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Feeling Trapped: Exploring the Lived Psychosocial Experiences of First-Generation College Students

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of First-Generation College Students

by Carmen Maria Moedano

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Abstract

Limited research exists that examines the lived experiences of psychosocial stress among first-generation college students. I utilize a trauma informed conceptual framework using the acculturative stress model and concepts from collective trauma to describe how colleges can function as a microcosm of the real world and place first-generation college students at increased vulnerability on top of the normative developmental challenges of young adulthood. I conducted a qualitative research study using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design to gain insights from first-generation college students about their lived experiences related to psychosocial distress. This study included purposive sampling at one four-year college institution in the Northeast. A total of 13 undergraduate college students who identify as first-generation college students were interviewed using 60-90minute semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded. The data was transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. One finding revealed a theme of first-generation college students renegotiating their intersecting identities that impacted feelings of connection and disconnection in college. Some identities were more salient than others in their home community and this saliency changed in college. The identities that stood out as most salient in college included identity as low-income, identity as a first-generation college student, and racial/ethnic identity. A second finding revealed a theme of sense of loss experienced by students that was nuanced, took time to identify, and took time to articulate. This sense of grief and loss and melancholia connected with fragmentation, splitting of the self, and intrapsychic conflict. These experiences resulted in students in this study feeling trapped in their circumstances. The third main finding revealed a theme of challenges with coping

due to the intersectionality of identities, pattern of self-sufficiency and parentification, and dissociation of the self that made it difficult to recognize a need for help. University campuses, especially those with a history of exclusivity, may not hold diverse communities of students, may create a culture that devalues the identity of first-generation or of an ethnic and racial background, and may contribute to students' sense of not belonging and psychosocial stress, particularly if they hold one or more intersecting marginalized identities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

First-generation college students may be more at risk of psychological distress due to acculturative and chronic stressors experienced on top of the normative developmental challenges of emerging adulthood. In this study, first-generation college students (FGCS) are defined as students whose parents do not have four-year undergraduate degrees (Engle, 2006; RTI, 2023; Stephens, 2014). Continuing generation (also identified in the literature as non-first generation) is defined as those students who have at least one parent who obtained a four-year degree (Jenkins, 2013; Stephens, 2014). The number of first-generation college students is increasing every year (Cunningham, 2016; Liversage et al, 2017; Trevelyan, 2016; Williams, 2015). Demographic characteristics in 2020 indicate that 26% of undergraduates who identify as first-generation had parents with no postsecondary education while 54% of undergraduates who identify as first-generation had parents who did not obtain a bachelor's degree (Cunningham, 2016; RTI, 2023). Although broad definitions of the term, first-generation college student, result in a higher number of these students in higher education, a too narrow definition may result in students missing out on the help they need (Blake, 2023). To best support first-generation college students, it is important to understand their psychosocial experiences in college and to understand the psychological impact of acculturative stress.

Acculturation is the adaptive process experienced when one is adjusting to a new cultural environment which includes cultural practices prevalent and centered in the United States along with values such as individualism (Berry, 2006; Schwartz et al, 2012; Torres, 2010; Yoon et al, 2013). Acculturative stress is the challenging experience that

can result from this adjustment (Berry, 2006; Torres, 2012; Yoon et al, 2013). Acculturative stress is described as the "psychological and social stress experienced due to an incongruence of beliefs, values, and other cultural norms between a person's country of origin and country of reception" (Berry, 2006). Four possible outcomes of acculturation include, 1) Assimilation, 2) Separation, 3) Integration, and 4) Marginalization (Berry, 2006; Yoon, 2013). *Assimilation* refers to the experience of the individual adopting the practices of the new dominant culture while not maintaining their original cultural identity. *Separation* refers to the opposite of assimilation - the individual rejecting the culture of the new and dominant culture in favor of conserving their own ethnic identity, an experience also termed "enculturation" in the literature (Berry, 2006; Yoon, 2013). *Integration* refers to accepting and incorporating both new dominant cultures along with their own (Torres, 2010). Integration, as a response to acculturative stress, is shown to be a protective factor and associated with more positive psychological outcomes as compared to situations where only one culture is emphasized (e.g., separation or assimilation) (Berry, 2006; Torres, 2010). *Marginalization* refers to the loss of all cultural affiliation because of not adopting the new dominant culture while also rejecting one's culture of origin. Separation and assimilation are connected to the most increased distress among individuals experiencing acculturative stress (Berry, 2006; Lubrano, 2004; Torres, 2010). Acculturation or assimilation is connected to higher depressive rates and poorer mental health outcomes for particular racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Lincoln et al, 2016).

If a first-generation college student experiences the acculturative outcome of marginalization, they may feel like they do not belong in their previous home

environment while they also feel like they do not belong in the new university community. Lubrano (2004) speaks to his own experience of navigating higher education and professional life as a first-generation college student with blue collar roots who is suddenly catapulted into white-collar surroundings. He describes feeling "in limbo" between what feels like two different worlds (Lubrano, 2004). He states,

> These people often find that the values of the working class are not sufficient guidance to navigate the white-collar world, where unspoken rules reflect primarily upper-class values. Torn between the world they were raised in and the life they aspire to, they hover between worlds, not quite accepted in either (Lubrano, 2004, pg 196).

These unspoken social rules, unspoken cultural capital for successful peers with privilege inherited from family members, and implicit or explicit microaggressions experienced by their institutions, can be disorienting and overwhelming for first-generation college students (Lubrano, 2004; Stephens, 2014; Williams, 2015). These stressors that challenge one's experiences with their own identity and cultural values in new-found ways, can lead to feelings of not belonging and disconnection (Eng & Han, 2018; Stephens, 2014; Williams, 2015). Experiences of isolation can contribute to mental health distress while strong familial or peer support are shown be protective factors for such risk (Liversage, 2017; Williams, 2015). Using Lubrano (2004) and the aforementioned literature, the experience of being in "limbo," or stuck between two worlds (feeling they don't belong in either their school world or home world) as a result of acculturative stress in higher education, can leave a first-generation college student feeling isolated, socially

disconnected, feeling trapped, and possible experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cheref, 2015; Corona, 2017; Engle, 2006).

More research is needed that examines acculturative stress specifically among first-generation college students aged 18-25 years-old and that examines psychosocial stressors among this population from a trauma informed lens. In this dissertation, I argue that university campuses can function as microcosms of the stressors in society like those experienced by immigrant populations as they adjust to relocating to the United States. This microcosm can trigger acculturative stress and psychosocial stress among first-generation college students thus making an already normative challenging stage in life of emerging adulthood even more challenging. Although all college students are at increased risk of negative mental health outcomes due to this critical developmental stage of life, first-generation college students may be more vulnerable due to acculturative and chronic stressors (Fanfan, 2020; Katsiaficas, 2013). A review and critique of the existing literature on acculturative stress and emerging adulthood will follow along with a trauma informed conceptualization of the psychosocial distress among this population. A trauma informed lens is defined as a shift in focus from viewing trauma as an injury and instead understanding the impact of trauma on the individual to promote safety and prevent re-traumatization (Harris & Fallot, 2001). A trauma informed lens contributes a more holistic and strength-based perspective as well as an institutional analysis of the stressors facing this population instead of placing responsibility entirely on the student.

Rationale and Problem Formulation

Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students is essential to understanding risk and protective factors for this population. Research on risk

and protective factors must be triangulated and deepened with studies about lived experiences of distress, resilience, and identity development. For example, social identity development in college can be impacted by bias-based bullying that often includes aggression towards college students of minoritized identities (Kumaria et al, 2023). Additionally, social identity is a factor in bystander responsiveness (Kumaria et al, 2023). The number of first-generation college students is increasing every year (Cunningham, 2016; Liversage et al, 2017; Trevelyan, 2016; Williams, 2015). Although the number of first-generation college students may be increasing in higher education, it is critical that universities not just offer but make accessible the resources to match student need and ensure the success of these students.

Emerging adulthood (18-25-years old) is a critical stage of development where individuals are at higher risk of psychosocial distress due to multiple factors. Individuals who attend college and identify as first-generation report experiencing increased depressive symptoms (Stebleton, 2014), loneliness, lower sense of belonging, lower social support, lower levels of academic performance, higher stress levels (Stebleton, 2014), survivor guilt, and are less likely to seek academic or mental health support (Becerra, 2017; Padilla, 1987; Jenkins, 2013; Wang, 2008). College students with minoritized identities may also face bias-based peer aggression and bullying and at the same time lack support from peers (Kumaria et al, 2023; Byers & Cerulli, 2022; Byers, 2016). Compared to students with college-educated parents, first-generation college students do not graduate at the same rate as their peers, they report receiving less support preparing for higher education, and report experiencing more loneliness and less support while in college (Longwell-Grice et al, 2016).

Existing literature notes that racial and ethnic minority college students and first-generation college students are more likely to encounter challenges to success in higher education. However, limited qualitative literature exists that examines in-depth the experiences of psychosocial stress specifically among first-generation college students. Additionally, existing literature does not provide a trauma informed framework to describe the phenomena of increased vulnerability to psychosocial distress among first-generation college students – a population that often identifies within one or more intersecting marginalized identities.

