Storytelling and Racial Identity: How First-Generation Students of Color Navigate their Identities at Predominately White Institutions

A Senior Project Presented to

The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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Spring 2023

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Abstract

Utilizing the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the present study seeks to explore and further understand the ways in which first-generation students of color navigate, and thus make meaning, of their race and class identities at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Through qualitative interviews with 14 first-generation students of color (henceforth, FGSOC), themes that emerged included: (1) *being used to "it"*, (2) *financial differences cause a clash with belonging,* and (3) *cultural spaces bring welcoming feelings.* Findings were consistent with previous research regarding barriers faced by first-generation students of color. The current study adds to the growing body of research on intersectionality within the Communication discipline. Theoretical and practical implications are offered. Study limitations and directions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: first-generation student, people of color, Predominately White Institution, racial identity

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Breaking barriers and defying the odds, one-third of all college students are the first in their families to pursue a college degree (Whitley et al., 2018). However, this road to success is not an easy one for these ambitious individuals. Unfortunately, only 27% of them will obtain their degree within four years (Whitley et al., 2018). During the 2015-2016 school year, a remarkable 56% of students had parents who had not received a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2018). Among them, over half were also the first sibling in their family to go to college (RTI International, 2018). These resilient first-generation students often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as reflected in the difference in parental income (RTI International, 2018). While continuing-generation students have a median parental income of $90,000 their first-generation counteracts can only rely on an average of $41,000 (RTI International, 2018). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that one in three first-generation students identify as students of color (henceforth, FGSOC) (Schuyler et al., 2021). In the context of this study, first-generation refers to individuals whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the term Predominately White Institution (henceforth, PWI) refers to universities where 50% or more of the student population is White (Gaston, 2022).

This study investigates the feelings of two intersectional identities: racial and socioeconomic identities, to further understand how individuals navigate a PWI. By directly asking students about their personal experiences as FGSOC at PWIs we created a collective narrative to better understand the community at risk and provide helpful approaches to successfully combat difficulties faced by this marginalized group.

Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students of Color

Regardless of academic qualifications for admission, first-generation students are less likely to enroll in college in comparison to their continuing-generation peers (Engle, 2007). There are multiple contributing factors to this unfortunate reality, such as a lack of preparation and familial support. Even with these increasing rates of college enrollment among students of color, FGSOC are still less likely to graduate (Beresin & Watkins, 2022). These barriers to higher education access begin as early as elementary school (Engle, 2007). In what follows, we explicate how early educational experiences have the ability to shape future educational goals and resources for first-generation students of color.

Early Educational Barriers for FGSOC

First-generation students often lack guidance from their parents on the application process and the decision-making process (Perna et al., 2008). Unfortunately, preparation for college can happen as early as elementary school (Chen, 2022). At this stage, completing homework can be beneficial because it allows students to review class material (Chen, 2022). A report by NASSP (2020) explains that living in poverty can affect a student's ability to complete homework, study, and even engage in after-school programs. If students are held back because of their socioeconomic status, they are automatically falling behind (NASSP, 2020). Families who don't have to worry about poverty, usually have children that end up developing better social skills, having more confidence, and a higher self-esteem (Chen, 2022). As mentioned earlier, children who live in poverty tend to be students of color, aside from their personal development skills, these students also are less likely to have resources like computers, fast and reliable internet, and even quiet places to study (NASSP, 2020). Students that live in poor neighborhoods often also have to deal with having lower quality classroom instruction because schools can't afford teachers and other materials (NCES). Studies have shown that students from low-income

households have less favorable school experience and less educational outcomes compared to students from other schools (NCES). Many students of color from low socioeconomic classes may not have the key parental involvement needed to succeed in school; typically, students have parents who work multiple jobs; they then cannot come to field trips, or they cannot help with homework, often it is due to a lack of time or lack of knowledge (Chen, 2022).

These disparities continue in middle school as well (Engle, 2007). A study conducted by Horn and Nunez (2000) found that taking advanced courses became a "gateway" to more advanced courses later in a student's academic career. Out of the students studied, 14% of all first-generation students took advanced courses in middle school, while 34% of students with parents who attended college took advanced courses (Engle, 2007). Taking high school algebra as an eighth grader, and other advanced courses in middle school, was found to be associated to the likelihood of attending college (Engle, 2007). A study by Morton and Riegle-Crumb (2020) found that teachers in predominantly black schools cover significantly less mathematics content than their counterparts in predominately white or non-racial majority schools. Middle school is when establishing good study habits is essential to prepare one for high school (Engle, 2007). Often, low-income first-generation students of color still do not have the adequate resources to efficiently study on their own (Horn & Nunez, 2000). A lot of these students are not even thinking about college or do not know what it is (Engle, 2007).

