People Look at You a Little Bit Differently: Self-authorship and the Homegoing Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color

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Abstract

First-generation college (FGC) students represent 56% of college students in the United States (RTI International, 2019). Studies on the role FGC family in students' campus experiences by Covarrubias et al. (2015) along with Orbe's (2008) work on the role of culture in FGC identity development provide a foundation for understanding FGC experiences. The role of FGC self-authorship (Carpenter & Peña, 2017) on campus also helps support FGC student success.

Unexamined are FGC students' homegoing experiences in their communities of origin. This study helps fill a void in the literature about FGC students' experiences in their home communities through the voices of one important student demographic.

       Keywords: first generation college students, homegoing, transition, identity development, self-authorship, Students of Color

First generation college students (FGC) represent 56% of US college students (RTI International, 2019). While there is a body of literature on the experiences of FGC student transitions to college going back more than 20 years (Covarrubias et al., 2019; Engle et al., 2006; Smith & Zhang, 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996), FGC student transition experiences at home is an overlooked area of inquiry. To help fill this void, we conducted a small pilot case study to begin exploring the homegoing experiences of segment of FGC students after they entered college. Our study's research question was: What is the role of homegoing in the self-authorship experiences of upper-class FGC students?

Limitations and Delimitations

       As with any scholarship there are both limitations and delimitations to this work. Some of the limitations include the fact that the students who participated in this study come from a single institution so their perspectives are informed by geography, history, and culture of the campus and the region. In terms of delimitations, we focused solely on Students of Color for this study. While that provides some diversity of experience and identity, other students were not included in our data collection. The study is further delimited by the fact that we collected data while the students were in school rather than after they had graduated and had the full benefit of hindsight in their reflections.

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Literature Review

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Family

       Research has highlighted family as one of the most important factors in the lives of FGC students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015). Family members can provide essential support (Irlbeck, et al., 2014; Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Throughout college, FGC students were more likely to return home than continuing generation college

students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009) and FGC students sometimes prioritized going home over studying for exams (Covarrubias et al., 2019).

There are points of tension between FGC students and families. The existing literature has shown that for most FGC students, college was a time for negotiating and navigating often conflicting identities and experiencing tensions between home and college (Orbe, 2008). Some families struggled to adjust to changing identities of their FGC students (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Orbe, 2008). As a result, FGC students experienced frustration explaining their college experiences and could feel compelled to keep their home and academic identities separate (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). The FGC students reported getting negative responses from family who accuse them of forgetting where they came from or who they were (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Orbe, 2008).

Culture

The role of culture is another theme in FGC student identity formation. FGC students are more likely to hold racially marginalized identities, to speak a language other than English at home, and to come from working class backgrounds which can result in conflicting home and academic values (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Orbe, 2008). Some FGC students have been discouraged from going to college by their families (Irlbeck et al., 2014) because college was seen as an obstacle to family unity (Covarrubias et al., 2015).

Homegoing

There has been little scholarship that centers on college student homegoing experiences. Waterman (2012) explored the experiences of Indigenous students who engaged in home-going on a regular basis and the impact those trips had on their residential college experiences. Most subsequent literature that references Waterman's (2012) work has been about Indigenous student's experience broadly rather than the home-going experiences. Other literature on FGC students and families has focused on whether family was a help or hindrance to FGC students (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Lightweis, 2014; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Orbe, 2008). The focus was on family roles in students' experiences at college rather than at home.

Like Waterman's (2012) work, our research centered on homegoing, but for FGC students rather than Indigenous students and we did not focus on frequency of homegoing experiences which delineates our work from Waterman's (2012). Most FGC student scholarship

has focused on issues of transition to college at college. Our study examined FGC student experiences at home.

Research Design

Conceptual Framework

Our study used Baxter-Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship as the conceptual framework to investigate how self-authorship aligned with FGC junior and senior students homegoing. Self-authorship refers to identity development throughout the collegiate experience. The phases of self-authorship include following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's own life, and internal foundations (Baxter-Magolda, 2001, 2009). Self-authorship focuses on how students navigate college, home, family, and the world. Carpenter and Peña (2017) used Baxter-Magolda's (2009) work to explore college students' family relationships and conflict in terms of students' identity development. Similarly, we examined students' homegoing experiences through self-authorship.