Further research is needed to better understand the challenges this population experiences in higher education to help increase supports that best meet their needs. Additionally, further qualitative research is needed to add to the existing literature that is currently primarily quantitative. To help fill this gap, I intend to use a trauma informed conceptual frame that draws from the acculturative stress model and collective trauma to explore my primary research question, "What are the experiences of psychosocial stress among first-generation college students?" As stated above, understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students is essential to understanding risk and protective factors for this population. Research on risk and protective factors must be triangulated and deepened with studies about lived experiences of distress, resilience, and identity development. This will help ensure any support matches the needs of first-generation college students. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research study was utilized to interview 13 first-generation college students through semi-structured interviews to gain insights into their lived experiences in higher education.

Chapter two of this dissertation will begin with a literature review of the psychosocial stressors reported among racial and ethnic minorities drawing connections to first-generation college students followed by an overview of acculturative stress contextualized as an additional stressor among first-generation college students. I will speak to the stage of emerging adulthood as a normative stressor among the broader college student population. A review of collective trauma will follow to describe how emerging adulthood stressors, acculturative stress, and other psychosocial stressors are compounded for first-generation college students and can lead to the experience of a trauma response among this population. Next, in chapter three, I will provide an overview of the methodology for my qualitative research study. Chapters four, five, and six will describe findings in this research study. I will conclude with a discussion and conclusion chapter that will connect my findings to theory and include implications for practice and future research.

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

This study utilizes the Acculturative Stress Model in combination with concepts drawn from collective trauma (e.g. meaning making, loss of connections, fragmentation) to conceptualize psychosocial experiences among first-generation college students. Using this trauma informed framework, I conceptualize university campuses as microcosms of the outside world - a unique cultural environment that can trigger acculturative stress and a trauma response among first-generation college students. I argue that university campuses can function as microcosms of the stressors in society like those experienced by immigrant populations as they adjust to relocating to the United States. This microcosm can trigger acculturative stress among first-generation college students and thus make an already normative challenging stage in life of emerging adulthood even more challenging.

I argue that first-generation college students can experience a search for meaning and loss of connection, constructs of collective trauma, due to acculturative stressors and a college environment that functions as a microcosm of the immigrant experience. First-generation college students and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience discrimination and racism at their institutions of higher education which contributes to stress and acculturative stress (Dawson, 2010). Experiences of discrimination and racism have shown to be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among some ethnic and minority populations (Espinal, 2019). In the last three years, college campuses have seen an increase in explicit displays of racism, xenophobia, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression (Tummala-Narra, 2021). Prolonged exposure to racism can

result in psychological distress and traumatic stress (Tummala-Narra, 2021).

Additionally, perceived discrimination was associated with PTSD symptoms for Chinese international college students (Tummala-Narra, 2021) and ongoing trauma among racial and ethnic minorities (Espinal, 2019). First-generation college students report experiencing acculturative stress that influences feelings of not belonging (Williams, 2015), demoralization, and feeling different (Jenkins, 2013). It will be important to examine the role that institutions of higher education that hold a history of exclusivity and elitism may play in contributing to implicit and explicit messaging to students that they do not belong. Additionally, parents may desire to provide guidance and support to first-generation college students but are limited in doing so due to lack of understanding and lack of experience thus exacerbating their emotional distance (Jenkins, 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2021). Emotional distancing and loss of connection from familial and cultural environment at home, while also feeling a loss of connection from their new institution, can increase psychosocial distress (Carrera, 2014, Langenkamp, 2018). This can also bring up existential processing about their meaning or purpose in higher education especially if the distress is associated with academic challenges.

A response to discrimination among college students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds includes a tendency to deny parts of the self-causing internal conflict (Tummala-Narra, 2021) or of internalizing symptoms such as anxiety or depression (Katsiaficas, 2013). Internalization refers to the experience of keeping one's feelings silent and not sharing them with others as well as these feelings or thoughts becoming your own over time. Trauma responses among Black immigrants includes fragmentation of the self. This can result in an internal experience of distress while

presenting externally as "self-sufficient" and "unflappable" (Curtis-Boles, 2019). The American Psychological Association defined fragmentation as separation into different pieces which can refer to a way of thinking or behavior. It is important to recognize the systemic forces that contribute to the experience of oppression on college campuses, which include institutions that hold Western values in privileging those with social capital (Langenkamp, 2018) and institutions where micro and macro aggressions are experienced from faculty and peers (Salusky, 2019). These implicit and explicit microaggressions and forms of oppression can result in first-generation college students internalizing messages that they do not belong or are not smart enough. It can also result in feelings of survivor's guilt and shame due to feeling grateful for the opportunity to be first in their family to pursue higher education but feeling guilt that they are struggling.

Using a trauma informed conceptual framework that takes into consideration acculturative stress and collective trauma will lead to a greater understanding of the risk and protective factors that contribute to psychosocial distress among first-generation college students, place more responsibility on the institution and not on the individual student, and then lead to trauma informed supports for this population.

Psychosocial Distress Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities and FGCS

Although limited literature exists on the psychosocial experiences of first-generation college students, there is literature on the psychosocial experiences of the typical college student population and of ethnic minority young adults. Although the following findings focus on racial/ethnic minority college students, demographics of first-generation college students indicate that these students often identify within a marginalized racial and ethnic background (Espinal, 2019; Williams, 2015). Thus, we

can draw implications for its application to first-generation college students. In addition to identifying within a racial and ethnic minority background, first-generation college students are also more likely to be female, be older in age, more likely to work while in school compared to non-first-generation peers and come from families of lower socio-economic status (Espinal, 2019; Wang, 2008; Williams, 2015). First-generation college students are more likely to report feeling stressed compared to continuing-generation students (Stebleton et al, 2014) and are also more likely to experience racial and ethnic discrimination (Jenkins, 2013). Furthermore, ethnic and racial minority college students are more likely than their white-identified peers to report experiencing less satisfaction with life, lower self-esteem, lower levels of academic self-efficacy, acculturative stress, and feelings of not belonging (Cheref et al, 2015; Jenkins, 2013; Wang, 2008; Wong, 2017). Emerging adults (ages 18-25 years-old) of racial/ethnic minority experience greater risk for suicidal ideation (Cheref et al, 2015).

Cheref and colleagues (2015) conducted a study on first and second-year college undergraduates in New York City to better understand racial and ethnic differences in cognitive vulnerability to depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation. The study included a diverse sample size of six hundred ninety college students aged 18-34 (median age of 19.28). The sample included 11% who identified as biracial, 31% who identified as Black, and 57% who identified as Latino (Cheref, 2015). These participants completed four standardized measures and utilized the Minority Stress Model and the Cultural Model of Suicide to help explain why racial and ethnic minorities may experience more stress and suicidal risk due to discrimination and/or cultural stressors (Cheref, 2015).

In addition, the authors found that cultural stressors contributed to psychological distress resulting from an internal conflict between one's internal and external world. This occurred when one's view of their internal representation of themselves, their identity, or values was not congruent with the feedback or reactions they were receiving from others. They also found that biracial participants hold risk beyond that of monoracial minority participants (Cheref, 2015). These findings indicated that biracial college students with higher levels of depressive symptoms were more likely to report greater levels of suicidal ideation and rumination compared to Black and Latino students. The researchers noted consideration of the developmental stage of emerging adulthood in combination with the background/identity of the college student and found heightened risk among racial and ethnic minorities compared to their White peers (Cheref, 2015). This study provides support to first-generation college students aged 18-25, who often hold marginalized racial and ethnic identities, holding increased risk of experiencing depressive symptoms, internal conflict, rumination, and other psychosocial distress during college. I argue that the internal conflict on identity and resulting fragmentation experienced by first-generation college students due to stress and acculturative stress are trauma responses that contribute to psychosocial distress. A trauma informed conceptual framework examining first-generation college students is incomplete without consideration of acculturative stress and trauma responses among this population.

Acculturative Stress and First-Generation College Students

Acculturation is the adaptive process experienced when one is adjusting to a new cultural environment which includes one's cultural or familial traditions and American cultural practices along with values such as individualism and collectivism (Berry, 2006;

Schwartz et al, 2012; Torres, 2010; Yoon et al, 2013). Acculturative stress is the stressful experience that can result from this adjustment (Berry, 2006; Torres, 2012; Yoon et al, 2013). Acculturative stress is described as the "psychological and social stress experienced due to an incongruence of beliefs, values, and other cultural norms between a person's country of origin and country of reception" (Berry, 2006). Four possible outcomes of acculturation include, 1) Assimilation, 2) Separation, 3) Integration, and 4) Marginalization (Berry, 2006; Yoon, 2013). If a first-generation college student experiences the acculturative outcome of marginalization, they may feel like they do not belong in their previous home environment while also feeling like they do not belong in the new university community.

