

Best of Both Worlds:
Bridging First-generation Students' Experiences with Kin and College

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Abstract

First-generation college attendees comprise a quarter of the nearly 16 million students entering higher education in the United States each year. Previous research finds these students face hurdles specific to their status, such as lower rates of academic success, retention, and campus engagement, and they report higher levels of stress and lower self-efficacy and self-esteem. Additionally, some scholars contend that intergenerational educational mobility negatively impacts family relationships, especially those with parents. In the current study, I take a phenomenological approach to first-generation college students' experiences in navigating school and family. I interviewed eight undergraduates who were the first in their families to attend college. Findings suggest that parents, despite lacking college experience, provide invaluable support to the academic success and emotional well-being of their children. Several participants also reported role modeling and inspiring younger siblings as a source of pride and motivation to persist. Overall, these students were found to be navigating college experiences quite similar to their continuing-generation counterparts. Implications for future research and institutional programming are discussed.

Keywords: first-generation college students, family relationships

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Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

According to a 2017 report by the Pell Foundation, first-generation college attendees now comprise a quarter of the nearly 16 million students entering higher education in the United States (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashuta, Ruizz & Franklin, 2017). Although higher education is generally believed to be a pathway to improved quality of life, research in the fields of sociology, psychology and anthropology has also revealed the struggles that accompany intergenerational educational mobility. Academic success, retention, and graduation rates are often lackluster for this group overall, and both quantitative and qualitative investigations show increased stress and diminished self-efficacy among first-generation college students (e.g., Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliot, & Pierce, 2012; McCoy, 2014; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001).

In one of the first studies of its kind, London (1989) interviewed 15 first-generation students “breaking away” from their families and their difficulties in reconciling their working-class home communities and their new academic settings. He framed his findings within the psychoanalytic and family systems theory of Helm Stierlin, who categorized “breaking away” into four general modes: liberated, bound, delegated, and expelled. The theory conceptualizes mutual liberation as the ideal mode of separation, but London found that all of his participants described, instead, themes of binding, delegation, and expulsion within their parental relationships. Although all of London’s participants shared different experiences about the quality and importance of their family relationships, one sentiment tied them all together: you are either working class *or* you are a college student. Whether pushed by their parents to “achieve

more” than they did or while attempting to shed their working-class identities, the students saw and described education attainment as a difficult departure from their families.

Contemporary research continues to be predicated on the assumption that these roles are incompatible, and it tends to focus on how this fissure affects the academic lives of first-generation students. In contrast to previous research that has focused on student experiences in school setting, Lee and Kramer (2013) utilized a mixed-methods design to investigate experiences in the *home* setting. What they found in their qualitative interviews was that first-generation students reported feeling like they exist in what Bourdieu (1990) calls a *cleft habitus*, an in-between space where they struggled to navigate either realm with confidence. Recognizing how difficult these *habitus* concepts have been to operationalize, the researchers bolstered their in-depth interviews with quantitative data gathered from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman (NLSF). Consistent with interview findings, these quantitative data suggested that navigating and maintaining family relationships back home was one of the hardest parts of the transition to college. Dodging certain topics, interests, and even vocabulary to avoid alienating their parents, students felt frustrated and disconnected when trying to talk with family about their exciting new worlds. Dissatisfied with the “self-censorship” required to fit in at home, some respondents reported intentionally limiting their contact with pre-college friends and family. This is similar to a concept described as “straddling” in which students experiencing class mobility struggled to feel completely at ease either with family or within higher education (Lubrano, 2004).

Whereas some students may resolve the discrepancy between their home and school worlds by limiting contact with pre-college friends and family, other studies suggest that some students maintain contact but alter *how* they communicate. Tactics such as code-switching,

avoidance of college talk, and restricted interactions are all common themes found in qualitative interviews with first-generation students (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lawler, 1999; Lehmann, 2013; London, 1989; Moschetti & Hudley, 2016; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, such strategies can engender feelings of guilt for students. In fact, this appeared frequently enough for scholars (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015) to coin a new term – family achievement guilt – to capture the specific experiences of students who feel they must choose college over family, as they find integration of the two worlds untenable.

Although family relations can be a source of strain for some first-generation students, recent research suggests that family relationships may also act as an important protective factor for individuals struggling with the adjustment to higher education. Gofen (2009), for instance, conducted a qualitative study in Israel where, he noted, patterns of intergenerational education mobility are similar to those in the U.S. Rather than focusing on how family can inhibit academic success for first-generation college students, he used family resilience concepts to explore how nonmaterial resources of family resilience may aid in positive outcomes. The findings showed that all 50 participants credited their educational success to their families. Analysis of the interview data revealed three specific themes related to resilience reported by participants: “(a) attitude toward education, (b) interpersonal relationships, and (c) family values” (p. 110). Although the education levels of participants’ parents ranged from no formal education to high school, many shared that family members often made concerted efforts to prioritize and support their education. Participants reported that parents’ unconditional love and support were paramount to their educational success. This is a departure from the stories often documented among U.S. first-generation college students who claim success *despite* their families, rather than because of them.

Although these divergent narratives may suggest cultural differences, they may also reflect the fact that American research on first-generation students has historically been deficit-focused. Recent years and different approaches have begun to challenge the negative frame so common in the field. Themes of resilience and new conceptualizations of what it means to be a first-generation student are illuminating the complexities and strengths of this population (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Martin, 2015; Teiken, 2016; Wildhagen, 2015). A step being made in this direction is recognizing the heterogeneity of the first-generation population. Jack (2016) articulated one of many dimensions along which students may vary by distinguishing between what he calls the *privileged poor* – low-income students who received elite and prestigious preparatory educations – and the *doubly disadvantaged* – those who attended typically low-income public high schools in their poor neighborhoods. Jack conducted in-depth interviews with 89 native-born Black and Latino undergraduate students at an elite Ivy League college, 62 of which identified as first-generation. Rather than one's generational status inhibiting their success, Jack found that experiences of the *privileged poor* within elite institutions made up for a lack of parental knowledge and support while in college. In other words, parental emotional support matters to students' overall well-being, but is not especially influential on their institutional success unless it is also accompanied by cultural capital or informational support.

To summarize, previous research has suggested that first-generation college students often experience a number of challenges at school and home. More recently, scholars have shown that some students find ways to maintain positive family relationships, excel within their new institutions, and seek out the additional necessary resources to do both. Besides the study conducted by Lee and Kramer (2013), however, there remains a lack of research on the ways that students experience and navigate their home settings.