High School Barriers for FGSOC

Applying for college can be extremely difficult for students who have minimal knowledge of how to apply and how to obtain financial aid (Perna et al., 2008). Parental involvement is also extremely important in high school (Perna et al., 2008). Parents who ask school counselors about their student's post-high school plans often receive more college

information (Owen et al., 2020). Many times, FGSOC lack familial support because they themselves did not attend college (Owen et al., 2020). Because of the lack of support and knowledge from parents and family, school counselors play an important role in providing resources and information about college and career opportunities for first-generation and low-income students of color (Owen et al., 2020). Hurwitz and Howell (2014) studied the impacts of high school counselors and they found having interactions with counselors can raise application rates. In the end, these high school counselors are the primary resource that helps students make their final decisions about college (Perna et al., 2008). Unfortunately, students with predominantly low-income or minority student populations of color have less college-related counseling available making them less prepared when they begin college (Owen et al., 2020). And when they do end up enrolling, they tend to attend two-year colleges rather than a "well-resourced" four-year college (Perna et al., 2008).

College Barriers for FGSOC

Many times, first-generation students, and low-income students of color fall victim to *summer melt,* a phenomenon explained by Harvard University as a change of plans for students who while in high school decided to go to college but do not end up starting the next fall. This happens when a student lacks support, either familial or financially (Harvard University). For those lucky enough to avoid the summer melt trap, and still attend college, face many new challenges upon arrival. By the time these students get to college, Stebleton and Soria (2012) found that they lack reading and writing skills in comparison to their continuing-generation peers. This automatically puts them behind students whose parents attended college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Although the first year of college is generally considered to be a crucial point for all students, it can be particularly challenging for at-risk populations, such as first-generation

students who are the first in their families to make the move to college away from home. Low-income, first-generation students were almost four times more likely than their counterparts to withdraw from higher education after their first year, regardless of institution type (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Schuyler and her co-researchers (2021) explain that "FGSOC report lower perceived support during their college transition than white first-generation college generation students" (p. 16). Many times, FGSOC feel disconnected from their institutions and as a result they are less likely to participate in on campus activities and in extracurriculars (Schuyler et al., 2021).

Low-income first-generation students were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year in comparison to other students across all institution types (Engle & Tinto, 2008). To further support this, Ernest and collogues found that first-generation students were likely to work more hours per week, study fewer hours, complete fewer first year credits, and were even less likely to participate in honors programs when compared to their peers with parents who had bachelor's degrees (Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, first-generation students of color are less likely to form meaningful relationships with their professors, which is ironic because first-generation students are the ones that would most likely benefit from these interpersonal interactions (Ward et al., p. 55, 2012). Retention levels among FGSOC increases when parental and familial support is given during the first transition year to college (Schuyler et al., 2021). Other studies suggest that this may be because first-generation students lack experience with multiple things including how to properly manage their time, are faced with the "economic realities of college life", and the obstacles of getting a degree (Hsiao, 1992). Because of the lack of resources faced by low-income first-generation students, they are more likely to

live and work off campus (Pascarella et al., 2004). Working full time causes them to be taking

part-time classes, this can further restrict their on-campus engagement (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Familial support can be challenging to receive when one is a first-generation student of

color away at college. Balancing two different cultures—that of their family and that of their

community at college—can be complex (Hsiao, 1992). Family members—which includes

parents, siblings, and even friends—tend to not be supportive of higher education when they

themselves did not have any experience with college (Hsiao, 1992). This could be because they

may not be aware of the benefits of college, or they might not even understand the complexities

of applying to college (Hsiao, 1992). If they were aware of these, parental willingness to guide

and support and prepare children for college would increase greatly (Gohn et al., 2006). By

looking at previous research on the educational barriers of FGSOC we gain a better

understanding of the systemic challenges they face in accessing and succeeding in higher

education. By understanding these educational barriers, we can develop support systems to

further help them.

Financial Barriers

A college degree can be beneficial for various reasons. Having a degree can increase the

opportunity for jobs, with more jobs comes more money, and college can give people a huge

network pool (Gagnon, 2022). Yet, college can be a financial burden for many and sometimes a

deterrent (Dickler, 2021). On top of tuition, students and their families pay for living expenses,

food, school supplies, and so much more. Because most FGSOC are low-income, it is that much

harder to find adequate resources to help fund one's education (College raptor, 2022). Financial

aid is always a good option, but the main reason students do not apply to grants, scholarships, or

even federal programs like Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is because of a

lack of awareness of the availability or even the processes of applying (College Raptor, 2022).
When it comes to FAFSA many students do not think they qualify and simply do not apply.
Others do not apply because the length and complexity of the form. For students who are
undocumented and reside and study in California, there is the California Dream Act but only
14% of all applicants receive it (González, 2023). The lack of knowledge that these resources are
out there may become the reason a FGSOC does not attend college.