This acculturative process includes "bicultural" challenges because of social class differences that result in attempting to navigate the middle-to-higher class culture of the university (Hermann, 2018). The existing literature links "cultural mismatch" due to social class differences to worse experiences in college and negative academic outcomes during and after college among first-generation college students (Jury et al, 2015; Stephens et al, 2012). The experience of cultural mismatch is also linked with experiences of institutional and interpersonal classism that undermine first-generation college student academic performance and emotional wellbeing in addition to lowering life satisfaction among these students (Allan et al, 2016). This cultural mismatch includes differences in identifying with more "interdependent norms" among first-generation college students who are socialized in working class families as compared to more "independent norms" among continuing-generation peers who are socialized in higher social class families and who are favored by institutions of higher education (Jury, 2015;

Stephens, 2012). However, authors Hermann et al (2018) write that first-generation college students who hold integrated social class identities, those who find their cultural identities as compatible with those in their new cultural environment, experience better health, increased performance, and improved general well-being. This requires increased supports by the institution, not just access.

Lubrano (2004) speaks to feeling "in limbo" between what feels like two different worlds in college and even after college. These stressors that challenge one's experiences with their own identity and cultural values in new-found ways, can lead to feelings of not belonging and disconnection (Stephens, 2014; Williams, 2015). These experiences of isolation can contribute to mental health distress while strong familial or peer support are shown be protective factors for such risk (Liversage, 2017; Williams, 2015). Using Lubrano (2004) and the aforementioned literature, the experience of being in "limbo," or stuck between two worlds (feeling they don't belong in either their school world or home world) as a result of acculturative stress in higher education, can leave a first-generation college student feeling isolated, socially disconnected, and it contributes to depression or anxiety among these students (Cheref, 2015; Corona, 2017; Engle, 2006).

First-generation adults may experience about 13% more acculturative stress and greater degree of stressors than second generation immigrants (Fanfan, 2020). Acculturative Stress is connected to more negative physical health outcomes (Waldman, 2019) and is a risk factor to poor mental health, particularly depression, and detrimental psychiatric outcomes among immigrants in the United States (Cheref, 2015; Corona, 2017; Engle, 2006; Torres, 2010; Waldman, 2019). Latino/a immigrants and Black Caribbean immigrants are more likely to experience greater levels of acculturative stress

compared to White immigrants and are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and suicidality (Fanfan, 2020). Acculturative stress increases negative psychiatric outcomes for Mexican American college students (Torres, 2012). Acculturative stress is associated with decreased self-esteem and increased feelings of not belonging (Claudat, 2015). Additionally, acculturative stress is associated with informal health seeking behaviors among Asian and Latin American immigrants in the US (Waldman, 2019).

A study by Torres (2010) sought to predict levels of depression based on experiences of acculturative stress and coping among Latino immigrants. The study consisted of one hundred forty-eight adults who identified as "Latino," "Latina," or "Hispanic," and who were recruited from a community-based organization. Seventy-nine participants identified as first-generation to immigrate to the United States. Participants were asked to complete four quantitative standardized measures, and all measures held adequate psychometric properties for internal consistency and were previously used with immigrant populations. The measures were provided in English or Spanish with most participants completing the measures in Spanish. Findings demonstrate that maintaining a cultural tie to one's heritage and active coping were protective factors to depressive symptoms among Latino immigrants while acculturating to the American society increased vulnerability for depressive symptoms (Torres, 2010). This study underscored how living in an environment that devalues one's ethnic group along with the pressure associated with being an immigrant in the United States increases the vulnerability for depressive symptoms. These findings provide support for integration as an acculturative coping protective factor for immigrant populations. It also supports existing literature

connecting acculturative stress to negative mental health outcomes among immigrant populations. University campuses, especially those with a history of exclusivity, may not hold diverse communities of students, may create a culture that devalues the identity of first-generation or of an ethnic and racial background, and may contribute to students' sense of not belonging and psychosocial stress, particularly if they hold one or more intersecting marginalized identities.

This study by Torres (2010) holds both strengths and limitations. First, in his participant sample, Torres includes adults varying in age anywhere from 18-76. He does not consider a developmental theory in his study or how one's developmental age could contribute to or be impacted by acculturative stress. This is a limitation I found in many other studies on acculturative stress. Additionally, Torres defines first-generation as individuals who were born abroad and immigrated to the United States and thus most of his participant sample identified as such. This is a limitation because it is not consistent with how the term is defined in the existing literature. In the literature, first-generation is often defined in various ways, as 1) the first generation born in the United States with immigrant parents or 2) as first individual in the family to immigrant to the United States but born in another country (Engle, 2006; Torres, 2010). In summary, the use of differing definitions for the term, "first-generation" in the literature, differences in how acculturative stress is measured, in addition to the acculturative stress research primarily focusing on immigrant or racial/ethnic minority populations across the age spectrum, contributes to limitations in applying existing research to first-generation college students aged 18-25yo. It speaks to the need to add and strengthen the literature by examining acculturative stress specifically for first-generation college students. Increased sadness,

depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of being in "limbo" and not belonging among first-generation college students who experience acculturative stress, speaks to the importance of supporting these students to reduce distress and improve likelihood of success.

Emerging Adulthood

Young adult college students between the ages of 18-25, a time defined as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2005), has five main features that includes identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future (Arnett, 2021). These individuals experience multiple normative macro-level (societal expectations), meso-level (socioeconomic status, parental and familial relationship), and micro-level stressors (cognitive development, identity formation) that can influence academic and mental health outcomes (Arnett, 2005; Wood et al, 2017). Wood and colleagues (2017) utilize the Life Course Health Development (LCHD) model to describe the multiple factors (e.g. personal, social, emotional, neuroanatomical, and developmental levels) that determine a "health developmental" trajectory (Wood et al, 2017). However, this model does not speak to how one's identity or diverse background can impact this developmental stage.

A critique of emerging adulthood literature includes limitations in its discussions on the potential variation in how this period of life is navigated cross culturally by individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and due to social inequity (Katsiaficas, 2017). Arguments include that this socially constructed stage is only present in industrialized countries where a young adult has the capacity and privilege to pursue higher education and delay adulthood responsibilities instead of pursuing immediate

work or marriage. Furthermore, Arnett (2021) states that emerging adulthood only exists in non-industrialized countries among the wealthier members of society due to rural and urban low-income members of society entering work, marriage, or parenthood at an early age. However, Katsiaficas (2017) cautions against generalizing all young adults in the United States as navigating emerging adulthood in the manner outlined by Arnett. In his study of community college students aged 18-25 who identified as low-income and ethnically diverse, he discusses how Black and Latino young adults were more likely to identify as having already reached adulthood compared to White and Asian identified young adults (Katsiaficas, 2017). He states that first-generation college students were more likely to meet the sociological criteria of adulthood such as leaving home, finishing school, working, or having children that could be connected to their socio-economic status, cultural obligations, or meaning of adulthood. He argues that Arnett's research does not give sufficient attention to the role social inequality and class plays in differences in economic or educational opportunities among emerging adults of racial and ethnic backgrounds (Katsiaficas, 2017). However, although these individuals may perceive reaching "adulthood" at a younger age due to such responsibilities, they may still "wrestle with and negotiate the phenomenon of emerging adulthood" (Syed, 2013).

It may be important to not generalize first-generation college students in the United States as automatically experiencing emerging adulthood because of their participation in college or delay of marriage. Instead, it may be important to consider a more nuanced experience of emerging adulthood for these students who may identify with many of the criteria that makes them feel more "adult" (e.g. more likely to enter the workforce while in school, likely to be financially independent or caretake for their

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families) but who are also still navigating identity formation – a key component of this developmental stage (Syed, 2013). Additionally, the experience of feeling neither like an adult or an adolescent, parallels the experience of being in "limbo" between two different worlds described by Lubrano (2004) and thus I expand on this authors use of the term. A first-generation student experiencing loneliness, disconnection, and nonbelonging due to feeling "in between" two worlds with respect to the acculturative stress and emerging adulthood stress, further supports the importance of drawing attention to the psychosocial impact of such compounded stress among this population.

Collective Trauma

Collective trauma responses may include loss of connections, a search for meaning, internal conflict between self and other, and fragmentation. Collective trauma can result in loss and increase "existential threat, which prompts a search for meaning, and the construction of a trans-generational collective self" (Hirschberger, 2018). Collective trauma refers to the "psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society" and is "devastating" for both individuals and groups (Hirschberger, 2018). Collective trauma can affect the way that individuals view the world and perceive their relationships with other people and groups due to exposure to "darker sides of human nature" (Hirschberger, 2018). Experiences of loss, violence, or life threat from collective trauma are associated with psychological distress and post-traumatic stress disorder for children (Liu, 2020). The experience of collective trauma being connected to meaningful connections is further described below,

> The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the
> awareness of those who suffer from it, so it…[is] a gradual realization that the

community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an

important part of the self has disappeared… (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 3)

A qualitative study by Salusky and colleagues (2019) explored how Indigenous Arctic young people frame their experiences and develop an understanding of who they are and how they behave in their school and home setting. The authors acknowledge how young Indigenous people receive messages that their success is tied to educational settings. These students' exposure in the classroom is not connected to their culture or traditions due to non-Native teachers leading these classrooms. As a result, these "two contexts (school and land) represent different opportunity costs, skill sets, and demands on these individuals' time" (Salusky, 2019). The authors argue that the presence of structural violence in schools limit their potential due to institutional practices that favor some groups. This results in an inequitable balance of power that favor the dominant group. These authors define structural violence as,

Structural violence is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harms way. The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury, including psychological injury, to people, typically not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities (Salusky, 2019, p. 2).