The purpose, in part, of this study was to answer Lee and Kramer's (2013) call to look further into the experiences of students visiting their home communities. I conducted qualitative phenomenological interviews with first-generation college students about their experiences going back home to visit their parents. Where so much of the research historically has focused on the *disconnect* between home and college, some scholars have opened the door to more complicated narratives. I am interested in the thorny and nuanced experiences of students as they navigate these two spheres so often depicted as incompatible. I contend that the root of many first-generation students' struggles comes from the 'cultural mismatch' (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) between their working-class backgrounds and the more elite norms and expectations of higher education. By specifically studying at-home experiences, we may come to better understand what students need to bridge the gap. Adding to the literature stories of students in their home contexts can perhaps challenge the devaluing of their working-class backgrounds as they experience educational mobility. We see literature that claims university success for first-generation students comes at the cost of family and friend relationships back home (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015; Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2011; Lehmann, 2013); at the same time, there exists research that affirms how important positive family relationships are for emotional well-being and, thus, adjustment to college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Whitehead & Wright, 2017). There is a palpable tension here, but I do not argue that either of these is false. Rather, I see that the stories of individuals who may fall between or outside of these categories have yet to be fully explored (Gofen, 2009 provides an exception).

In-depth phenomenological interview are ideal for exploring students' experiences in the home setting, and the stories shared are likely to be deeply personal and contextual (Vagle, 2014;

van Manen, 1990). A central question guided this study: What are the experiences of first-generation college students going home to visit family? As is practice in phenomenology, interviews were semi-structured and directed primarily by what the participants chose to share as significant about their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Along with a phenomenological method, I utilized Symbolic Interactionism (SI), specifically the structural approach laid forth by Stryker (1980) to examine the experiences of the participants back in their home settings. Stryker (2008) expands on SI's original conceptualization of society to more fully consider the way that structures such as gender, class, and race determine social location and, thus, the resources one may have. Here, one's first-generation status acts as a "facilitator of and constraint on entrance into and departure from networks of interpersonal relationships" (Stryker, 2008, p. 19). Related to one's location is the concept of *role*, which regulates norms and behaviors within certain settings. While most people balance many different roles, first-generation students may find the student role and family role(s) particularly conflicting. Lacking proper resources within each setting to properly perform the roles can lead to role strain and consequently, the shedding of one role or the other.

Additionally, structural SI synthesizes well with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which is used commonly in the educational mobility literature to describe social locations (home and school) and the rules ascribed within those settings (e.g., Aries & Seider, 2005; Jack, 2016; Lehmann, 2013; Martin, 2015; McCoy, 2014). Phenomenology and Structural SI work in tandem to illuminate the subjective and positional nature of how individuals construct the meanings in their lived experiences.

Chapter Two

Method

The research question that guided my study is, “What are the experiences of first-generation college students going home to visit family?” Borrowing the framework of Martin (2015), I combined phenomenology with a critical lens to capture the lived experiences of first-generation students. Phenomenology is not inherently political, but its insistence on centering and prioritizing participants’ own stories with intentionality can “lead to indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to turn to [a] political agenda,” especially when studying people with marginalized identities (van Manen, 1990, p. 154). The critical perspective, in conjunction with phenomenology, demands that the researcher aim not only to produce knowledge, but to challenge structures of inequity (Patton, 2002).

Positionality & Bracketing

I am a white, working-class, cis-gendered woman who was the first person in my family to attend college. My own identity as a first-generation student informs my interest in this study, and I recognize that it may act as both a benefit and a limitation to the research. Much of the existing research speaks to code-switching in which first-generation students participate while navigating their different realms (home vs. school), and perhaps our shared status has enabled them to speak freely and authentically.

To help mitigate the influence of my own experiences on the interview process, I have taken several steps to ensure I set aside preconceived notions and personal feelings. Bracketing is a well-accepted and regarded practice in qualitative research to help reveal researchers’ preconceived notions and biases (van Manen, 2001). This is an essential step in phenomenological research as “phenomenologists love to study the things we tend to assume we

know – *the things we think we have settled*” (Vagle, 2014, p. 58, emphasis added). I participated in a bracketing interview with a seasoned phenomenological researcher, which helped to uncover several existing blind spots and assumptions. First and most importantly, I was taking a deficit approach to this research, making assumptions that college attainment would inevitably lead to strain within family relationships. Additionally, I was conflating first-generation status with low socioeconomic status. Acknowledging and confronting these issues led to a more inclusive approach to participants’ stories and opened my mind to greater possibilities. I also kept a reflexive research journal throughout the entire study and participated frequently in peer debriefing, or checking in with fellow researchers and my major professor whenever I sensed a conflict arising (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I have been granted access to a phenomenology working group on campus populated by both experienced researchers and fellow graduate students. The objectives of the working group include bracketing, assistance in coding and analyzing data, and general reflection throughout the research process. The transcript of my bracketing interview and one additional participant transcript were shared with the group over two two-hour meetings during the spring of 2018. I also shared two additional transcripts with a small research group within my department.

Recruitment & Facilitation

Definitions of what constitutes being a first-generation student vary a great deal between studies. The National Center for Education Statistics classifies first-generation students as those whose parents never enrolled in higher education, while the U.S. Department of Education allows for those whose parents enrolled but only as long as they never obtained a degree. Researchers in the field have yet to come to a consensus here, and the dissimilarity can make a significant difference, especially when considering social capital and informational support – two

influential factors in college adjustment and success for first-generation students. For the purposes of this study, participants self-selected after reviewing the recruitment flier (Appendix A) and criteria, which asked if they were the first in their families to attend college.

Participants for this study were recruited from a large Southeastern state university using purposeful sampling, which is useful when selecting participants from a population with certain shared characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For my study, this meant recruiting current undergraduate students who were the first in their families to attend college. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted professors in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences and in the College of Arts & Sciences to ask if I could recruit from their sophomore and junior level courses to capture “traditionally” aged college students. Eleven classroom visits were scheduled, but the respondent goal was reached after visiting four classes within five days. My recruitment strategy involved distributing a flier to the students with information about my study and the three inclusion criteria: (a) being the first in your family to attend college, (b) aged between 18 and 25 years old, and (c) currently living away from home. To help ensure that students did not feel pressured to participate in the study, all instructors were asked to leave the room while I briefly presented this information. A study-specific email address was created to correspond with respondents. Nine individuals expressed their interest in the study via email over the five days that followed, eight of whom ultimately participated in the study.

Procedures

I collected data through semi-structured, one-on-one, in-person interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ consent, and they ranged from 54 to 104 minutes, with most lasting right around an hour. I conducted and digitally audio-recorded interviews in private

spaces on the university campus. At the beginning of each interview, participants read and signed informed consent documents (Appendix B) approved by the IRB. Although the study provided no major risks, the informed consent document acknowledged that discussion of family could be potentially upsetting, and resources to the university counseling center were provided. I also verbally confirmed with participants that participation was voluntary and identifying information would remain confidential. Participants were offered compensation in the form of a \$25 gift card to a major supermarket.