Selection of Participants

We recruited five junior-level or above undergraduate Students of Color (three men, two women) at a large, predominantly White, public university in the Southeast. We partnered with a campus office designed to serve FGC students to recruit participants. Email was initially sent to program participants at the junior level or above and then snowball sampling was used.

While definitions of who FGC students are varies, for the purposes of our study we defined FGC students as students whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree. This definition has been used by 56% of colleges and universities (Rogers, 2018) and is the definition utilized by NASPA's Center for First-Generation Student Success (Rogers, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of FGC students' self-authorship experiences during college in relation to homegoing experiences. We developed interview questions, tested them with a research class of graduate students, and refined them for data collection. We used one-on-one interviews consisting of questions about student's homegoing experiences after attending college for multiple semesters. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes to provided thick, rich data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Two members of the research team were present at each audio-recorded interview and took field notes. One researchers conducted the interview; the one who did not transcribed the

audio and reviewed the field notes. The researcher who conducted the interview provided insight into their interviews, and the researcher not observing the interview provided an additional perspective. Both coded for themes for that interview. Common themes were identified that related to the FGC students' homegoing experiences throughout their collegiate years. Students discussed changed perceptions, recognition of growth in self, their sense of independence, and support. These themes were then examined through the lens of self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 2001).

To address Lincoln and Guba's (1986) components of trustworthiness, we interviewed multiple participants, found consistent themes, established credibility through multiple researchers working with the data. We addressed dependability through describing the research design and maintaining an audit trail. Finally, we conducted debriefing among the research team members and utilized peer debriefing with student affairs practitioners who work with FGC students to ensure our findings were consistent with others' understanding of FGC student experiences.

Findings

Student stories about homegoing aligned with Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2001) phases of self-authorship. The findings section outlines how participants moved through different self-authorship phases, specifically self-authorship experiences during homegoing interactions.

Following Formulas to Crossroads: Changed Perception

Participants started college in the following formulas phase of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001) by discussing values and beliefs dictated by family, community, school, and friends, but after going to college, they shifted quickly to the crossroads phase. Change was a theme each of the participant interviews about their transition to college. When talking about their friends' changed perceptions of them, one participant said, "I guess people look at [you] a little bit differently. . . . Everyone thought my goals had changed and so I was a different person. They distanced themselves from me." Another participant said changes in language were noted by friends at home.

> This is the saying that I get all the time: '[participant name] went to [college] and then got White on us.' That is the terminology that I get a lot of times. But I don't look at myself as better than them. I came from the same background. We came through the same struggles.

This student highlights that despite efforts to stay connected to others, FGC student participants experienced frustration and sometimes isolation at home. There was resistance as they tried to simultaneously understand and share their new identities with friends and family.

In another example, an FGC participant expressed his frustration regarding others' perceptions of him when he tried to share knowledge or correct microaggressions or inequities in his home environment. "So sometimes people look at you and they think, 'You think you're better than me.' Sometimes they say it directly to your face. It's like no. I don't think I'm better at all like I'm just trying to educate." Another student agreed and added, "I talk to friends who went to college – friends I wasn't close to in high school – more than my best friends who didn't go [to college]. They don't want to hang with me. They say I'm totally different." FGC students adjusted to college while also trying to understand the changing nature of their relationships at home.

The FGC student participants also changed their perceptions of what home was to them after going to college and leaving their home environment. Some of the FGC students reported that they were more comfortable at college than they do being back in the communities where they were raised. One participant said:

> Granted, I'm not doing anything spectacular at [university], but I'm more comfortable here than I am home. I feel like when I go home it's a trap, and I can get stuck there, or it's always negative energy around. So, I don't really know if I could call it home, but I am grateful for the environment because without it I wouldn't be who I am.

Some participants' perceptions of home changed because they were exposed to new things that made them realize their true feelings about home. For example, one participant talked about how their original thoughts of always wanting to stay in their hometown changed.

> I never wanted to leave. I definitely wanted to come to college, but I always told myself after growing up there – it was where I saw myself raising a family. . . . But now I kind of like feel like there's more out there than just where you were born and raised.