Furthermore, structural violence can include reinforcing particular narratives in history while minimizing the narratives of other disadvantaged groups. Structural violence can manifest as a lack of diverse representation with university faculty (Salusky, 2019). Findings showed that among these students, caregiver involvement with the institution

was minimal, students spent large amounts of time in these formal education settings, experiencing challenges in balancing family and community expectations, and primarily engaged in this journey independently (Salusky, 2019). This article uses structural violence to help explain the stressful and isolating experience of being "in-between home and school" as well as the stress of adjusting to an institution of higher education that upholds Western values in how they teach.

This study acknowledges the impact that structural violence in institutions of education that minimize narratives of disadvantaged groups can lead to isolating experiences of being "in between home and school" – experiences that parallel the isolating "limbo" feeling of not belonging in school and home among first-generation college students. In institutions that are historically exclusive and may not hold a diverse student population or diverse faculty, students do not see representation of themselves in the university. They may experience implicit or explicit experiences of discrimination that impact a first-generation college student's experience of making meaning and can lead to a trauma response among these students.

Parenting & Social Class

It is important to understand that social class plays a role in parenting for families. When children take on responsibilities and caretaking for the family, they can experience parentification. According to Hooper (2008), parentification is defined as, the distortion or lack of boundaries between and among family subsystems, such that children take on roles and responsibilities usually reserved for adults. That is, either explicitly or implicitly, parents create an environment that fosters caretaking in their children that help maintain homeostasis for the family in general and the parent in particular. Thus, the

child must be emotionally available for the parent, even though the parent is often

emotionally unavailable for the child, which may engender a chronic state of anxiety and

distress in some emotionally parentified children. The clinical literature has also reported

that the breakdown in the generational hierarchy may rob the child of activities that are

developmentally appropriate... (Hooper, 2008).

The research conducted by Lareau (2011) lends to a more critical lens of the idea

of parentification. Lareau (2011) describes in her book the independence or self-

sufficiency seen in children of working-class families as rooted in parenting style

differences between middle class and working-class families. Through her research study

observing and interviewing families when the children were 9 to 10-years-old then

interviewing the same children again a decade later when they were young adults,

Laureau (2011) describes how all parents regardless of social class, desire that their

children be happy and successful. However, the parents' perspective of how they support

their child in doing so looked differently. More specifically, middle class parents held the

perspective of "concerted cultivation" whereas working class families held the

perspective of "accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau, 2011). Lareau compares

concerted cultivation to gardening where middle class parents hold and feel an obligation

to foster growth and development of different skills in their child, which is seen in more

advocacy and parental involvement in the child's school, increased organized activities

for their child, and a busy schedule of extra-curricular activities for their child from a

very young age. For working class families, accomplishment of natural growth was

described as parents holding the perspective that children grow and thrive spontaneously

which led to these children engaging in less organized activities and parents expecting

and placing the responsibility of growth and development in the child's institution. These differences contributed to students from middle class families holding more *cultural knowledge* because these experiences translated into skills as compared to working class families. This cultural knowledge contributed to advantages valued by employers and American society.

It contextualizes how social class differences may contribute to parenting style differences that then lead to working class students holding more responsibility for their own growth and development. From the perspective of Lareau's study of parenting and class, students raised in working class families are encouraged in independence and self-reliance. It is their responsibility to figure out how to navigate college and higher education on her own. Utilizing Lareau's (2011) framework, these parents may have held the perspective that educational institutions would prepare and guide their children for college. However, these students learned quickly this was not the case as they navigated many firsts throughout high school and college as first-generation college students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Approach and Design

The objective of this interpretative phenomenological study is to provide insight into the lived experience of first-generation college students to better understand their psychosocial experiences. The research on risk and protective factors for this population must be triangulated and deepened with studies about lived experiences of distress, resilience, and identity development. My research questions were examined using a social constructivist epistemological framework to engage in a co-learning process between researcher and participants as well as to understand the experiences of the participants. This epistemological framework works from a perspective of there *not* being one truth that exists or that the researcher knows what this truth is (eg not positivist framework). Thus, a social constructivist framework would allow the best opportunity to learn from the participants and help them inform and guide proceeding interviews.

I utilized a qualitative research approach and an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design. An IPA research design works best for this research study as I am looking to study the lived experience of first-generation college students and to describe this experience as accurately as possible (Groenewald, 2004). Additionally, IPA is more psychologically oriented than the classic phenomenological design and utilized when examining a topic that is complex (Smith, 2015). My understanding is that an IPA approach is more psychological because it seeks to provide more specific insights, instead of more generalized findings, in how a participant makes sense of their personal experience. IPA has the researcher in a dual role of making sense of the participant who is making sense of their lived experience (Alase, 2017). IPA thus involves a close

interpretative engagement of the part of the researcher or listener (Alase, 2017). My

project seeks to understand the lived experiences of psychosocial stress among first-

generation college students. The objective of this study is to gain a better qualitative

understanding of why and how stress impacts these students, information limited in the

existing literature and that cannot be acquired through standardized quantitative screening

tools. The research on risk and protective factors must integrate lived experiences about

distress, resilience, and identity development to deepen their understanding about first-

generation college students.

A component of phenomenological research design includes "bracketing" a term

referring to the researcher "bracketing" their own thoughts or assumptions to fully

understand the participants' experiences (Groenewald, 2004). However, a strength of an

IPA research design is the bonding relationship that it allows researchers to develop with

study participants (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2015). IPA acknowledges that bracketing entirely

is impossible but ensures that it is present during data collection to allow for the

participant to share their lived experiences in their own terms (Reiners, 2012). IPA would

also allow an interpretative process to the data collection, keeping an open mind to ask

different questions guided by the responses of the participants in the interview (Alase,

2017).

Recruitment and Sampling

This study was approved by the Bryn Mawr College Institutional Review Board

(IRB). This study fits the criteria for exempt research under 46.104 section (1) as human

participants are involved in interviews that are de-identified, there is no risk of harm to

participants, and there was no deception. The participants in this study, included college

students in the United States who identify as first-generation college students – a term defined as students whose parents did not complete a college education. All human subjects were voluntary participants who indicated interest to participate in the study and who provided informed consent to participate.

This was a cross sectional study with a plan of utilizing a sample of 12-15 undergraduate students who identified as first-generation college students and were recruited from a one four-year liberal arts college in the Philadelphia area. A total of 13 participants were recruited for this study. Dependent on retention of participants, I originally planned to interview all 12 to 15 participants twice throughout the study for a total of 24 to 30 interviews. I anticipated interviewing participants twice to allow for more in-depth conversations that moved beyond perfunctory comments as I expected that participants may be more comfortable by their second interview. Although I originally planned to interview participants twice, as I moved through my study, I found that the initial interviews were rich in information and that a second interview was not needed. Originally, sample inclusion was planned to include only first and second year undergraduate students (eg freshman and sophomores), range in age among this emerging adulthood population (18 to 25yo), and be inclusive with respect to race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. However, as I moved forward with my sample recruitment, due to challenges in recruitment, an amendment to the IRB was approved to expand the sample to include students across the undergraduate population (freshman, sophomore, juniors, and seniors). First-generation college students who identified as students of color were encouraged to participate. I aimed for a larger than nationally

representative sample of students of color but ensured there was inclusivity with respect to race and ethnicity, gender, and year at their university.