Networking is an essential experience for college students, and it is hard to connect with
others when employed and working long hours. 66% of students who are first in their families to
attend college are employed while in college (Schwartz, 2017). These students tend to work
almost twice as many hours as their continuing generation peers—20 hours per week compared
to 12 hours a week. Because these students work and have a limited on-campus engagement tend
to lack the opportunity to connect with other students and thus lack opportunities later in their
careers (Schwartz, 2017). Even with the same credentials as continuing-generation students
Many FGSOC lack the basics of finding a professional job (Marcus, 2021). Either they do not
know how to have an interview or how to write a resume (Marcus, 2021). Parents who attend
college often have a better understanding on how to help their student get a job post-grad
(Schwartz, 2017). Examining the financial barriers is a critical aspect of understanding the
challenges first-generation students of color face, as financial barriers can have a significant
impact to their access to higher education and may influence, their overall college experience. In
this next section, we will discuss how intersectional identities create more challenges for first-
generation students of color attending PWIs.

Intersectional Identities

Identity development refers to the concept of understanding who one is. This typically happens as adolescents emerge into early adults. Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggest that identity development is a "lifelong task". In the adolescent stage, young adults begin to ask fundamental questions that then shape who they are. These questions help navigate one's "political and religious views, career choices, and even future achievements" (Shell et al., 2020, p.192). Stanford (1967) explains that identity development is achieved through a complex understanding of various social identities.

Komives and other researchers (2003) explain that "Social identity developments have evolved from the sociohistorical and sociopolitical climate of the United States in which social groups that are not White, heterosexual, male, able-bodied, and privileged have been oppressed" (p. 205). This is important to consider when speaking about FGSOC at PWIs. Racial identity has multiple statuses. There are six: conformity, dissonance, immersion, emersion, internalization, and integrated awareness (Komives et al., 2003). It is explained that with these statuses people have implicit acceptances of White standards where people may unknowingly adopt and follow norms and values that prioritize white culture Komives et al., 2003). As a result of this, individuals may start to think less of their own racial group, and they possibly may be influenced by negative stereotypes. Others might reject or even ignore aspects of White culture considering them less valuable (p. 208-209).

Multiple oppressions might emerge due to multiple intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989). In this case, first-generation identity and racial identities intersect while attending a PWI. Both identities face unique challenges, so if one has intersecting identities, they face more challenges. A first-generation student lacks information and a student of color at a PWI lacks representation at their institution. Webber (1998) explains that ignoring the intersections also

means that one is ignoring groups of people who hold multiple identities, especially identities that have been marginalized. There are moments in time where some individuals may experience multiple social identities at once; therefore, it is extremely important to place an emphasis on intersecting identities such as first-generation students of color.

Exploring Identities in College

College is widely recognized as a crucial period for students to cultivate and develop their identity (Shell et al., 2020). This is because they are given the freedom to explore and self-discover, they also gain an independence that strays away from the direct supervision of parents, and it even allows students to find and form interests with other students (Shell et al., 2020). As one can imagine, this may be relatively easy for students whose parents have navigated college themselves and for students who do not have to worry about having enough money to pay for essentials like groceries, rent, or school supplies. FGSOC are placed at crossroads because aside from self-identity-discovery, they also must think about being able to afford being in school and about navigating a college campus without the help of their parents (Shell et al., 2020). A study conducted by Shell and other researchers (2020) found that college students were more likely to be currently exploring identity options. They further explain that the first year of college may be the most important to understand. Researching concepts of identity is crucial for understanding the struggles faced FGSOC as it helps illustrate the complex intersectionality of their experiences.

Imposter Syndrome

One out of every college student experiences imposter syndrome throughout their college career (Swenson, 2019). Imposter syndrome refers to the doubts an individual places upon themselves regarding success, skills, and even abilities (Le. 2019). Attending college as a first-

generation student can be complicated. Feelings of worry that one does not belong in school can and may arise. In many cases, imposter syndrome may cause first-generation students to "doubt their own abilities, to discount praise, to generate anxiety, to opt for easier pathways, and to experience increased dissatisfaction with their lives" (Dickson). It is very common for first-generation students to experience guilt and family conflicts while in college (Beresin & Watkins, 2022). Many first-generation students feel guilt that comes from being granted this educational opportunity that many of their family members did not have thus leading to imposter syndrome (Beresin & Watkins, 2022).

For students of color, imposter syndrome is also a prominent experience during college. Researchers Stone-Sabali et al. (2023) examined imposter syndrome in students of color, they found that "African American, Latinx, and Asian American college students suffer from impostor-ism and psychological distress". Bauer-Wolf (2017) explains that students of color in college often face discrimination and report higher rates of depression and anxiety than their white peers.