Although a brief interview guide was used (Appendix C), conversations were largely guided by what the participants' chose to share in response to general open-ended questions I used to prompt them. After each interview, I recorded reflections and analytic memos in a reflexive journal, making sure not to include any identifying information about participants. Digital audio files were immediately transferred onto a password-protected university computer network folder, accessible only to the me and my thesis advisor, and then deleted from the recording device. All transcription was done solely by myself following the end of interview data collection. Identifying information was removed, and finished transcripts were checked against the audio recordings to make any necessary corrections or clarifications. I kept reflections and analytic memos throughout the transcription process, which noted pauses, inflections, and intonations that appeared significant or interesting to my analysis.

Participants

Participants ranged from 18 to 22 years of age. All were current undergraduate students at the same large public university. I selected pseudonyms from the Social Security Administration's website listing the top 100 baby names of 1998 to reflect the average age of participants. Participants were asked an open-ended question to describe their demographic

characteristics. All language used here to describe demographic information of the participants is their own as they shared it with me. Seven of the eight participants identified as female and used she/her pronouns, and one identified as Questioning and used gender-neutral pronouns, they/them. All were currently enrolled as undergraduate students – four seniors, three sophomores, and one freshman whose credits qualified them for a sophomore-level course. Participants' own descriptions of their social class ranged from "poor" to "middle class."

Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Inductive thematic analysis is a method used to systematically organize qualitative data by assigning codes and finding patterns that are grounded within the data, itself. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, I first, immediately after each interview, recorded my reflections on both the process of interviewing as well as my predictions on what may later appear as codes or patterns. Second, I transcribed soon after the interview so that participants' tone, inflection, and affect were still fresh in my mind. As I listened to and transcribed the data, I made notes about moments and words that stood out to me as especially salient. Next, I took three full passes over the transcript, each time using a different colored pen to make coding notes in the margins. My initial round of transcript review was closer to what Saldaña (2013) called "pre-coding" (p. 19), where I simply circled or highlighted striking phrases from the participant. I was also careful to note my own presence and force when such a moment was in direct response to a question or probe from me. I paid close attention to mentions of family, as those relationships were my unit of analysis, again marking when *I* summoned them versus when the participants did.

As suggested by thematic analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006), my coding of the data was bound by my unit of analysis (family relationships) as well as influential theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The rounds of coding were labeled *in vivo*, or using participants' own words. I then clustered these codes into features, still mostly using participants' words but now with some language informed by my own interpretation (Vagle, 2014).

Themes were categorized theoretically, meaning my guiding theory and its assumptions helped to organize features accordingly. Family relationships remained the focus of analysis, and concepts from Stryker's (1980) structural symbolic interactionism guided the organization for what later became my themes. For example, the subtheme of "inspiration" is distinctly different from "paving the way" as it is a symbolic role rather than an instrumental one. Next, I developed a "thematic map" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are several levels to this step of analysis. First, I reviewed all extracted data points within each preliminary theme to check for consistency and coherency. For example, some extracted data points needed additional context in order to make sense within its theme home. The second level involved returning to the data to determine if my themes truly were represented within the data. Next, each theme was subject to its own detailed analysis. This led to a refinement of some themes and a broadening of others. For example, it was at this point that "best of both worlds" became its own theme rather than a subtheme. Themes were concisely named and defined for clarity. Some themes were named using participants' own words while others were named using my interpretation of the data. Finally, I extracted quotes from the interview data that exemplified each theme.

Chapter Three

Findings

My original research question (“What are the experiences of first-generation college students going home to visit family?”) aimed to capture experiences within family relationships; the path to getting there was different than I anticipated, but stories shared were rich and ripe for exploring family. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) inductive thematic analysis, I developed three themes: Role Modeling, I’ve Got This, and Best of Both Worlds. Qualitative data can be analyzed endlessly (Reissman, 2008; Saldaña, 2015), but, for the purposes of this project, analysis was bound by my point of inquiry: family relationships. The original inquiry of experiences back home did not especially resonate with participants in the way I expected. Although participants did share stories of visiting family, what they shared with me went well beyond the boundaries of home. Phenomenology makes room for this and allows for the data generated to be determined by the participants and what matters to them (Vagle, 2014).

Theme 1: Role Modeling

Nearly all participants spoke of being the first in their immediate and also extended families to attend college. For them, being the first meant that they served as role models for others, a responsibility that both encouraged and sometimes burdened participants. Although never asked directly about relationships with siblings and extended family members, participants’ descriptions of role modeling included younger brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, and grandparents. Within this theme, I identified two subthemes: Inspiration and Paving the Way.

Inspiration. Many participants spoke proudly of being an inspiration and model of possibility for others in their family. Their presence on a campus symbolized the possibility of

college attainment, normalized the idea of the university, and inspired others to actively pursue higher education. Additionally, participants' responsibility as representatives sometimes encouraged them through their own hardships at school.

Briana, an African American sophomore who showed enthusiasm for both the educational and the social experiences college had given her, spoke of how her love of school had inspired her mother to begin the process of enrolling in community college. Briana's mom had negotiated with her ex-husband to take on rearing responsibilities for their youngest son, so that she could focus on juggling work and school. "My mom's thinking of going to school. So I'm excited for her! She was like, 'if I'm gonna go to school and be workin, he needs to be somewhere where he's not just like sittin at home by himself.'" Frequent trips to visit Briana at school had led her mother to envision those opportunities for herself.

Sylvia was 21 years old and described herself as White and Mexican. She was in her final semester of school, and, with a dry sense of humor, she shared stories about what happens when she makes her annual trip out west to visit her dad's side of the family. Being the eldest of her cousins, she lamented that she often acted as driver and supervisor of the brood for shopping and beach outings. On those trips to the mall, though, Sylvia's success at school was a frequent topic of discussion.

I'm also the first one to go to college, so I have a bunch of cousins, um, and I'm the oldest, so I'm the first one. So everyone's really, you know, always excited and, like, proud, I guess. Um. So there's a lot of questions. There's always a lot of questions. Sylvia's younger cousins would bombard her with questions, sometimes to the point of overwhelming her, but she acknowledged that it's "just cause they care." She described feeling proud that she was setting an example for them.

Paving the way. Beyond being an inspiration to those around them, other participants' experiences as the first to pursue higher education also increased accessibility to college in more concrete ways. Whether navigating the complicated administrative work of applying for college or becoming socialized as a university student, their experiences meant forging the trail for those who came next. This subtheme captures the more concrete and instrumental ways in which participants modeled college attainment for their family members.