The sampling strategy was primarily non-probability sampling - purposive with some convenience sampling and snowball sampling. As I moved through my study, a total of 13 participants were recruited before reaching saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Dworkin, et al). Cresswell (1998) recommends minimum of 10 participants in a phenomenological study to reach saturation (Groenewald, 2004). IPA focuses on the quality not quantity of participant interviews and thus recommends anywhere from two to twenty-five participants (Alase, 2017). The recruitment began with the support of a partnering campus organization focused on campus programming that addresses issues of diversity, power, and privilege. This campus organization representative reviewed and provided feedback on the study announcement flyer and then distributed it to the first-generation college student listserv on campus. An amendment to the IRB approved additional flexibility for me to email the study announcement flyer directly to different student groups on campus and not rely only on this partnering campus organization to email the study announcement flyer. The interested participants completed a brief demographic form, and I selected participants from those who completed the form. Some snowball sampling occurred following this initial round of recruitment. All participants completed a consent form and were asked for feedback regarding the interview guide (see Appendix). Students were incentivized to complete the study with a $25 gift card that was received at the end of the study and funded through dissertation funding. The funding for this dissertation study was acquired through the Rivitz Award through the Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research. The Rivitz Award was

made possible by an endowed fund given to the school by Maurice Sall in memory of his
daughter, Joan Sall Rivitz, who completed her M.S.S and Ph.D. degrees at the Bryn
Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, all study participants identified with
multiple intersecting identities and all named identity as integral to their experience in
higher education. See Table 1 for a demographics summary of the participant sample.
These demographics are shared in aggregate form to protect confidentiality of these first-
generation college students.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Demographics	N	%
Gender		
Female	13	100%
Male	0	0
Age		
18	4	30%
19	0	0
20	2	15%
21	4	30%
22	3	23%
Race		
White	2	15%
African American/Black	0	0

Asian	3	23%
Hispanic	9	69%
Middle Eastern/Arab American	1	8%
Year		
Freshman	4	31%
Sophomore	0	0
Junior	4	31%
Seniors	5	38%

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection via 13 total 60 to 90-minute semi-structured participant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Memoing was utilized during and after each interview by the researcher which aligned with a phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004). This data collection occurred over twelve months followed by months of data analysis. To minimize participant drop-out, participants were recruited during the first month of each semester at a time when the semester is the least busy for most students. Interview participants were provided the option to complete the interview in-person, via phone, or through zoom. However, all participants selected to complete the interview view zoom. A demographic form, consent form, and interview guide (see Appendix) were utilized for each interview. The participant interview transcriptions were all de-identified to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

In this research study, I sought to understand the psychosocial stressors that an emerging adult, particularly one who identifies as a first-generation college student, may experience navigating college (Antonio & Levy, 2015). The data analysis utilized Dedoose software. I transcribed all interviews. The processing of data occurred in multiple stages beginning with reviewing interview transcriptions for general themes. This processing transitioned to content/thematic analysis that included utilizing Saldana's (2015) guidelines for complete first cycle and second cycle coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Throughout the data analysis process, as I moved through first and second cycle coding of the transcripts, I developed a thematic network using Attride-Stirling's work for guidance (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Techniques utilized by this researcher to enhance trustworthiness included memoing in addition to meeting with doctoral committee director of work for questions or to share progress. Throughout the interview process, feedback from the participants on the interview guide and responses to interview questions guided additional questions asked of subsequent participants. This iterative process is consistent with a social constructivist epistemological approach and an IPA research design as it allows co-learning to occur between the researcher and participants.

Coding

I began first round coding after completing four interviews, and I continued coding while I was continuing with interviews. I completed all first-round coding after completing 13 interviews and reaching saturation. First round coding resulted in 157 codes. In preparation for second round coding, I reviewed the list of codes to create a

code book and explore the relationship between codes. Following the procedure Saldana (2015) outlines, I created clean copies of the interview transcripts in Dedoose. Then, I used pattern coding to find similarities or commonalities amongst the codes that could fall under larger categories. Then, I created new categories and reorganized the codes down to 24 main codes before proceeding to complete second cycle coding using this new code book. See Table 2 for a list of these 24 codes.

A dilemma I experienced throughout this coding process was desiring to reorganize categories and complete second cycle coding while also still ensuring I captured the authentic "lived experience" of the study participants. I worried that filtering down the themes into fewer and more general categories would cause loss of the "lived experience" of the participants. I wanted to stay as grounded to the data as possible and as aligned with my interpretive phenomenological approach. Consulting with my doctoral committee director of work was helpful at this stage. To resolve this dilemma, I attempted to keep as many in-vivo codes as possible even throughout second cycle coding. As I completed second-round coding, I remained open to include additional in-vivo codes if I found it was appropriate to capture the authentic lived experience of the participant interview. Therefore, in addition to the 24 main second round codes identified in Table 2, a few additional in-vivo codes were added for certain transcripts. I was thoughtful in which codes were added but only a select few were added to ensure the lived experience of the participant was captured adequately in the analysis, in alignment with phenomenological research.

Table 2*: Second Round Codes

New Code	First round codes housed under new code

Experience and response to feeling othered and or discriminated against	Included 11 codes: we're all American but we're not always perceived that way by others, microaggressions, feeling othered, going from majority to minority, I'm a minority in the community, I'm feeling out of place, avoid conflict with microaggressions, felt they were judging, code switch, gender discrimination, and I'm not pandering to Whiteness
Family and own adjustment to leaving home	Included five codes: guilt at leaving family behind, unable to help parents in same way as before, parents don't really get what you were talking about, restraints in own house, and feels like I'm in a prison almost.
Mental health	Included 16 codes: suicidal, mental health, disordered eating, depression, counseling, anxious, ADHD, exhausted, family experiences with therapy, family supportive of seeing therapist, lonely, barrier to asking for therapist help, therapist support, self-hatred, no motivation, and toxic thinking
Trauma	Included three codes: family friend suicide, friend suicide, and trauma.
Strengths	Included six codes: confidence, self-assuredness, pride in first-generation, resilience, memorable experience, and asking for help
Education resources for support (present or absent)	Included six codes: institutional resources for support, it's just the institution that just doesn't want to make room for us, breaking barriers, mismatch in need vs institutional support, recommendations for more support, and ESL
Sense of belonging versus nonbelonging	Included eight codes: feel like an outsider everywhere that I went, belonging, feeling like they're not quite like one place like identifying with one place or another, disconnected, comparing myself to other people, length of time to make friends, easier to build friendship within a group that is similar to you, and what it means to be part of a community
Coping	Included eight codes: that included: coping, alone time to cope, talk to friends

	and family for stress management, boundaries, humor, school traditions, building community helped to cope, and more to life than just classes
Cultural adjustment and overall adjustment	Included 11 codes: two different worlds, cultural adjustment, acculturation, culture shock, figuring out my social role here, half on the outside when back home, adapting, adjustment process, exploring once more comfortable, excited to come here at first, and safety in environment
Stressors and challenges	Included 22 codes: stressful experience, spread too thin, mother health issues, Spanish mother's comfort, health issues, food, covid, pandemic, financial stress, moving away from home during COVID due to finances, low income, work study, challenges, parent jobs, apart from family, limited ability to visit family, miss family, moving away, homesick, predominately white institutions, pressure to succeed, and castle schools
Feedback for interview	Included two codes: feedback for interview and advice to self
Differences between high school and college	Included three codes: high school vs college differences, high school resources, and high school differences more hidden
Impact of stress	Included two codes: leave of absence and transferring.
Emotion of participant in interview	Included two codes: participant emotion and emotion
Participant multiple intersecting identities	Included 14 codes: multiple identities, identity development, social class, student immigrated to the US, religion, participant race/ethnic identity, participant demographics, I'm off the spectrum in terms of being gay, fear due to being undocumented, raised by single parent, immigrant parents, parents live in a different county, language barrier, language interpreter.
Relationship with family/friends changed or not changed	Included two codes: my relationship with family and friends changed, friendships didn't change from high school to college

First generation definition	Included six codes: first generation definition, parents unable to finish college, others don't get it, experience of being first-gen, missed opportunities, family disagree with student leaving for college
False self vs true self - censoring self	Included eight codes: false self vs true self censoring self, being a role model pressure to hide stress, hard to ask for help, felt like inconvenience them to ask for help, you don't talk about it (being first gen), didn't talk about family situation, censoring myself, shame
Independent and self-sufficient	Included 4 codes: need to figure everything out by myself, advocacy, responsibility, and ownership
Parentified	Included two codes: parentified and caregiver
Met and unmet expectations of college	Expectations of college
Academic and career activities and planning	Included 4 codes: academic planning, extracurricular responsibilities career-oriented activities, and networking
Participant reactions to researcher	Participant curious about writer's research and future interests
Non-first gen students have more support	Included 9 codes: non-first gen students have more support from family, less support, frustration with others privilege, you have to work hard but sometimes life just keeps you waiting, and seeing how like maybe easily some other peers have it here, I have to work a little bit harder than my peers in order to be at the same level, I didn't realize I was missing everything, I didn't get it through hard work, and serendipitous support

After completing second cycle coding, I reviewed all the transcripts multiple times and reflected on the most frequent or salient codes. Although time consuming, I often would reflect on the thematic map I created along with examination of the themes

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emerging from second cycle coding to understand any relationships emerging. I recognized that the theme of multiple intersecting identities not only came up repeatedly more than any other theme, but the experience of navigating identity seemed critically connected to many of the other themes emerging from the data. This led me to recognize that these participants were navigating a renegotiation of their identity and subsequently helped me to further examine the data to support this first finding. The theme of psychological distress and its relationship with other trauma related themes helped to recognize sense of loss that supported this second finding.