The majority of first-generation students are people of color, 41% are Black and 61% are Latine (Embry, 2022). These intersecting identities create even more feelings of distress and worry of belonging (Swenson, 2019). Imposter syndrome is extremely common among young adults attending college. Thus, it is important to ensure that colleges are diverse to try and prevent these uncomfortable feelings among students. A statement by the American Council of Education published a diversity statement in 2012, that explained the importance of diversity in colleges and universities. They explain that "diversity enriches the educational experience". Essentially diversity allows us to learn from different perspectives and beliefs that one can't get unless it's taught in a "rich intellectual and social environment". Additionally, it provides a place

in which personal growth can happen in a healthy manner. Being surrounded by people who are different from you can encourage critical thinking and allow students to communicate with people from different backgrounds. Researching imposter syndrome just adds to complexity of the challenges FGSOC face while attending college. It helps us gain a stronger understanding of the struggles faced in a college setting. Furthermore, it is important to talk about this as it helps validate experiences of students.

Predominately White Institutions

The term PWI refers to universities where 50% or more of the student population is White (Gaston, 2022). Some students, specifically African American students, who attend PWIs tend to experience tension understanding their cultural identity and develop a desire to acclimate (Sinnan, 2016). Mentoring can be extremely helpful for students of color as African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans experience the largest proportional educational achievement gaps in the U.S (Bensimon, 2005). Having a mentor can be critical in determining career success. Students rely on advisors for professional mentorship, as well as understanding how to navigate the institution. It is important for students to find mentors that look like them and that have similar experiences as them to successfully tackle the workforce (Zambrana et al., 2015).

It is common for students of color to be targeted in institutions that are primarily made up of White students (Eschmann, 2020). Racial microaggressions are common and so are stereotypes. Eschmann (2020) found that targets of racial microaggressions feel "pressured to remain silent" and tend to not speak up about these comments. Microaggressions from a sociological perspective views microaggressions as "new racism" that contributes to the colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In the following section, we will discuss the importance of storytelling and how it relates to FGSOC at PWIs.

The Narrative Paradigm

The Narrative Paradigm, proposed by communication theorist Dr. Walter Fisher, offers a valuable and effective framework that helps us understand human communication. The theory suggests that that humans are natural storytellers, interestingly, it is something that doesn't need to be taught. By being able to naturally tell stories, we can understand and experience life through various narratives. Fisher explains that we are considered "authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life" (Fisher, 1984, p. 18). He explains that even listening to stories can help shape our understandings of the world. Additionally, Fisher argues that narratives have a persuasive power that goes beyond logical reasoning. Narratives tap into our emotions, our values, and even our personal experiences therefore influencing how we interpret and make sense of information.

Applied to the current study, we seek to solicit and examine narratives provided by FGSOC about their experiences at a PWI. By listening to the experiences of FGSOC we gain a better understanding of how they view and navigate the world. With this information we can challenge dominate views and cultures to better support FGSOC. Thus, we propose the following research questions:

R1: Within the context of a PWI, what themes animate the stories of first-generation students of color about their racial identity development?

R2: What themes animate the stories of first-generation students of color regarding finding a sense of belonging, if any, at PWIs?

Methods

The purpose of this study was to thematically analyze first-generation college students of colors' stories regarding their personal experiences with navigating their racial identities at

Predominately White Institutions. 14 participants were recruited to achieve this goal. We engaged in thematic analysis to make sense of the stories told by participants.

Procedures

For people to participate in this study, individuals needed to meet the following criteria: (1) be 18 years of age or older, (2) identify as a person of color, (3) be the first person in their family to complete a four-year college degree, and (4) have spent at least 1 full year as a student at a Predominantly White Institution. Participants were recruited via various social media sites, email, convenience (e.g., word-of-mouth) sampling. All respondents signed an informed consent form. All interviews took place through Zoom video conferencing and ranged from 23 to 48 ($M = 31$) minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, resulting in 409 pages of single-spaced text. To protect confidentially, respondents were assigned a pseudonym and all identifying information was kept separate from the interview data.

Sample

Of the 14 participants recruited, ten participants identified as female ($n = 74.1\%$), two as non-binary ($n = 14.3\%$), and two as male ($n = 14.3\%$). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old ($M = 21$). Two participants were transfer students ($n = 14.3\%$). Most of the participants in this sample identified as Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 92.9\%$), while only one participant identified as Black ($n = 7.1\%$). At the time of the interview, all participants resided on the West Coast. Participants were also asked about their parents' highest educational attainment. For parent 1, one participant was unsure ($n = 7.1\%$), five participants indicated their parent had completed middle school/junior high ($n = 35.7\%$), seven participants indicated their parent had completed high school ($n = 50\%$), and one indicated their parent had attended some college ($n = 7.1\%$). For parent 2, two participants indicated they were unsure ($n = 14.3\%$), five participants

indicated their parent had completed middle school/junior high ($n = 35.7\%$), seven participants indicated their parent had completed high school ($n = 50\%$). These categories were borrowed from the FAFSA application that determines if a student is considered first-generation.