Ruth, a 20-year-old sophomore who described herself as White of all the participants, lived farthest from her family home. She described the frustration and confusion of navigating the application and orientation processes with her inexperienced parents – “I was scared as sh-t – horrified!” – but she also hoped that her struggles could somehow make the process easier for her younger sister.

And, I don't know, I see myself as the first one going. I'm kinda setting a path for my siblings. And that was really important to me. I wanted my sister to be able to know that, yeah, you can do it, too. You know? It's a possibility. Because she struggles with the same things I do. So I don't want her to think that she can't.

Ruth assumed the responsibility as role model for her sister; that responsibility also sustained her through her own struggles at school.

Similarly, Sylvia, who described the financial aid and application process as “foreign,” spoke of how “next time would be so much easier.” Although her mother still had difficulties with technology, Sylvia acknowledged her own responsibility to step in and offer help for whoever came after her.

Next year, she'll start applying and she's been, um, touring. She was there for all my tours, but she was younger, so um, I don't think she really cared. Would just be on her

Nintendo or something. Um. But it's definitely exciting. I'm excited for her. And, um, she's...she's more, she keeps to herself more. Um, so I've been trying to, um, talk to her about it not in like a pressuring type of way 'cause I know she doesn't like that, but just see where she's at and, um, I hope that I can be a help. And my mom's still stressed out about FAFSA and stuff. She's like, 'do I fill it out now?' I'm like, 'no! She's not going to school yet. Like, calm down.' Like. But so it'll be nice that I have more experience with it and I know my mom's looking forward to me helping a lot with her.

Although they were proud of what help they could offer to their younger family members, there was also sometimes recognition of the burden of being the first to forge the trail. Devin, only in their second semester of school, spoke of their brother's nonchalance at college with disbelief.

I always tried to [...]be the best straight A student that I could be, but I don't think it, it's as... important to him, but... yeah. I feel like he has this expectation that he's gonna go to college, but I'm worried about him honestly just like getting through what I got through.

Although their younger brother was not nearly as academically motivated and self-sufficient as Devin, they expressed with frustration that he took for granted that college would happen simply because a norm had now been established.

For those I spoke with, being the first in one's family to attend college often came with additional responsibilities, pride, and hardships. Although being a role model sometimes took a toll, none of the participants took for granted where they were or what they had accomplished and what it meant for their families.

Theme 2: I've Got This!

The theme was originally conceptualized as “I’m still here” – a quote repeated by six of the eight participants. That phrase, when decontextualized, is too passive, however, to capture the emotion and power behind this theme. Rather, “I’ve got this!” is a radical claim of power, agency, and resilience in the face of hardship and difficulties. This affirmation emerged through processes that are reflected in two subthemes: They Wanted to Give Me What They Couldn’t Be Given and I’ll Make It Through This, I Always Do.

They wanted to give me what they couldn’t be given. Nearly all participants acknowledged that their journey to becoming the first was not one they traveled alone. Family resources, from educational opportunities to helpful life lessons in their pre-college experiences, made college attainment and persistence a possibility for them.

For some, familial support took the form of access to advanced academic training at private and/or rigorous high schools. For participants whose families were more financially privileged, an elite high school education was an obvious and easy step toward higher education. Devin, whose mother had worked her way up in a company over the course of 15 years to become a well-paid executive, described the conversation they had with their family about transitioning from a public to a private high school their sophomore year:

My mom just said, “you know, uh, we’re pretty well-off, financially” and I was happy about that cause, you know, [private school] was an expensive school. And a lot of my friends like weren’t good. Or, not my friends, but people I was with. Uh. They weren’t going to [private school] and stuff, and it was just whatever. Um. And I knew that it was pretty, like, I wouldn’t say like prestigious, but it was a pretty good step up from where I was. And my mom said, you know, I know you don’t like it too much at [public school], and I’ve been looking at [private school] and like it fits in our price range and, you know,

I think you would really benefit from it with college prep and everything and I think you should do it. And I was like, “okay!” Like, it pretty much was just like, “alright, I don’t have anything to lose.” So I just, I went. And I was glad that I was able to do that, cause I know a lot of people that like wanna go to [private school] or wanted to get that and they just can’t because their family can’t afford it.

Beyond her motivation to provide her child with an elite education, Devin’s mother knew the transition would give Devin better emotional and socialization experiences.

For Grace, her family’s financial comfort had come later in life. She described how excited her father was to finally be able to afford orthodontic braces at the age of 65 – but only after setting aside money for his children’s education. As with Devin, Grace’s parents included her in the conversation and decision to transition to a private school.

So my parents, their mentality has always been, they wanted to be able to give me and my sister whatever they weren’t able to be given by their parents. And a lot of that just comes back naturally to finances. They grew up low income, you know, like my dad, for instance, just now got braces a while ago and he’s ecstatic because like growing up, they didn’t have the money to have braces. So, just things like that. But I remember when we first decided, I went to public elementary school and then public middle school, fifth and sixth grade. And then they were like, I wonder if, you know, we can take some of the money that we’ve saved and, like, see if we can get into private school.

Additionally, Grace’s parents continued to negotiate ways they could offer financial support during college. Although she had to keep a part-time job to afford fun and luxuries, Grace described with gratitude how her parents pay for her rent and tuition not covered by scholarships.

Um, so we kind of sat down, like took those [scholarships] off the price. And they were like, “okay, this is what we’d be paying each semester.” And he was like, “I think where we’re at now, I’ll be able to pay for freshman year.” Um. And I was like, “okay, that’s wonderful.” So then we were like, “let’s do it!” So we did freshman year, they paid, helped me and paid for both semesters. Um. Which was incredible. Like, [stammer] that’s...too much. [laugh]

Briana, who described her background as low income, spoke proudly of her single mother who went above and beyond to find quality education for her daughter. Although resources were limited for them, Briana’s mother moved them to another city and enrolled her in a prestigious charter school. There, Briana’s mother and principal worked together to find and create diverse educational opportunities for her, from a robotics summer school program to piano lessons to a camp where she learned to groom and ride horses.

There were a lot of opportunities that I didn’t know that I’d get that I got. Like, one of my...one of the principals of my school was very involved in getting me involved. Like, he called my mom before he’d tell me. He was like, “I think there’s something [Briana] should do. “And he was like, “you know, I’m gonna sign her up for” and she’d be like, “okay.” And then she, like, next weekend, and she’s like, “oh yeah, you’re going to this.” And I’m like, “huh?” I had planned to go to the movies. She was like, “no, me and Mr. Williams, we got you – you’re gonna do this.” And I’m like... “okay.” [laugh]

Ella, the daughter of a low-income single mother, applied to and was accepted at 10 different colleges. She was able to tap into extended family resources when trying to decide which school she could make a reality.