Reflexivity Statement

My positionality as first-generation Mexican American, female, a former first-generation low-income college student, and current university counseling center clinician are identities important to name to examine how these identities could influence the research (Berger, 2015) as a few of these identities are shared with the target population of this study. My experiences working in a university counseling center for ten years informed my curiosity in this research topic due to hearing first-generation college students share experiences of psychosocial distress as they navigated being the first in their families to attend college. I tried my best to reflect on my positionality and clinical experiences that helped inform my research questions to ensure "bracketing" to the extent possible, so that they did not influence the interview in a biased manner (e.g. lead the interview in a particular direction due to biased beliefs of where the interview should go). However, I acknowledge that even with bracketing, my experiences and background still play a role in how I completed the research and interpreted the findings. It is also important to note that my positionality is a strength as there is insight that I may hold due

to these shared identities with participants. I noted in my memoing that many participants in the study expressed at different points in their recruitment and participation, that they were grateful that someone who shared their identity as a first-generation college student, was leading the study and that it made them more comfortable to share their experiences.

I also noted in my memoing that this positionality, with shared identities with participants, created a dilemma that I experienced throughout the data collection process. This dilemma was related to how to respond to participants' curiosity about me and how to navigate keeping my researcher hat on and not that of a clinician. Most participants became tearful while describing the challenges they experienced while in school. As a licensed clinical social worker whose worked in mental health settings, including university counseling centers, I could not help but respond as I would with any client expressing emotion - with compassion, empathy, and validation. I also felt surprised when several participants expressed curiosity about me at the end of their interviews. For example, several students asked if they could stay connected to me, asked if they would see me around campus, and several asked me the questions that I had just asked them during the interview. These students expressed curiosity about my own experiences in college as a first-generation college student as they wondered if it was like the stories that they had shared with me. As a clinician who is accustomed to very firm boundaries around self-disclosure, I struggled with a dilemma of how to respond while holding multiple hats as a clinician, as a current graduate student, and as a researcher. Although I struggled internally, I did not disclose this struggle. Instead, I found myself responding to their questions honestly, I encouraged them to reach out to me with any questions

following the interview if desired, but I also did not schedule any follow-up meetings with any of the participants. My intention was to wait until my research study was fully complete to schedule any follow-up meetings if students still expressed interest in doing so at that point in time.

An additional challenge that I noticed experiencing most in the data analysis and writing stage of this study, included a strong sense of responsibility and ethical duty to capture as accurately as possible, the authentic lived experience of these students. Although I felt it was a clear expectation and desire, I experienced my own worry that I would stray too far from the data. This at times resulted in feeling "stuck" in the writing process. I often stayed too close to the data, which slowed down my writing process. Even in the coding phase of the analysis, I utilized in-vivo codes frequently in an intentional attempt to hold on to the authentic lived experience of students to avoid watering down of stories through filtering codes into too general of categories.

Additionally, in reflection of this study, I found myself holding more emotion in bearing witness to the stories of these participants than I expected. As a mental health therapist in the field, I've witnessed a multitude of trauma narratives which have required development of my own coping skills to ensure I can compassionately and practically support these clients while also still support myself to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout. Thus, it caused surprise to experience the stories of these students in this study staying with me more than others have in many years. Understandably, I have a connection to these stories. However, upon reflection I have now realized the uniqueness of these interviews for first-generation college students to share their stories with me as "a researcher," but to do so with a licensed mental health clinician. My interactions with

these students, authentically compassionate and of understanding due to my positionality as a former-first-generation college student and current mental health clinician, may be unique compared to other trusted adults on campus. I may have represented some belongingness on campus due to my roles while also differences they could relate to as someone with time and interest in them.

Strategies for Rigor & Trustworthiness

Ethical Considerations

A review and approval from the Bryn Mawr College Institutional Review Board was acquired before proceeding with the study. An informed written consent was acquired from each participant and all documents were de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. The audio data was initially recorded and stored on my password protected laptop, which has up to date virus and malware software installed. The data was then transferred to my password protected OneDrive. Once I moved the data to OneDrive, the data on my laptop was destroyed. This study fit the criteria for exempt research under 46.104 section (1) as human participants are involved in interviews that are de-identified, there was no risk of harm to participants, and there was no deception. The participants included college students in the United States who identify as first-generation – a term defined as students whose parents did not complete a college education. All human subjects were voluntary participants who indicated interest to participate in the study and provided informed consent to participate.

Chapter 4: Renegotiating Identities: "I've had to Learn to be in These Spaces"

This first finding chapter will focus on how participants' multiple intersecting identities, along with the identity as a first-generation college student, caused a renegotiation of identities, and impacted these students' experiences of connection and disconnection on campus. In this qualitative phenomenological study, I found that how participant identities showed up and how they impacted their lived experience, looked differently among students, and this resulted in a renegotiating of their intersectional identities in college. These identities ranged in sexual orientation, gender identity, religious identity, race, ethnicity, international status, undocumented or DACA status, socio-economic status, age, language, and culture. The experiences that led to this renegotiation of intersecting identities, impacted sense of belonging, or feelings of connection and disconnection, and had implications on their psychological wellbeing.

Lubrano (2004) describes first-generation college students as being "in limbo" between two different worlds, with blue collar roots suddenly being catapulted into white collar surroundings. He describes a tension where these students are "torn between the world they were raised in and they life they aspire… not quite accepted in either." Lubrano describes the unspoken social rules, cultural capital, and implicit microaggressions experienced by students navigating this environment for the first time. In my study, participants echoed this tension as they renegotiated their identities in college, however, they often did not have the language to describe the experience. In his book, Lubrano focuses on social class as the primary cause of feeling "in limbo." However, my study adds a new dimension to this idea because it includes other identities such as race and/or ethnicity, as a factor of this feeling of being "in limbo." Additionally,

my study doesn't just look at one identity in isolation and its impact on lived experience among college students. My study examines and finds that the simultaneous holding of multiple intersecting identities, has an impact on the lived experience in college and leads to a renegotiation of their identities and subsequent feelings of being in between different worlds due to class, race, ethnicity, culture, and developmental stage between emerging adulthood and adulthood.

Renegotiating Intersectional Identities in College

Many study participants discussed how prior to college, they held awareness of some or all their identities, but that some identities were more salient than others in their home community and this saliency changed in college. They navigated a surprising shift when some of their identities became more salient upon entering college and overshadowed previously more meaningful identities. This led to a renegotiating of their identities. Most students in this study, began to identify as first-generation college students, and with lower working-class backgrounds, or with more of their cultural/ethnic background for the first time in college. Their new identities in turn influenced feelings of connection or disconnection, including feelings of loneliness. A realization of stark differences in social class between themselves and their non-first-generation college peers stood out as a major theme for many students. More specifically, these students described reconciling entering a privileged community, a private prestigious university institution, that promised career and financial stability, all while they remained stuck in their current low-income status. This led to feeling very limited in their ability to experience a "typical" college experience. In addition to stress related to work study and financial responsibilities to take care of themselves and their families far at home, these

experiences led to feelings of difference between themselves and their peers, especially

related to social class, that took some time to name and understand.

Socioeconomic Status Differences & Impact on Connection/Disconnection

Many participants in this study identified financial stress as one of the main

challenges in navigating higher education as a first-generation college student. One

participant, Becca, shared that although she initially believed that she was not connecting

with peers because of her identity as an international student, she later realized it was

more due to her identities as a first-generation and low-income student. Becca shared that

as an international student from an English-speaking country, she felt misunderstood and

like others didn't get "why I wasn't assimilating as quickly." She shared signing up for

international student organizations but had a "hard time connecting with people" and

making friends. Becca shared holding the responsibility on her own to pay for college

and any other living expenses, a responsibility also shared by other first-generation

college students in this study, that impacted feelings of connection or disconnection with

others. Although financial aid covered tuition costs and dining hall meals, she worked

part-time while in school to cover travel expenses, living expenses, and the parent

contribution fee in her tuition bill that was not covered by her financial aid. Additionally,

she took out a loan while not fully understanding what this meant, and she worked many

hours in work study that reduced her free time for completing homework and building

social relationships. She stated, "I was working all the time," and "I was obsessed with

hoarding my money," which she realized impacted her experience in college and

contributed to feelings of difference and disconnection between herself and her peers.

When asked to elaborate further on how she noticed this difference, she explained that

she noticed the difference over time in how frequently each week her peers would order food delivery or eat at a fancy restaurant. For Becca and her family, eating at a restaurant was reserved for special occasions such as a birthday or graduation celebration. However, in college, she saw that it was normalized as a weekly social activity for her peers, who did not work while in school and who seemingly did not hesitate to use their parent's credit card. For Becca, seeing peers order food daily using their parent's credit card felt frustrating. She stated that even when she did order food, "I order the dominoes special of two medium pizzas because then I have food for the week." She described how it felt "ludicrous" to run into people from very privileged backgrounds or who "were so rich." She shared that these differences between herself and others made it difficult to make friends or feel sense of belonging with others.