Data Analysis

Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis to examine data, we identified patterns and themes that emerged through the stories of participants. We did this by first re-familiarizing ourselves with each interview by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. While reviewing these, we took vigorous notes about commonalities and moments that we found meaningful in the dataset. We then began to identify themes in the data, specifically using Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying themes: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. To ensure the distinctiveness of each theme, we employed the constant comparative analysis technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After, theme names were assigned, and exemplars were selected to support each theme. Finally, we produced the final report which entailed writing the story of our data.

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Findings

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In this study, we explored how FGSOC make sense of their racial identities within the context of a Predominately White Institution as well as how students find a sense of belonging, if any, at PWIs. Three primary themes animated participants' stories: (1) *being used to "it"*, (2) *financial differences cause a clash with belonging,* and (3) *cultural spaces bring welcoming feelings.*

Being Used to "it"

Many participants spoke about stereotypes they either had experienced or heard in passing while being at a Predominately White Institutions. For most, these instances were ones

that students experienced frequently; consequently, most did not feel the need to address them. In this context *it* refers to any comment made about one's racial identity. Sofia, a participant, explained that while attending an event hosted by a club that she was affiliated with, she began to dance with a White student:

> We were talking, and I don't remember what he said, but he mentioned something about me being a Latina, I was very much being stereotyped. And I don't remember what it was. I think it was because I blocked it out—I didn't really want it to let it impact me…I kind of just shrugged it off, but it didn't catch me by surprise. This shouldn't be done, but I know what I want to invest my energy in, and this was not it.

Sofia's experience with her dancing partner, shows us that FGSOC are accustomed to uncomfortable situations, which is why they tend to not give them as much attention. Unfortunately, this just reinforces the systemic structures in place at PWIs where White students can get away with stereotypical remarks. Dani, another participant, shared a similar experience where they heard students make fun of a professors' preferred name:

> I'm walking out of class, making my way out the door. And then I hear people talking behind me, one girl says, 'that must be his [the professor's] gangster name'. And I was literally like four feet away from them, I never confronted them about it, because I know how ridiculous it sounded because they were insinuating Mexican stereotypes.

Dani's experience with classmates shows how unaware other students are about their surroundings and about the things they are saying, even when it comes to speaking about a professor. The more we spoke with Dani, the more we understood why they did not mention anything to the girls behind them. As Latine students, many don't want to be stereotyped as someone who exaggerates for making a big deal out of *nothing*. Like Sofia, Dani decided to not give it any energy.

On top of dealing with stereotypes, FGSOC are also learning to not let microaggressions hurt their feelings. Diego, another participant, expressed how he found out that his place of employment was almost not going to hire him due to a microaggression:

> [The White hiring manager] didn't want to hire me because [she believed other people] wouldn't want to interact with me because of my accent. Most of the people working there are White. I'm still afraid of my accent, but I'm here. I help a lot of students with their senior projects.

As microaggressions and stereotypes emerge, it seems that FGSOC tend to not let uneducated comments made by their White peers affect them. Although ignoring comments like this may help students in the moment, it again is reinforcing the structural systems PWIs have created. Gabi, another student, spoke to us about her experience in Greek life at her PWI:

> Every year, we take photos to create a composite. Everyone in the sorority is pictured on this big board. The year I joined; everything was virtual due to the pandemic. So, we had to virtually send in a photo of ourselves. When I saw it printed for the first time, I was completely washed out. The color of my skin was completely different. I was so pale, so White, and I looked exactly like every one of my sorority sisters. It bothered me, but what was I supposed to do?

Gabi continued to tell me that she has her composite up on her fridge, when her friends come over and try to find her on it, they usually always miss her. Most of these students when confronted with *it,* do not know how to approach the situation, or even if they should. Many of them, like Gabi, have a *what's the point* mentality. Jazmine summarizes why she's here in the first place, and further explains what keeps her motivated at her PWI:

> When I first started college, I felt the culture shock, and for me, I kind of forgot why I was here, and a lot of what I could focus on was how I just felt alone, and then once I started getting into upper division classes, I started realizing that your career, your life, and what you choose to do with your life, is what makes you better. I used to resent my mom—mainly my family, I used to hate being Mexican. With time, I realized that I'm here for my career, to better myself, and to better my life. So what if I had to live differently? So what if I had to work ten times harder? That's just how it is.

From these exemplars, it is evident that FGSOC largely ignore microaggressions and stereotypes to ensure their feelings and their energy do not get consumed by the comments made by their White peers. It is not the job of FGSOC to address these issues, as if one wants to learn they will. It is essential to create an inclusive educational community in which all members are educated

on microaggressions and stereotypes to avoid these interactions. But it is also important to note that by choosing to not to respond to remarks made by students, FGSOC may be indirectly contributing to the actions and behaviors of White students, further encouraging them to continue doing it.