Um, I ended up having to get my uncle, who I'm not very close with, to cosign for me 'cause my mom didn't make enough. But, thankfully, he's cool with that. So I really had support from my family which is nice. And since I am first-generation, everyone really wants me to go to college, cause it's like the only one in our family.

For Ella, her role as the first meant that family members could pool resources to make her dream of attending college a possibility. Although already a serious student, she told me that the help she received from her family helped to keep her motivated and ambitious at school.

I'll make it through this, I always do. None of the participants I spoke with were unfamiliar with struggle. Every one of them described facing and overcoming obstacles since coming to college. Although not all of these struggles were directly related to their status as the first in their families to attend college, many spoke of the strength they gained and the lessons they learned that fortified them against the difficulties of navigating college life. Whereas my first subtheme captures family resources and support, this subtheme represents the more individualistic ways my participants tackled issues.

Several of the participants spoke of mental health struggles they faced after entering college. Grace spoke frankly about her diagnosis and battle with major depressive disorder during her sophomore year. Thanks to her parents' emotional support and her own resilience, she was able to persist in school despite facing days where she "struggled to get up and go to class." She spoke emotionally about how her parents would call every day to check in and often made the three-hour trek each weekend to spend time with her.

And that's the thing. Like, even on the worst days, like, there were times when I would just call my dad and like...he would be like, okay, well, it's Thursday. I'll leave and come for the weekend. Um. And so [...], like, I'm super blessed.

Not only did Grace's experience strengthen her relationship with her parents, it also provided perspective and gratitude for her opportunities as a college student. She also referenced her parents' financial support as a motivator to keep on in school: "It was important to me not to waste their money. That was always something very important to me."

Ruth struggled socially with peers and emotionally in trying to find support from her family:

It was the whole, like, not the academics that scared me, but the social things. I'm like, I'm not antisocial to say anything, but I'm shyer and I don't like to put myself out there that much. So I was, like, "oh god, I'm not gonna make any friends. I'm gonna be in my room all alone" and I'm just, and I, and I was horrified that I was gonna drop out. You know? Cause this is, I really wanted to go away. I wanted to be able to be my own person and show my family that I could be independent. Because, you know, there's some members of the family that have doubts. That you can go that far. That you can make it. And I'm one of those that, if you tell me I can't make it, I'm gonna make! [laugh] you can't tell me I'm gonna do something or I have to – or, I don't – I don't want you to be right [laugh]. So I was really scared that I was gonna drop out. And I wasn't gonna be anything. Or make anything of myself.

Through her first two years at a college several states away from her family, Ruth found a solid group of friends and decided on a program of study that excited her for the future. Eventually, Ruth's success at college instilled in her a new pride and confidence moving forward. "So, going to a new place and not knowing anything is, like, okay, if I can do this, what's stopping me going the next level?"

Ella, like Grace, talked openly about her mental health struggles, mostly her intense performance anxiety in class. After being placed in a course heavy with public speaking, Ella faced near-daily panic attacks. Luckily, a strong relationship with her mother kept her grounded through her hard times.

And obviously like you have your good days, you have your bad days. And so my mom's my biggest support with that. Cause I have panic attacks, like, a lot. So, like I have to call her and just like, she'll know. Because I won't be, like, talking. Like I'm always like [rapid breathing] and she's like, "okay, let's breathe." Like, we'll get it together. Like, everything's fine and so... especially with school. Like, especially when it gets hard, uh, a lot of times, like I'll just like freak out.

Although she continued to struggle with her anxiety, daily phone calls with her mom and a relationship with a counselor on campus helped Ella to make sure anxiety did not get in the way of her academic success. Similarly, Devin reflected back on their first semester of college where they were so overwhelmed, they would forget to eat for days at a time. Although they wanted to protect their mom from worrying too much, Devin finally reached out for help:

She [got] some like teary phone calls. Where I was just like breaking down. She was like, "it's gonna be okay!" Like, "you're gonna get through this, you always do!" And I was like, "you're right." Ha. But. It was hard for a lil' bit.

Briana's struggles were largely resource-based. She was a motivated and adept student, but that did not protect her from financial woes. Family issues led her to consider dropping out to help take on more responsibility at home, but her mother insisted she persist.

And she was like, "you know, we were all worried about, you know, the lights gettin cut off or stuff like that." And I'm like, "oof. Um, if I can't go to college, then, you know,

what are we gonna do?” And she – her big thing is, you know, don’t be like me. Don’t *not* go to college, don’t, you know... cause...she’s been like strugglin, we’ve been strugglin, you know, all our life. And she was like, “this is how you not – don’t struggle. You know? You go to college, you get that degree, you get that job hopefully, you know? And you don’t have to worry about, you know, where’s the light money gonna come from? Where’s this money gonna come from?” She was like, “’cause you’ll already know.” And I’m like... “yeeeeahh”... that would be nice, you know? To not have to worry...

Wendy, an independent and ambitious sophomore, spent much of our conversation discussing the stress of balancing school and work. Unlike other participants I spoke with, Wendy felt college attainment was primarily a strategic move to advance financially in her career of choice. As such, she sometimes struggled with requirements of the university that she felt did not accommodate her own life.

I pay for an apartment and I live off campus, and I work to do that. And it’s a lot of hours to put into work and go to school when school, like, is designed for kids who just go to school. Their academics and how they lay out things. Like, a lot of my professors, I have to email ‘em and say I can’t do certain things or on certain dates. You know, I have to take quizzes or exams earlier. I have to leave class at certain times, you know. And a lot of kids have no idea. Like, they don’t understand. They’re out partying all the time, and it’s just frustrating. [...] I think that [...] the students who overcome these obstacles [being the first in their families to attend college] are more likely to be successful. Because they’re not given everything. You know what I’m saying? Cause like, you, obviously, you know... did, had to work a lot harder than other students who were paid –

they always knew that it was just a safety net, their parents would pay for it. Which is a great thing, you know. I wish everyone had that. But it's not...that way.

Given that she was working full time to support herself without financial help from her family, school could not always be the top priority for her. Despite the stress of navigating it all, she repeatedly shared stories of her successfully doing so. From emailing professors about rearranging exam times to strategically taking on jobs where she could do homework on the clock, Wendy always found a way.

Although they faced mental health issues, academic struggles, and administrative complications, every participant I spoke with showed resilience and great self-determination. Supports from family (financial and emotional), access to mental healthcare, and pure determination meant that they could take on whatever obstacles they faced.

