getting work done and passing their courses. Concepts such as "transformation and self-actualization" might also be too individualistic in nature, as the participants were motivated to succeed for their family, not their own personal transformation. With these structures in place, individualistic cultural backgrounds disrupt the doing, being, becoming, and belonging of those from collectivist backgrounds. The Theory of Othering (ToO) was developed to include these various intersections in the presence of DBBB (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Theory of Othering



The ToO is inspired by the analogy of a child's shape sorting toy to represent the "fit" between a person and their sense of belonging. The ToO is established to consider how individuals of collectivist cultural backgrounds navigate through the DBBB framework. This theory also offers an alternate experience of belonging that differs from the DBBB framework. Influenced by FGCS identifying with IP, this framework depicts how individuals of diverse intersections interact with their occupations under dominating groups to achieve a sense of belonging within an environment where they continue to feel marginalized.

Pyramid: Being

The ToO begins with the triangle, which represents the person. Similar to the DBBB theory, the Triangle is similar to the 'being' aspect of Wilcock's (1999) theory. However, rather than defining the person and being as solely the individual, it accounts for themselves and their background, family, and culture. A "person" through the lens of the ToO is an individual's idea of who they understand themselves to be, but it is highly influenced both internally and externally by their culture and family. When the participants were asked questions surrounding their backgrounds, it was found that many of the participants came from a culture that was highly based on collectivist values. This means that although FGCS have the autonomy to choose which occupations they participate in, their choice of engagement is motivated and limited by their family, culture, and perceived expectations for the person.

Arrow 1: Barriers

Next in the model are the barriers individuals experience, represented by the arrow. The research findings revealed that the barriers a person faces are often rooted in intersectionality, where socio-economic status and racial/ethnic identities shape complex social inequalities. Frequently, these intersectional identities serve as barriers to having proper access to resources causing individuals to feel lesser than their peers. Another example is the lack of diversity and not seeing yourself represented within your space which may cause individuals to feel forgotten or overlooked within their environment. Other barriers are the emotions that come along with IP; for example, many of the participants experienced feelings of anxiety or disconnection inside the classroom because of differences in socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity; all of which serve as implications to their occupations experienced at the point of othering.

Circle: Othering

Once we arrive at the circle, we are at the point of othering. Othering was a core category that emerged and was highlighted in the findings. Othering is more than the feeling of lacking a sense of belonging; it looks at the systemic process of exclusion when othered. Othering focuses more on the context than the person. For the participants, othering happened because of a lack of diversity in race and ethnicity on campus, intimidating classroom experiences, decreased financial privilege, and lack of awareness from those who do not understand what it means to be first-generation. In the context of higher education, the current structures in place impede the occupational experiences of FGCS with IP, which involves the dominance of individualistic norms and values on college campuses (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Students from collectivist backgrounds are othered in higher education as the system is heavily founded on individualistic values and practices that neglect to consider cultural diversity. Universities often assume and cater to students of middle to high socioeconomic status, which can greatly impede the occupational experiences of students who do not identify as coming from that certain background.

In contexts of the visual model of the ToO, this section is understood through an analogy of a child's sorting block. When trying to fit the subjects, represented by the pyramid, into the context and dominating higher education structures represented by the circle, the subjects simply do not fit in. This is where students are confronted with the emotional aspects of IP, including self-doubt, incompetency, stress, anxiety, and pessimism. Moreover, this is where the participants' occupational experiences are connected to IP, including changes in their occupational engagement and the quality of engagement discussed in the theme regarding balance. The significance of this section is to exemplify the mismatch of FGCS in individualistic environments.

Triangle: Belonging

Although there is a sense of being othered on a macro level by these universities, individuals can still experience feelings of belonging on a micro level through self-made communities. Even though they felt excluded from a larger social environment on a larger scale, they were able to create small communities where they felt comfortable, included, and supported. These groups were often formed with other students who experienced similar feelings of being forgotten or other students of similar racial identities, backgrounds, or overall experiences. The new sense of belonging allowed those who felt excluded by their environments a more significant opportunity to succeed in that they now had increased access to resources and support by creating their small network of community.

Belonging is a sense of connectedness to other people, places, cultures, communities, and times (Hitch et al., 2014). Although the feeling of belonging is attainable and exists for different populations, in theory, overall belonging was not an end goal made apparent by the participants of this study. Instead, the participants revealed a common theme of developing communities of belonging, striving to obtain their degrees, and reaching success in honor of their families.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the small sample size and limited sources of data, which impacts the validity of this research. Multiple data collection strategies could have been employed to add to data triangulation including focus groups, interviews with families, observations, or journal entries. The population could have been larger and more diverse to expose more generalized occupational experiences. It might also be beneficial to observe FGCS outside of California to promote the ToO's generalizability to more contexts and populations.

Implications

FGCS who identify with IP may experience shifts in the quality of occupations, occupational balance, and their sense of belonging. This study exemplifies a need for occupational therapy practice in this area of working with first-generation college students, not only to help college students adapt but also to consult with higher education about how to adapt the university environment to improve experiences of belonging and engagement in occupation.

This research contributes to higher education by providing the real-life experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in a four-year university. This study brings awareness to the FGCS experiences and, specifically, the limitations to resources for academic achievement and how that adversely impacts their overall well-being. Thus, giving insight as to how higher education spaces can better accommodate various groups to promote success through inclusion. The ToO uses a generalized model that can be applied beyond the FGCS community to identify additional spaces in which othering has imposed occupational barriers and a removed sense of belonging. It brings to the surface the question: Does this person not belong in this space, or have these spaces been historically designed to benefit specific types of students over others? A systems-level approach that aims to explore how the environment would change to fit the person better might benefit FGCS.

Participatory action research (PAR) methods may also play a valuable role in advancing the research of ToO. The purpose of PAR is to establish a collaborative relationship between the researcher(s) and participants to create a better understanding and action toward a common situation, system, or process. Centering around the participants' perspectives would not only allow for rich knowledge of first-hand experiences but steer toward a more representative and participant-centered outcome.

It is crucial to explore further how FGCS can attain belonging because it is an occupational justice concern. If doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Hitch et al., 2014) is important to well-being, and belonging cannot be achieved by the FGCS community, they need to determine how to get there. We must advocate for altering environments that disallow a person's belonging rather than programs that merely encourage personal change.

Conclusion

This study examines the occupational experiences of first-generation college students who identify with imposter phenomena. The ToO was generated based on the study's participant's experiences in a four-year university, utilizing grounded theory. The ToO adopts the lens of intersectionality to observe how minority groups navigate their spaces in dominated environments. While this theory may serve as a tool for representation, it also helps to understand better the occupational experiences of entering higher education as a FGCS. This theory adds valuable information to the existing occupational science literature by adding the representation of underserved and collectivist communities. Occupational scientists and occupational therapists must address occupational barriers and elevate others to achieve individual versions of belonging. Therefore, we need to shift their thinking from why people do not belong to how our systems repress belonging in higher education.

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