Financial Differences Cause Clash with Belonging

As first-generation students of color, many of the participants we spoke to come from families who are economically disadvantaged. Many students expressed feeling excluded from various experiences due to their financial differences. Grace, a student whose major works closely with the agriculture industry explains:

> Just the way people talk about money, and the way people think about money here is insane, especially in agriculture. I remember I went to go see the horses one time, and I was so excited, I wasn't even in the class. It was my first time working with horses. My friend was in the class, and I had the professor last quarter, and they let me go. The girls in charge [who were students] did not talk to me, I totally felt like I wasn't worth their time. I can tell when someone is racially profiling me, this was like them saying *you don't have what I have, you just wouldn't understand, like I'm not even going to waste my time trying to teach you.*

Grace's experience with students ignoring her because of her lack of experience due to her economic disadvantages instead of teaching her how to work with horses properly is a reality for many FGSOC at PWIs. It is important for univerisites, specifically PWIs to provide adequate resources so that their students do not feel like they are not enough. Another student, Elena, lives thirty-minutes from her university:

> I always knew I wasn't going to have a typical college experience. From the moment I picked [this university] I knew I wasn't going to be able to live in [that town], I just couldn't afford it.

Because Elena lives so far from her college town, she also expressed the struggles of maintaining friendships and even staying involved with on campus events:

> I have a friend who always invites me when her roommates are having parties, or when they go to the bars. I'm honestly not a drinker, it doesn't make sense because I'm driving all the way down [to the school's campus] to just drive thirty minutes back [home]. I'm not going to get drunk…I tried going to a club one time. I drove all the way down there and two people showed up. Driving 60 miles round trip to just hope that this club is going to work for me doesn't seem reasonable.

For Elena, her financial differences prevent her from having a *normal* college experience like her peers who do live in a closer proximity to their college campuses. This is a reality for many students with financial burdens. Universities should be checking in with their lower-income students and providing extra resources to have them thrive just like any other student. Bianca, another student, who relies on financial aid to stay in school explains:

> I remember I took 11 units, so because I didn't meet the 12 units, financial aid wasn't able to cover. And I was living on campus, so I started freaking out, and that's not fair, like I don't get my education paid for like some of the students here, and it was just a very hard time for me. I tried to find resources. It just seemed like they didn't have enough for students who are like me or in my position.

Bianca's situation is a sad reality for a lot of FGSOC. Sometimes taking less units is needed for students like Bianca because they need to be working to simply stay in the college town that they're in. Again, it shows that FGSOC are in an immense need for more financial aid. Similarly, Jazmine explains:

> I knew I would have to work full time to afford living here. I knew that I would have to take out loans. My mom wasn't financially stable. She still isn't. I knew that was a big sacrifice on my part, but I wanted an education to better myself.

Like Jazmine, most if not all the students we talked to expressed being on financial aid and spoke about working a job while trying to balance classes. These stories illustrate the need for more financial help within higher education institutions as well as how the lack of money can contribute to a non-normal college experience.

Sometimes coming from a lower socioeconomic status can be a talking point in discussions. As uncomfortable as it may be, speaking up and sharing personal experiences may be beneficial. As nervous as she was, Ana, a third-year student expressed:

> In a business class last year, we were talking about Trader Joe's and everyone in that class was White, and that class really put me on another level of anxious because I was always a little nervous to speak up. Participation was a huge part of my grade, so I was like *I have to do it!* For about ten minutes the class was raving about things they liked about the store. I made a comment, "I don't go to Trader Joe's. In the area I live at home, you don't have a Trader Joe's that's accessible to you. They're kind of profiting from ethnic foods".

Ana shared her experience with the class, and instead of an awe in agreement after sharing her personal experiences, a White student rose his hand and argued with Ana as to why she was wrong. She further expressed that "it was in that moment where I was shaking, I'm never going to participate again". Luckily for Ana, the professor intervened and ask both to have a civil discussion where they each got to explain their points. Ana's upbringing caused her to have different experiences in comparison to her peers. In this case, she used her financial difference to take up space in the classroom setting.

Cultural Spaces Bring Welcoming Feelings

Finding a place of belonging can be difficult for many FGSOC attending PWIs. Most if not all students expressed that cultural spaces made them feel welcomed. For some, making friends came at an ease, thanks to the University's roommate pairing system. Ale explains:

> I'm [in a program for first-generation students at my college], so during my first year here, I was with [other students in that program], and one of them was Latina. We weren't super-duper close, but we liked hanging out with each other and we always had each other's backs. It was really nice. I'm lucky that my first roommates related to me on that level, and we just loved being around each other.

Ale's experience with University Housing and their school's program allowed them to create a community for themself to feel like they belonged. The university's paring system may be a form

of in school segregation, as most FGSOC are paired with each other. Ale's university paring

system has both pros and cons, as it segregated her from her White peers, but it also gave her

best friends. Bianca explained that she posted a Ride Share because she was going to Trader

Joes:

> Just the other day, I was picking up this girl, and she was Mexican. She began crying to
> me and she said, "I don't belong [at this college]" and the thing is, I didn't even know
> her. I had asked if anyone needed a ride and she kind of just opened up and started
> sobbing.