Theme 3: Best of Both Worlds

I had imagined that participants would struggle to balance their school lives with their family home lives. What I found, however, was a consistent strategy of compartmentalizing the two, which helped them navigate and make the most of each realm. Going home provided valuable opportunities to recharge from school and spend time with family. Any conflict mentioned was usually about feeling frustration at still being treated “like a teenager,” but many talked about how the distance made them appreciate their family even more. Two subthemes captured these experiences: Home as Refuge and Strengthening Ties.

Home as refuge. For the most part, participants spoke positively of visits back home. Even when negotiating new boundaries with parents as a young adult, most experiences at home were described as restful and restorative after stressful times at school.

Ella, who had just completed a semester of classes that exacerbated her anxiety and filled her with daily dread, described her ritual for when she finally lands at home after a long drive:

I just like kinda like shut off school stuff, I like don't check my phone. Like I just like literally just take like a mental break from everything. Cause it's so important to do that. [...] I literally get home and like throw my phone. I'm just like ahh! Thank god! I don't have to talk to anyone! Except the people I love! It's gonna be great! [laugh]

In part because of the anxiety that school caused her, Ella's relationship with her family home shifted, and it became a refuge. "'Cause it's like, you know, I ran away from home. And then it's like now I run away from school. [laugh] Get me out of here! [laugh] I just need to, like, breathe!" It was important for her to keep her two worlds (school and home) separate so that she could recover from the stresses of each.

Some participants were surprised at the ways their relationship with home had changed since coming to college. Although Grace described an unwavering and unconditional love for her parents and her hometown, something "weird" happened when she went home for the holiday break this year – she missed school more than she missed home. When she talked through this tension, every sentence trailed up like a question. She expressed surprise at the revelation; she "never imagined leaving and not missing it." But, she corrected herself - she does miss home! "It's just that here is home, now, too." She talked in circles, somewhat more of a processing-out-loud rather than to me, it seemed. "It's just that I've kind of, like, established...who I am here..." Grace never intended for these two realms to feel so distinct, but she remained open and curious to what the development could mean for her own personal growth.

Sylvia recounted that she initially chose the college she did for the distance ("It was mainly just being away from home. I wanted to do the whole thing basically on my own"), but

after four years away, she had gained a new appreciation for her family and her little hometown. Although it was not her first choice, she considered the possibility of moving home for a while post-graduation to save money before moving to bigger city out west. Her time away, she felt, was necessary for her own maturation, as she saw friends who stayed close to home stagnate: “I feel like no one really grew. Or no one really, you know, experienced other things.”

Not everyone found their family home to be a break from their lives at school. For Wendy, home was not a refuge, but it never really had been in the first place.

I didn’t really have much of a change? That sounds kind of weird. [E]veryone talks about how significantly different it was going into college, but I didn’t really have that experience. [I]n high school, I mean, I did everything for myself. I drove myself to school, I packed my own lunches, I put myself in AP classes, I did my own homework, I had a job, I paid for gas, I drove to and from school, I paid for my own parking spot, I applied to college by myself. I mean, my parents were there, but they didn’t really play a significant role in anything.

Although she visited her parents’ home weekly, it was often for practical reasons like doing laundry or helping her dad with a job for extra money. Wendy described her relationship with her mother as “rough,” but she still took her responsibilities as a daughter seriously, offering to help her mother clean and prepare the family home for an upcoming sale. She recognized, though, that her time spent with them now was in preparation for her plans to move out of state after finishing school.

Strengthening ties. Some participants, especially those who were further along in their programs, described how they had successfully negotiated the relationship between their lives at

school and their family lives. Existing positive family relationships appeared to make this much easier, but it was sometimes the hardships faced at school that led to strengthening ties to family.

Most notable here was Grace's successful negotiation between her relationship with her family, her self-discovery, and self-development while away at school. Throughout Grace's story about her experiences in college so far, her family and hometown loomed large, even when I was not asking directly about them. Her parents' sacrifice and support are why she ever made it to college, a place where she has struggled but flourished immensely. She told me she talked to them on the phone every single day and made the three-hour drive home every weekend she wasn't working. For her post-graduation plans, she said she was "absolutely sure that [she] will move back to [her] hometown" to start her career. This connection to home had not prevented her from forming solid relationships at school, however. In Grace's own words, she had found "the best of both worlds."

Lucy also spoke of a strong and positive relationship with her parents and hometown. Although a six-hour drive away, she visited her family frequently, which helped keep her grounded, especially through the tense political climate of the last two years. Being biracial at a predominantly white institution, her connections to her home community remained important for her self-esteem and mental health. Alternately, the resources available to her on campus helped her find a place to feel comfortable in her sexual identity.

I identify as lesbian, and [...] I was excited to come here cause I was like, man, pride center! So I'll feel more involved and more welcomed. And I'll have friends who are gay.

[laughs] And I thought, this'll be a great thing.

Given the intersection of her identities, Lucy required multiple resources and supports to fully explore herself as she also navigated her new role as a college student.

Despite the different experiences faced and tactics used to navigate their family and student roles, all participants I spoke with were finding a way to persevere. Although everyone struggled, it is important to note that most of these hardships were not due to their status as being the first in their families to attend college. Rather, they appeared to face normative developmental and interpersonal issues that anyone navigating young adulthood encounters. If anything, their status as the first provided them with a point of pride, motivation, and the skills to make meaning of their lives and relationships.

Chapter Four

Discussion

Previous research on first-generation college students has largely focused on comparisons to continuing-generation students and outcomes that are quantifiably measurable: academic markers like GPA, retention/graduation rates, and self-esteem and efficacy (e.g. Cahalan, et al., 2017; Farrare, 2016; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Warburton, et al., 2001). Qualitative studies over the last few decades have begun to explore the personal, interpersonal, and emotional lives of first-generation students (e.g., Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2016). Although few quantitative studies have focused on family relationships (Gofen, 2009; Lee & Kramer, 2013; London, 1989; Rondini, 2016), qualitative researchers often hear stories of loved ones back home when speaking with first-generation college students regardless of study topic.

The purpose of this study was to centralize students' experiences at home. The "visiting back home" frame was intended to capture family interactions in ways that have been overlooked in previous studies that have focused on the costs of educational mobility for students' relationships with friends and family at home (Covarrubias, et al., 2015; Lee & Kramer, 2013; London, 1989). I realized early on in my interviews, however, that this question carried with it at least three complicating assumptions. First, I treated 'family' as equivalent to 'parents,' failing to leave room for other kinds of relationships. Second, I assumed that all participants would describe hardship in navigating the two 'separate' realms of school and their family home. Finally, my question presumed that family experiences would be more difficult simply because of students' first-generation status, effectively treating this group as homogenous. Participants' narratives reflected the importance of sibling relationships and extended family, revealed

strengths as well as challenges that, in many ways, mirror typical developmental changes in family relationships during late adolescence and young adulthood (Hill, Burrows, & Sumner, 2016). Concepts within Symbolic Interactionism such as constructions of the self and mind, expectations of roles, and identity salience helped to interpret my findings and allow participants' own meaning-making of their experiences to guide analysis.