Another participant said no matter how much they enjoy college, their original community is where they find support and love.

> I think what it boils down to is that home is still home. It played a huge role in who I am as a person. I grew up there pretty much my whole life, and my family is still there, so [college] doesn't really change the fact that home is home.

Each participant defined home in their own way. Most of the participants claimed that their perception of home changed due to new opportunities at college, a desire to be their own person and to define who they were for themselves instead of being defined by others or assumed to be the same person they were in the past.

Becoming the Author of One's Life: A Sense of Independence

All participants talked about choosing to be independent while going through college. Some saw independence as role modeling different opportunities for their community. Others embodied independence by making decisions different from community and family norms. All participants said that their families played a role in their decisions but added that they have responsibility for their decisions.

> I let [family] talk to me about decisions and their views, and I take their words into account. At the end of the day, I'm gonna make my own decision, but it does matter to me how they feel. I talk through decisions, but it's so they understand where I'm coming from when I decide something, not me asking them to make the decision for me.

This perspective was shared across participants. FGC students consulted with family and shared their rationale with people who mattered in their lives, but ultimately made their own choices. FGC students embraced independence as part of who they were, especially with decisions about college and future. "Maybe yesterday was up to my parents [one student shared], But today and tomorrow are up to me."

Internal Foundation: Navigating Home as a Self-Authored Person

All participants recognized that they were creating new selves as they experienced ideological shifts because of engaging with diverse people and thoughts in college. As junior and senior students, participants had perspective and recognized their growth and the ways in which self-authorship impacted their experiences at home over time. They commented on their appreciation of their growth, despite people back at home sometimes seeing their change negatively. Through the interviews, participants indicated the continuous self-reflection and learning that played a factor in their growth. A common theme was that going to college made them question the beliefs and practices that they were raised with at home to create their own belief system.

One participant no longer sought affirmations from others. They said, "I know what I am doing and where I am headed. Others can't know that for me. I have learned to trust myself."

Another participant saw growth as a positive change but understood that others in their home community might not see their growth positively. "They see it only as a change, but not change for the better. I see it as growth." Another participant viewed growth as being able to question their own upbringing and the world around them as they formulated identity. "You question yourself like what you grew up believing or that kind of stuff. . . . What I've experienced makes you question things that you might always just kind of took for granted."

Overall, FGC students discussed growth as something powerful, but sometimes seen as negative or problematic by their families, friends, and home communities.

Discussion

The role of self-authorship in the experiences of FGC students had a unique impact on students, as it was prominent in relation to their experiences at home. We analyzed data for this pilot case study related to the changed perceptions of student's identity development as they navigated their home environment after attending college for at least two years. Our findings related to students moving from following formulas at home while in high school, to crossroads, through transitions, to becoming the author of one's life, and finally specifying internal foundations make a contribution to the literature.

Students' connections to home remained strong as other scholars have found (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Covarrubias et al., 2015). Participants in this study identified family and home communities as tremendous sources of emotional support. This finding aligns with Palbusa and Gauvain (2017), and the sense of interdependence described by Hartig and Steigerwald (2007).

The participants revealed that their definitions of family and home changed, fitting with Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2001) crossroads phase of self-authorship. The new support systems that they found in college were families they constructed from friends, staff, and faculty on campus. These new families served roles in terms of providing guidance and support that their families at home could not because of proximity or exposure to the college setting. Additionally, the students found community on their college campus and felt that they did not need to constantly return home. Students discovered a new support system that encouraged their developing identities. The need for on-campus support and FGC students' ability to cultivate that support fits with previously conducted research (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004).

Students moved into Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2001) becoming the author of one's life phase by seeing their independence from their home communities, family, and friends during

their homegoing experiences. FGC students recognized growth in themselves and discovered their independence as they became more comfortable making their own decisions. Their independence did not mean that they forgot or ignored their home environments. This independence allowed FGC students to create the life they envisioned for themselves.