Students shared that social class differences showed up in subtle ways between themselves and their peers in ways that other students not in their social class position may not notice or understand. For example, Becca described learning to create a budget to try to cover her expenses with her on-campus job. This budgeting included skipping purchasing of coffee when she met friends to study at coffee shops, ensuring she packed snacks from the dining hall so she could eat if hungry between meals, saving food from the dining hall in her dorm room to ensure she had options for when the dining halls closed over the weekend or over holiday breaks, and included not having the ability to travel home during most school breaks. Additionally, she noticed that while she had access to a winter coat due to donations on campus, her peers did not struggle to afford expensive winter coats or winter boots. Similarly, she noticed her peers' dorm rooms were full of resources, decorations, electronics (e.g. television, fridge), and quality

comforters with extra mattress pads, that their families moved in on their first day on campus. In comparison, many first-generation students shared traveling to campus alone due to financial limitations or documentation status of family members that limited travel. Thus, they brought only what they could pack in several suitcases. She shared that although initial feelings of difference between herself and other students of color felt like it was due to other identities they held, such as her own identity as an international student, months to a year later it became clear that it was more due to differences in family socio-economic background as illustrated in the following quote.

> I just assumed that any differences between me and the other people were because I was from a different country. But now, like thinking back more on that I realize it's a lot to do with like my class, and it's a lot to do with my status as first generation. (Becca)

Becca shared that at first it was difficult to understand that social class differences were a large factor contributing to feelings of difference, particularly because her classmates often did not talk about social class or the identity of being a first-generation college student. For Becca, the identity of first-generation college student was not salient for her prior to college, but in college she was confronted with the realization of how it played a large role in her experiences. Becca stated, "I noticed that people who aren't first-generation college students make the assumption that others also aren't first-generation, so it doesn't come up as much." She shared that it seemed like these peers did not consider that their way of living and their financial status was not the same as for those around them. For Becca, this made it difficult to relate or feel understood by peers who seemed unaware of such a critical component of her identity.

For many participants, the shared social class identity as low-income, contributed the most to feeling connected, understood, and sense of belonging with peers, even when these peers did not identify as first-generation college students; however, it also contributed to feelings of disconnection and difference most notably when confronted with such large gap differences in wealth among their college peers. Additionally, as the quote below from another participant, Lucy, illustrates, students shared at times keeping their identity as first-generation to themselves due to shame because of how others reacted to hearing that they held this identity. Please note that, in the quote below, this student used the acronym "FGLI" in addition to the saying the whole phrase, to refer to "first-generation college students."

> …there was some warning [from other first-generation college students], of like when people hear that you're a low-income first-gen student, and people who don't relate to the experience will tell you, "Oh I'm so sorry for you." Like you know like it must be a bad thing to be a first-gen low-income student. Or the idea that there is a lack of resources and being first-gen low income is considered or must be bad and sad. And I think, for me, as FGLI, there is this kind of othering feeling I feel compared to the non-FGLI students…. I'm like wow, like these people are coming from backgrounds where they have access to all those resources and all that money. And it makes me feel like I'm here at this great university like, like billions of dollars' worth, and I still feel like, like I'm a first-gen low-income student, and the low-income feeling is still there. Like the low-income part is still like present. Like of course I'm in college, right, but I'm still poor, and so a little bit of my economic situation has not changed. (Lucy)

In this quote, Lucy captures the sense of pity directed towards her by classmates whose ignorance and entitlement limited their frame of reference. Up until the above moment, Lucy never felt judged or made to feel less than for her first-generation college student identity, particularly because in the community where she was raised, she was one of many students whose parents never went to college. However, feeling judged by these peers who assumed what it meant to hold this identity, not only made Lucy feel like she didn't fit in with her peers, but it also made her keep this identity to herself moving forward. For other students, it also made them question if they were less than for being different from their peers.

Prior to college, students with low-income backgrounds may have only encountered wealthier peers through service work. Lucy described how her only earlier experience with individuals with wealth occurred when she helped her parents mow the lawns of families who lived in the wealthiest communities and largest homes in her hometown. She discussed how there was distance from and therefore minimal conscious impact in observing this wealth from the outside. However, in college, the differences in social class were felt on a more individual and personal level. She shared slowly learning the benefits that a privileged background could have on the success of a non-first-generation peer on campus who was otherwise taking the same courses as she. For example, she learned how networking connections by family helped in acquisition of competitive internships or that attendance of elite private high schools helped make college "easy compared to high school" as she often heard her peers say. Additionally, she learned how other students had clear expectations and understanding of how to seek support from departments on campus and increased the ability for family to make

frequent visits to campus. For many students, this was a confrontation and realization for the first time of missed opportunities or sense of loss compared to their peers.

Throughout these qualitative interviews, some students described sadness in acknowledging the feelings of difference. In my field notes during this research, I noted many participants were tearful as they described this experience. They tearfully shared both feeling grateful for the opportunity to navigate college, an opportunity their parents did not have, while also sadness and feelings of guilt in struggling with anything – academic, socially, or psychologically. For many of these students, access to college came with messaging in the home that it was an opportunity to move towards financial stability for themselves and their families. However, to be in a transitional space where future post-graduate financial success was still years away and dependent on your performance the four years in college, all while remaining in the same social class surrounded by peers with much more privileged backgrounds, was confusing and frustrating. It contributed to a feeling of being stuck or trapped. These students had navigated parentification or independence in the past but in college, it felt that others "made it look easy" and were "less stressed" which illustrated a more typical college experience than what they were experiencing themselves.

Participants in the study shared how their social class identity also came with responsibilities they held to help their family. On top of their responsibilities as a college student, they also felt a responsibility to help with family finances or at minimum not use any family finances even while living thousands of miles away. For example, one student, Deborah, shared working 15 hours per week in a work study job as a freshman, an amount of work hours, which felt like "pushing it" given her academic challenges. She

shared that although her family "offered to help" with money by offering $100 on an occasional basis, she could not accept it. She described "hearing" in her parent's voices that they "needed" that money. She stated this would be, "equivalent to a penny to a rich non-first-generation person that goes to this school." She described feelings of guilt that were associated with accepting any money from her parents when she knew the reality of their financial situation and struggles. This reality that she was confronted with at a young age came with a sense of responsibility to care for herself and be independent as much as possible and as quickly as possible. This theme of parentification or self-sufficiency of most students in this study will be further discussed below.

Racial/Ethnic Differences & Impact on Connection/Disconnection

For many student participants, their multiple intersecting identities all showed up in different ways, and they encountered experiences of othering and nonbelonging due to incorrect or inaccurate assumptions about their racial/ethnic identities. As the first member in their family to have access to college, particularly if those institutions were primarily white institutions, participants vocalized a theme of feeling "out of place" with some stating that entering college felt, "like a whole new world." Many participants in this study shared having the lived experience of residing in communities with many community members who shared their identities or that they attended schools that had a diverse student body – they were a "majority" in their home communities. This all helped create a supportive community and strong sense of belonging at home with family, in high school with peers, or in their immediate neighborhood. However, for most students, this strong sense of belonging did not continue into college. For some students in the study, the identity of first-generation college student was one they felt proud of while for

other participants, this identity was one they first learned they held upon beginning at an institution of higher education. This realization resulted from noticing differences between themselves and others and having to adjust in all areas of their life (e.g. academic, weather, culture, and social preparation, access to familial support, difference in socio-economic status, and existing networking relationships).

Some students felt they did not fit easily into any community on campus. Gloria shared being raised in a community where her identity as Latina was the majority in her diverse community and no one "bothered with always having to clarify" as compared to her college community where assumptions were being made about her ethnicity and race. This led her to feel she needed to clarify her identity and justify why she may be Latina yet only speak and not write Spanish as well as her peers from Spain. She shared feeling like others made generalizations about her based on her skin color. However, similarly, when she attended affinity student groups on campus, she also felt like she "can't relate enough." Gloria shared how this experience left her feeling like she does not belong in any/either community.

> …I either feel like not Hispanic enough. Or I don't feel like white enough…It's like sometimes I don't have enough experiences to share with one group, and I don't have enough experiences to share with another group. Um, and I've never felt that line, more than I have here. (Gloria)

In her interview, Gloria shared not feeling like she could relate to Hispanic peers in her affinity student group; however, she also shared experiencing sudden points of disconnection from some of her closest friends on campus when they made references to skiing or playing tennis at their local country club, references she didn't understand as

she'd never skied - a stark reminder of their class differences. This student cried as she shared this example, and both expressed an apology for crying and surprise that her own story was making her feel this emotional. Although she did not say it, as a licensed clinical social worker whose worked in university counseling, my positionality led me to empathize and validate her feelings. I also reflected to this student how I wondered if it was possible that she may still be processing the sadness or pain of these past moments. I offered sometimes when we share them out loud for the first time, we can re-experience the emotions we experienced at the time. This student agreed with my reflection and shared that she was only realizing now that this was the case. This participant example also aligns with Lubrano's reference of being "in limbo" or stuck between two worlds and like they do not belong in either world that I described earlier in this chapter (Lubrano, 2004).