In talking about family, participants spoke of characters beyond their parents; grandparents, cousins, aunts, and especially siblings appeared frequently in stories of back home. Several participants spoke of how going to college meant setting an example for younger family members. Grace was willing to alter her graduate school plans to matriculate at the same school as her little sister, hoping to make the transition easier on her. Ruth was terrified to go off to college states away from her family, but she found comfort in knowing that she was “setting a path” of possibilities for her sibling. Sylvia spoke of how her angst with the application and financial aid processes was worth it if it meant making things easier for her mom as her younger sister began applying to and touring schools. Family research with first-generation college students tends to focus exclusively on parent-child relationships (e.g., London, 1989; Rondini, 2016). This makes sense since the *generational* relationship is a key element in the identity of first-generation college students, but for these participants, family meant more than their parents. Relationships with their siblings represented a responsibility to set a good example, motivation to persist, and pride in providing new possibilities. Findings from this study indicate that relationships with siblings, especially those younger, may be particularly impactful in the experiences and motivations of first-generation students.

The participants I talked with often spoke of their family home as a necessary reprieve from the stress of undergraduate life. Ella's ritual of going home, shutting off her phone, and

focusing on her loved ones helped keep her grounded between stressful academic semesters. Devin described how “teary phone calls” with their mom provided a release when they became overwhelmed with assignments, and Grace credited her parents’ emotional support with getting her through a clinical depression diagnosis without losing any time in school. Though conceptions of identity and roles are closely related in SI, roles more specifically address the external and relational aspects of self. The juggling of multiple roles during developmental transitions is well documented (Guiffrida, 2005; Hill, Burrows, & Sumner, 2016; Koepke & Denissen, 2012), but symbolic interaction theory proposes that when one takes on too many roles with competing expectations, this results in *role strain*. My assumption that dissonance would occur between family roles and student roles was unfounded. The student role changed relationships and expectations within the family setting, yet no one expressed strife or frustration with this shift. This finding challenges previous first-generation literature that suggests it is an inevitable struggle to navigate the two disparate worlds of back home and school. Scholars evoke the concept of ‘straddling’ (Lubrano, 2004) these two realms as a source of tension for students, where they no longer fit in at home but do not feel comfortable at school either. This frame can lead to the expectations that any hardships first-generation students experience at school are *because* of their status (Sy et al., 2011) and that their college attainment is a source of tension in their family relationships (Covarrubius et al., 2015). None of the students I spoke with described such tensions. Their stories align more with the experiences shared in Gofen’s (2009) study in which students claimed their academic success was *because* of their parents and not *despite* them. By providing college-preparatory education opportunities, financial assistance, and/or emotional support, parents of these participants played a crucial role in the persistence and success of their children.

Rather than sharing stories of hardships specific to being the first in their families to attend college, those I spoke with described relatively typical college life hurdles. Ella suffered from intense academic stress, but she described it as due to her performance anxiety. Ruth worried about making friends and fitting in socially at school, but that had more to do with moving states away from home than anything else. They, and other participants I spoke with, were not strangers to stress and struggle, but their experiences, while sometimes serious and upsetting, were not issues specific to a lack of exposure to college life. Not having role models, appropriate expectations, or cultural capital can and do create obstacles for academic success (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2013; Pascarella et al., 2004). This does not mean, however, that *every* challenge faced by first-generation students is qualitatively different than those of their continuing-generation counterparts. Some of the students I spoke with even expressed resentment and frustration with any postulation that they were “at-risk” just because they were the first in their families to attend college. Instead, they spoke of finding pride and strength in their unique status.

Family class status appeared to be more influential than generational status when considering the experiences of my participants. Those students who described family financial strain expressed occasional stress and confusion at navigating the institution where those self-described as middle-class and above rarely mentioned such things. Ella was accepted into all 10 schools she applied to but was bound to the college she and her family could afford by scraping together all possible resources. Briana told me of how her mother’s struggles like “the lights getting cut off” are part of what motivated her to stay in school in the hopes of gaining financial security. Experiences related to racial identity were also much less conflated with first-generation status; instead, it was their identity in contrast to the predominantly white institution

in which they found themselves that was a point of consideration. Lucy struggled emotionally sometimes at school, not because her parents had not attended college, but because she was biracial in a mostly white school and city during a racially-charged political election.

Qualitative scholars working with first-generation college students have called for more focus on the heterogeneity of this group, noting the tendency to collapse first-generation with certain demographic markers such as low-income and racial minoritized identities (e.g., Jack, 2016; McCoy, 2014). By using phenomenology and allowing participants to guide our conversations, my findings help to disentangle some of that. Although difficulties experienced because of first-generation status can be compounded by other marginalized identities, my findings paint a much more complicated picture.

Limitations

My study contributes to the literature of lived experiences of students who are the first in their families to attend college, but several limitations should be considered. Although research on this topic and this study use the term “first-generation college student,” not all participants identified with this label, even when they met the criteria. My study was also limited to a sample of mostly people who identified as female. Familial expectations may vary depending on gender, and women may be more likely to remain tied to their parents throughout young adulthood. Given that many of these participants were also older siblings, gendered expectations for caretaking may also impact relationships to home. Some scholarship points to gendered experiences in higher education as well (e.g., Covarrubius et al., 2015; Sax & Weintraub, 2014), but my sample precluded any meaningful analysis of gender’s impact on different experiences. Many of my participants were high achieving students and had undergraduate research experience and thus were excited to participate. This leads to the question of how researchers can

reach those struggling the most to feel comfortable. Additionally, while six participants mentioned having a job, few of them *had* to work, raising questions about the relevance of findings for less economically advantaged students. Findings should also be considered within the specific context of one large predominantly White public university. Students' experiences may differ depending on the institutional context in which they are embedded, and additional research with students from different kinds of institutions such as community colleges, private schools, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) provide a more complete picture of risk and resilience among first-generation students (e.g., Aries & Seider, 2007; Jack, 2016). Identity and relationship to context are important when considering any phenomenon of experience. I did not ask participants about relationships with people at school, but the differences individuals feel in comparison to their peers can understandably exacerbate feelings of alienation and limit likelihood of success at school. Finally, whereas family relationships were the point of inquiry, findings reflected the experiences of merely one member of the family unit.