 Bianca spoke to the girl and explained "I have been in the same position as you" she further

encouraged the girl find a Latinx sorority to join. Both narratives show us that having similarities

to the people you are with, even if you are meeting them for the first time, can help someone feel

like they belong.

Students were also intentional when finding places of belonging. Many spoke about clubs

and organizations they are a part of that continuously make them and their friends feel

welcomed. Mateo, another student, expressed:

> The first time I felt welcomed on campus was when I joined [a Latinx club]. At first it
> was because I saw more Latinx students such as myself and saw a lot of people from my
> building. Every meeting they talk about certain countries in Mexico and the club informs
> us about their culture and more. Here I met different types of Latinx people, it's not just
> Mexicans.

Here, Mateo went out of his way to find an organization that shared similar values as him.

Seeing people like himself made him even more excited to continue joining this club. He loved it

so much his first year, that now he holds a position on the club's board. Another example of

intentionally seeking a community can be seen with Andrea explaining what EOP and what

Scholars has done for her with a prospective student:

> I was basically telling him all these things about the program and how it's helped me.
> And he was like "oh, my, God, thank you so much, you know, you make me feel so
> welcomed, and I was really nervous about coming to a school that was predominately

White." It's nice to not only receive these good experiences, but also comforting to know that my experiences can help others.

Andrea did not have to talk to prospective students about her experiences at her PWI, let alone positive experiences. She chose to highlight the positive impacts that finding a good community can make. Gabi explains that she found her sense of belonging on her first day on campus:

> Finally, I told myself that I needed to get out of my room and find some friends. I joined my dorm floor building's Slack group chat. And being the nosey person that I am, I scrolled to the bottom of the screen to find the profile pictures and I stumbled upon a familiar face. When I was first looking for a roommate, I went on Facebook pages and stumbled upon one that said "Join [college's name] Latinx group chat". The girl who had started the chat, was the familiar face I saw. One thing led to another, I texted her, she moved in two doors down, we hung out for a little bit, and things just happened from there. We became best friends.

Even though Gabi had to find her friends, she expressed that social media pages like Facebook and Snapchat were easy ways to "get out there" and find people that look and possibly have similar interests as you.

As we were discussing these questions with participants, many expressed that their friend groups were primarily made up of other students of color. Isabella said, "now that I'm actually thinking about it, yeah, I only hang out with people of color". Diego mentioned, "all of my friends are Latino, so I don't really have White friends". Bianca expressed, "the people who I've made friends with somehow are still a little bit of Hispanic". Even though FGSOC are making friends, it seems like there might be a disassociation with students of color and White students at these universities. Maybe these schools are implementing discrete segregation policies like Ale's university.

Discussion

Findings illustrate how FGSOC make sense of their racial identities at PWIs and how they find a sense of belonging in these environments. Qualitative interviews were conducted and grounded in Fisher's Narrative Paradigm (1984) which explains that storytelling and narration

allows us to understand human experiences. Using Buran and Clarke's (2006) model for thematic analysis, three primary themes emerged in participants' stories: (1) *being used to "it",* (2) *financial differences cause a clash with belonging,* and (3) *cultural spaces bring welcoming feelings.* Our findings culminated into a host of theoretical and practical implications discussed below.

Theoretical Implications

Findings from this study contribute to previous research on the Narrative Paradigm as storytelling helped us gauge a better understanding of the challenges faced by FGSOC at PWIs (Fisher, 1984). This study extends research as it primarily looks at narratives told by individuals with intersecting identities: racial and socioeconomic. With the use of narratives, we were able to gauge a better understanding of the challenges marginalized students at PWIs face.

Previous research has focused on either navigating racial identities at PWIs (Sinnan, 2016) or navigating first-generation identities in college (Shell et al., 2020). Not much has been found about both. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the intersectionality of both identities in the context of navigating college. Within the theme of *being used to "it"* students recalled various moments in which they encountered microaggressions and stereotypes. With these encounters, it was not common for students to say or do anything about them. Yet when asked about instances most, almost immediately, had an answer. This contributes to previous research like Eschmann's (2020) in which it was found that targets of microaggressions and stereotypes tend to not make a big deal out of comments made by peers.

Again, the study reflects previous research with the second theme *financial differences cause clash with belonging.* Dickler (2021) explains that college experiences may alter depending on one's financial stability. For many, the cost of college is a deterrent. With these

narratives, the participants expressed having different experiences as their White peers at their PWI because they come from low socioeconomic classes. On top of this, many students expressed that they're time was limited because most of them had part-time jobs. This caused a challenge for most when it came to making friends and coming to on campus activities. Schwartz (2017) explains that having a job while managing classes in college may reduce the number of extracurricular activities they attend. These are crucial because they allow students to make friends.