Research on the role of self-authorship among FGC students is limited, but Carpenter and Peña's (2017) research study suggested "more first-generation college students may achieve self-authorship at earlier stages in life" (p. 91). FGC student experiences with familial conflict, and their need to potentially renegotiate family relationships, served as catalysts for FGC students' self-authorship development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017). This was particularly true for the participants during the becoming the author of one's life phase (Baxter Magolda 1999, 2001).

In the context of Baxter-Magolda's (1991, 2009) theory of self-authorship, students in this study had begun to take responsibility for and control over their own stories and experiences. This independence aligns with Patton et al.'s (2016) description of the phases of self-authorship. As FGC students developed independence, they were moving from the absolute knowing of students in their home communities before coming to college, through the transitional knowing (Patton et al., 2016). As FGC students moved through college, their independent and contextual knowing formed through their college experiences (Patton et al., 2016).

Just as FGC students' recognition of their growth and senses of independence developed through their college experiences, so did their abilities to identify and utilize different sources of support. Family encouragement varied for students in this study which aligns with other scholarship (Irlbeck et al., 2014). As students moved through the phases of self-authorship and found themselves not only develop independent and contextual knowing (Patton et al., 2016), they also found new sources of support as they became role models for other potential FGC students from their families or communities. This renegotiation of roles and understanding potentially served as a catalyst for FGC students' self-authorship (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

Support, growth, independence, and changed perceptions are important for understanding the complexities of FGC students. Much of the established literature has focused on the experiences of FGC students and their transition and obstacles they face on campus (Inkelas et al., 2007; Orbe, 2008; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Our study focused on the additional challenges that FGC students' experiences in navigating their identity in the context of their families and communities of origin. The resulting challenges created dissonance for participants when

returning home, which may compound the stress that FGC students were already experiencing in their college environment. The dissonance in college transition has been previously explored (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Orbe, 2008). The experience of this dissonance in home communities has been understudied. Our study identifies transition at home as being potentially more challenging than transitions on campus. These findings contribute to the literature and provide additional context for the ways and reasons that FGC students separate their home and college identities as discussed by Bryan and Simmons (2009).

Implications for Practice and Research

Implications to consider about FGC students and their experiences in their home communities include the role of faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education and P-12 educational systems. How do we prepare FGC students for college and for homegoing before they arrive on campus? How are bridge programs setting FGC students up for success to navigate both campus and home communities?

Many FGC students may have no one to relate to at home regarding the conflicts and tensions between their communities. This can have implications for their mental health and personal well-being. This information can provide important context for FGC support programs. Understanding these additional stressors may help residence life staff, counselors, and others with significant contact with FGC students to provide resources and support.

This study can inform additional research that focuses on support systems for FGC students and how FGC students develop those systems for themselves. By analyzing what support FGC students need, current practices on campuses can be developed and improved to meet the needs of FGC students. Other research could include studying the experiences of FGC after graduation, particularly if they return to their home communities after graduation. How do the relationships between FGC and their families and communities continue to evolve after FGC students have completed college?

Just as Waterman's (2012) work centered the experience of Indigenous students rather than the entire FGC student population, ours included only the experiences of FGC Students of Color. It is important to examine the experiences of White FGC students to fully understand how FGC student experiences intersect in connection to and beyond racial identity.

Finally, examining FGC experiences through the lenses of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other individual and intersectional identities is needed. FGC students are not FGC

students only. They hold multiple identities, therefore paying attention to those identities and how they impact the issues reported in this study may be important work still to be completed.

Conclusion

In this case study FGC students discussed their homegoing experiences, examined through the lens of Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2001) theory of self-authorship. Students came from their communities to the college campus in Baxter Magolda's following formulas stage of the theory. They followed the authority of parents and community leaders about who they were and whom they should be.

They moved into the crossroads phase as they began their transitions in college. They more fully began to understand their desire to define who they were for themselves rather than being defined by others (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001). As students moved into the final two phases, they were more confident in their beliefs and in who they were. During the becoming the author of one's life phase, participants built stronger connections with high school classmates who were also going to college. At the same time, closer friends who did not leave the home community for college became more distant. Participants became more confident in voicing their opinions and perspectives with family and others at home. Finally, as participants moved into the internal foundation phase, students more clearly specified their beliefs and made choices based on those beliefs.

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