Implications and Future Directions

Future research should include parent and sibling voices to get a more inclusive picture of family dynamics for first-generation college students. My realization that questions related to experiences "back home" did not elicit stories of family as expected indicates that interviewing students *in their home setting* may be more effective and could also provide opportunities to speak with multiple members of the family. Although some retrospective studies have been conducted (Franchscelli, Evans, & Schoon, 2016; Kulis, 1987), to my knowledge, researchers have yet to take a longitudinal approach, following students throughout their college careers. Doing so may provide an opportunity to talk with those who do not persist through graduation.

Different methodological approaches such as institutional ethnographies could possibly identify ways in which administrators and others may help or hinder the success of first-generation students. Given the variability in participants' identification with the first-generation label, scholars should also consider how language in recruitment may exclude certain experiences. More research employing the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is needed to further disentangle differences in experience for first-generation students who carry multiple marginalized identities. Administrators and practitioners working with students can benefit from recognizing the diversity within this group when considering programming and resources. For example, findings here indicate that limited financial resources may be much more detrimental to positive college experiences than generational status alone. Investing more money in scholarship programs or developing sliding-scale tuition rates are simple and impactful moves toward making college attainment easier and more accessible. Additionally, developing formal and informal networking support systems for families and students on campus is an affordable change that higher education can implement easily. Families of first-generation students who have successfully navigated these institutions are a valuable mentoring resource for others. Colleges and universities often have information on their applications to determine if a student is first-generation. Departments such as student or advising services could reach out to students and families about participating in a mentoring program and even incentivize involvement.

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Appendices

participants needed for research project

are you:

- ❖ the first in your family to go to college?
- ❖ living away from home?
- ❖ between the ages of 18 and 25?

If you answered yes to the previous questions and are interested in participating, I would like to interview you for **one hour** for a research project **exploring the experiences of first-generation college students.**

Participation is **voluntary** and your responses are **confidential**. Participants will receive compensation in the form of a \$20 Walmart gift card.

If interested, please contact me via email at

UTKSEP@gmail.com

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you!

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-17-04143-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 01/22/2018

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The Student Experiences Project (Researcher's Copy)

You are invited to participate in the Student Experiences Project that is being conducted by a graduate student researcher from the University of Tennessee. The purpose of this study is to learn more about first-generation college students and their experiences.

If you choose to participate, you will meet with me, the graduate student researcher, to talk about your experiences as a first-generation college student. The study will take about 60 minutes, and the interview will be digitally audio-recorded to help me remember what you talked about.

RISKS: There are minimal anticipated risks associated with doing this study that are not greater than what you may experience in your daily life. The primary risk associated with this study is breach of confidentiality. Sometimes, people can become upset when talking about family relationships and this topic may come up during our interview. You can skip any question or end the interview at any time if you become uncomfortable. The Counseling Center on our campus is free and open to all students. If you feel you need assistance after our conversation, please contact them at [\(865\) 974-2196](tel:8659742196).

BENEFITS: I do not expect any direct benefits to you participating in the study, but the overall results of the study will help us understand your experiences as a first-generation college student.

COMPENSATION: You will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card for your participation in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information that I collect from you will be kept private and only available to researchers at UT involved in the project. Digital audio files and transcripts will not have your name on them. Digital audio files will be stored on a secure UT server accessible only by a password-protected university computer and then erased as soon as I transcribe them.

Transcripts that have been stripped of any potentially identifying information may be shared with my thesis advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Johnson. The researcher will take precautions to ensure participant's confidentiality such as avoiding including information in presentations or reports that could link participants to the study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, which means that you do not have to do the study if you don't want to. You may skip questions you don't want to answer, and may stop the interview at any time. If you decide to stop the interview, I will erase the audio file if you want me to. You will still receive full compensation if you choose to terminate the study early. Declining to participate or ending participation will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

FOLLOW UP: I may be interested in following up with you for a short (30 minutes) meeting where I ask for clarification on my preliminary analysis of the information you have shared. This is a process called member checking to ensure that I am representing your story accurately. Participation in this follow-up meeting is also completely voluntary, and no additional compensation will be offered. If you are okay with meeting again after this interview, please provide the best way to contact you:

CONTACT INFORMATION: If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the graduate student researcher, Amanda Capannola or her faculty advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, at 1215 West Cumberland Avenue, JHB 115 or (865) 974-5316. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-7697.

CONSENT: I have read the above information. I, _____, agree to participate in this study.
(printed name)

Participant's signature _____

Date _____

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-17-04143-XP

IRB APPROVAL DATE: 01/22/2018

IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 01/21/2019

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

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CONSENT: I have read the above information. I, _____, agree to participate in this study.
(printed name)

Participant's signature _____

Date _____

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-17-04143-XP

IRB APPROVAL DATE: 01/22/2018

IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 01/21/2019

Amanda Capannola
The Student Experiences Project
Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Hi! I want to thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview study. I first wanted to provide some background information. I am a master's student conducting a qualitative research study on the experiences of first-generation college students. I myself am a low-income first-generation student, which is a significant motivation for me to study the topic. I'm 29, I identify as a woman, and my preferred pronouns are she/her/hers.

Our interview should last about an hour, depending on how you feel. I do have some general questions, but this will hopefully feel more like a conversation. If at any point, you feel uncomfortable and wish to stop the interview for any reason, please do so. Before we begin, I'll ask that you go over this informed consent and let me know if you have any questions. If everything is clear and okay with you, you can sign at the bottom of the page. (Talk through informed consent with participant.) Do you have any questions before we begin? (Allow time and space for participant to ask questions.)

1. So, you contacted me to participate after seeing the recruitment flier. On it, I ask if you're the first person in your family to attend college. Do you identify with the label of "first-generation college student?"
2. So you're the first person in your family to go to college. Walk me through what that process was like for you.
3. How far away is "home" for you?
4. How often are you able to go back home for a visit? / Did you go back home for winter break?
5. Tell me more about the last time you visited home. Walk me through a typical day.

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. I appreciate it immensely. As we talked about earlier, I am interested in possibly following up with you. Would you be okay with that? The information you have shared is so important, and I want to make sure I represent it authentically and respectfully. Do you have any questions for me as we wrap up?

Thank you again!

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-17-04143-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 01/22/2018

Vita

Amanda Lynne Capannola was born in Bakersfield, California to mother, June Hardesty. She grew up in Gallatin, TN and then matriculated at Middle Tennessee State University and Pellissippi State Community College before graduating magna cum laude from University of Tennessee, Knoxville where she earned a degree in both Judaic Studies and American Studies. She has recently been accepted as a doctoral student in the department of Child & Family Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville where she will be earning her master's degree in the summer of 2018.