Lastly, the third theme *cultural spaces bring feelings of welcome* also contribute to previous research on belonging and identity. Crenshaw (1989) explains that intersecting identities has the potential to bring people together. This is evident in the study as sharing similar values, experiences, and backgrounds is what allowed students at these PWIs to create meaningful relationships with other students.

Practical Implications

We also offer advice for professionals (e.g., educators, practitioners, therapists) who work with first-generation students of color to help lessen stress about college. When working with students who are in the midst applying to college, it is important to note that counselors should be supportive and helpful. Through narratives we found that many times students were discouraged by counselors to apply to college and thus only limited themselves to target and safety schools. Past research has shown that college counselors play a huge role in helping FGSOC apply and go through with college (Hurwitz and Howell 2014). Additionally, it is important for students to know that they belong at whatever college they decide to go to as many students within this study reported feelings of imposter syndrome (Swenson, 2019).

For those professionals in charge of inclusivity in college, it is important to create safe spaces in which students can find other students with similar social identities. As we saw through the study, most friendships cultivated at PWIs comes from welcoming cultural spaces. Most friendships made came from creating a connection through intersecting identities (Crenshaw 1989). When hiring staff, it is important to ensure diversity among professors. This will allow for diverse mentors for students (Zambrana et al., 2015). With this, it is important for professors and other staff to have adequate resources to also retain diverse employees.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provided a deeper understanding of the emotions faced by first-generation students at PWIs, it is necessary to understand and discuss the study's limitations. First, the present study's ability to generalize the findings is constrained by the utilization of a small sample size. On top of this, the sample is predominately Hispanic/Latine which leaves out the voices of other FGSOC. Looking forward, it would be interesting to further diversify the sample by examining other intersectional identities, specifically focusing on the queer community. Additionally, it would be interesting to also explore how White students experience PWIs and interact with students of color. Second, sampling bias could have occurred as we reached out to people we knew and asked them to spread the word as well. To prevent this in the future, researchers should employ multiple sampling strategies to ensure diversity and representation in the sample. Lastly, the study assumed that racial identity would be the main concern for FGSOC, in fact, we found that students think about financial differences almost as much as racial identity. Moving forward, this would be interesting to explore in more detail.

Conclusion

The current study explored how first-generation students of color make meaning of their race and class identities at Predominantly White Institutions. Findings demonstrated three ways in which FGSOC make sense of their racial identities and how they find a sense of belonging at PWIs. Our findings culminated into a host of theoretical and practical contributions. We hope future research will continue to explore how intersecting identities are shaped by PWIs.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hi, (INSERT PARTICIPANT'S NAME)! Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this study! This interview should last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience as a first-generation student of color at a predominantly White institution (PWI). If at any point you do not want to answer a question, that is totally fine. Are you ready to begin?

To preface, this study is centered around stories and storytelling. For each question, please answer in a story format. Stories do not necessarily need to be long or short. Just be sure to include everything and anything in your story that best helps you convey your experiences, feelings, and actions. Some helpful aspects to keep in mind: Who, what, when, where, and how. Additionally, I will be repeatedly using the acronym PWI, which stands for Predominantly White Institution. Your confidentiality will be protected, but if at any time you'd prefer to not to answer a question that is completely okay. If you're ready, let's begin.

1. Can you explain your college application process and your school selection process?
    a. Follow-up: who aided your decision-making or application process---if anyone?
2. Tell me a story that exemplifies your personal experience as a first-generation student and a person of color at this PWI.
3. Tell me a story that reveals a time, if any, that you felt unwelcome at a PWI due to being a first-generation student of color?
4. Tell me a story that reveals a time, if any, that you felt welcome at a PWI as a first-generation student of color?
5. Tell me a story about a negative personal experience you had within your friend group at your college concerning your racial identity.
6. Tell me a story about a positive personal experience you had within your friend group at your college concerning your racial identity.
7. How have you found a sense of belonging as a first-generation student of color at a PWI?
    a. Follow-up: What were some challenges you faced finding it (if any)?
8. Tell me a story about how you learned how to sustain yourself as a person of color at this PWI?
    a. Follow-Up, if needed: What did you do to support and comfort yourself as a first-generation student of color at a PWI?

Debrief

So that is officially the end of the interview! Are there any other details you would like to provide or questions you would like me to revisit? Any questions you have for me?

If anything comes up, please don't hesitate to contact me via email kgarc103@calpoly.edu

Before I let you go, would you be willing to review the results of this study later – likely in a few months? Basically, we will send you a summary of our findings and ask you if they ring true to your experience.

- IF YES: Can I get a good email address for you?
- IF NO: I totally understand, thank you anyway!

Would you also be willing to share this study opportunity with others you know who may qualify? If so, that would be great! Feel free to give them my number and I'll send them the link to the survey.

Thanks so much for sharing your experience with me. I hope you have a wonderful day/night!