Another common theme threaded through my interviews were experiences of othering and racial microaggressions due to the multiple identities of these students. A microaggression is defined as "verbal, behavioral, or environment indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of other races" (Ross-Sheriff, 2012). This definition was recently expanded to include "insults based on not only the target's race but also gender, ethnicity, ability status, sexual orientation, or other identities that the perpetrators ascribe to the target persons" (Ross-Sheriff, 2012). One student, Ashley, stated, "We're all living in America, we're all American, but like we're not always perceived that way by others." These experiences of othering can result in distress (Allen et al, 2016). For many participants, experiencing microaggressions, even recognizing them when they occurred,

were part of the learning process in college, as many had not experienced this in the past. Finding community that they could lean on for support played an integral role in whether they felt supported or alone. However, as described so far in this chapter, the differences these students experienced amongst their peers, reduced social connections and sense of belonging. For example, in one interview, Irene, shared experiencing a microaggression when she registered for work study. The administrative staff member in the office saw her name and stated, "a Latina!" then proceeded to make assumptions of what a great cook she would be in the dining hall, this student's work study assignment. She shared stepping away feeling confused and upset but didn't understand why she was feeling so upset over this comment. Irene hadn't experienced a microaggression before and was confused as she processed and worked to understand her emotional response. In the interview, I reflected that microaggressions can at times take time to process because they can be subtle and often later, once we realize why it was upsetting or that it was a microaggression, it is often too late to respond because the moment passed, or we are no longer with that individual who made the microaggression. This student then said, "yes, that's exactly what I felt. And I was so upset with myself that I didn't say anything in the moment." Having time and support to help process and place language to such an experience in college may make a difference for students feeling an increase in sense of belonging. Although Irene did not have such an opportunity for support at the time of his microaggression, other students in the study described how helpful and validating it was to speak to a mentor or friend after such an experience, particularly when they could help process it.

Although some shared identities and experiences brought connection and reduction of isolation, it also led to simultaneous and sudden points of disconnection and difference even among students that shared their identity of being a first-generation college student. For some students, including Emily, she found the strongest sense of belonging with peers who shared her racial identity over any other shared identities.

> …Sometimes even if you are both first-generation college students, then your background can still be quite different…Like I don't feel like first-generation college student, is a big part of my identity. It is certainly part of my identity, but I don't, I'm like not strongly connected with those who share the same identity with me. I feel like I'm more connected to those who are Asian, or their parents are Asian. So, we have more like common ground in the background or in the family that we were raised in. Or we have more similar concerns, so we share more things. (Emily)

Emily discussed in her interview, the loneliness she experienced in her first year in college and the difficulty in finding friends that she felt genuinely connected to. For her, loneliness was an internal experience kept hidden from others. On the outside, an observer may see her with a group of peers and not "alone," but she felt lonely even when amongst this group. This loneliness was due to the internal feelings of disconnection and holding this as a secret from everyone. She shared spending time with a group of classmates in her first year, some who identified as first-generation college students and others who did not share any identities with her but whom she met from living in her dormitory. Due to fear of otherwise being alone and not having any friends, she shared feeling like she was disingenuous with these friends due to pretending to be interested in

the topics they would discuss. Emily shared that as she transitioned into her second year in school and she had other opportunities to meet new friends, she noticed feeling more connected to peers who shared her identity as Asian. It was only once she felt she'd created a stable support system of peers she felt connected to through her Asian identity, that she then felt comfortable distancing herself from other peers she had "pretended" to feel connected to. Emily shared realizing later the impact it had to pretend to be someone she wasn't.

> Cause first, like when you are first in community, that you are minority, you feel like you want to conform, conform to the social norm, like pretend to be like somebody else, to fit into the group…But it definitely helps to just be who you are. And then you will feel comfortable. Like if you are always pretending to be someone else, then you will never feel comfortable with your community…It's just adding more stress to yourself and it's kind of self-hatred to think like that you wish you are, you wish you were somebody else, because you wish things were different for you… (Emily)

Emily described realizing the psychological toll this took on her. For Emily, she shared pressure to conform to her peers' behaviors and values at the time, a response that may speak to the tension Lubrano (2004) describes of being in limbo between two worlds. This may speak to Emily at first accepting her peers' behavior and values as normative while later rejecting it to follower her own path where she is true to herself and doesn't conform. She shared experiencing losing a sense of her true self when she was pretending. She shared learning through that year how her family interpersonal dynamic influenced her pattern of self-doubt and self-critique. Throughout that first year, she was

critical of herself for not being more like her peers and later she built confidence to reject these values as normal.

Renegotiating Identities in Primarily White Institutions (PWIs)

Navigating whiteness was an inevitable process of acculturation for first-generation college students, and one that could be powerful in influencing positive or negative experiences in college. Lizzette, a senior undergraduate student who was graduating that semester, described navigating a similar experience in private high school so that she felt more prepared to navigate college herself and support other first-generation college students to feel empowered.

I think the navigating whiteness here and navigating white institutions is something that a lot of first-gen students have to like to contend with for the first time and navigating being so far away from home. I think, for me… I've been in a place like that before. And not to say that like I'm crediting the institution that I was at before, because no, like the place sucked, it was terrible. But it is the, initially like learning how to hurdle that, is integral to finding, to being true to yourself, too… So the affinity groups are one way that people can like stay connected to their cultural identity… And just building relationships with the people who do align themselves with those clubs… I have been able to like curate the type of spaces that I wanna be especially as an upperclassman… That's been really nice, but I think it definitely takes a lot of like student initiative to like make those inviting spaces, because I think as an institution [university] does not always make an effort, for that. (Lizzette)

Lizzette's previous experience of already navigating white institutions in high school, helped her be even more aware of what she would encounter at her college, also a primarily white institution. With this awareness, she experienced more initial distress and frustration in her matriculation to college as compared to the excitement of many other students entering this space without similar knowledge. However, this experience also helped her adapt more quickly to the environment compared to other students without this prior experience, due to knowledge of what to expect and ability to use process and use language to understand the acculturation experience. She shared that this then empowered her to lead initiatives to create spaces that support first-generation college students. This student shared how attending a primarily white institution, and navigating othering or micro/macro aggressions, took a toll and impacted her mental health and sense of self. Being prepared helped buffer the psychological and intrapsychic impact which helped her stay true to herself. However, as illustrated in this chapter thus far, not every participant found connection in the first-generation college student community, others found community with peers who shared other identities. This following quote demonstrates how building community early in college for support while navigating the adjustment challenges of a primarily white institution, helped students stay true to themselves and prevented more significant psychological distress that could result from loneliness. The experience of losing oneself can include pretending to conform to peers, rejecting own values as not normal, or isolating themselves due to feelings of difference or disconnection.

> Their first exposure to a predominately white institution is very shocking, and in
> that way it becomes a negative experience being first-generation here, because it

can feel so isolating, 1) because you're so far away from home, and 2) because it's

your first time navigating this type of space…It's taught me a lot about like

navigating whiteness and white spaces, and how to be true to myself in them. And

I think that is something that is like invaluable, and a lot of us experiencing that

for the first time… there is a sense of loss to that too because I've had to like code

switch, I've had to learn to be in these spaces, and there's a sense of why do I

even have to do that to be a distinguished member of society with a bachelor's

degree. So, getting a bachelor's degree… I don't want to say bad words here…

but it's been bittersweet. And I think for first gen low-income students, there's a

bitter sweetness to it because you have to change yourself in some ways, and you

have to like adapt to these type of places to be successful. And like doing that

while staying true to yourself is something that a lot, of people navigate for the

first time, and I think like of course that's like a universal college experience, but

it's more than that, it's not just like, 'oh, like coming of age,' it's also like, 'oh, I

have to worry about finding work, I have to worry about making money while I'm

here to send home to my family. (Lizzette)

Lizzette discussed how she experienced loneliness and nonbelonging throughout her

college years due to differences in herself and others; however, that in empowering

herself to be true to herself and advocate for others struggling with similar issues as her,

led her to feel more confident and comfortable being herself. Additionally, this helped

her build a sense of belonging. She went on to explain that she found community among

first-generation college students and the difference this made, leaning on each other to

support one another. She stated, "at the very beginning of the year I experienced a very

harrowing like racist attack, right, and then that same week, or like around the same amount of time, I experienced microaggressions at work, and then those are things like I have never been able to navigate on my own before…" (Lizzette). Again, having peer support with whom to relate to when navigating experiences of difference, allowed Lizzette to be vulnerable and process this experience with someone else, which allowed opportunities for support.

Psychological Impact of Renegotiating Identities

All students in this study identified psychological distress in their adjustment to college due to a variety of factors described so far in this chapter: acculturation, experiences of othering or microaggressions, renegotiation of intersecting identities, differences in social class, and feelings of disconnection from peers. Students who found connection and sense of belonging experienced benefits of this protective factor. As Becca shared experiences of renegotiating her identities in her first year of college, particularly how her identity as a first-generation college student and low-income student became more salient, she also described the psychological impact of these stressors that first year. When asked how the stress affected her, she stated, "Yeah, I was really unhappy my first semester. I think, I actually had depression, so I didn't cope with it very well. I struggled my way through it." She shared not yet having any friends in college to lean on and also didn't feel comfortable sharing her distress with family, who made many sacrifices so she could attend college. Becca shared knowing that the university counseling center existed but stated, "how do you have time to make an appointment, when you barely have time for anything, and when you could be using this time for something else." Other students discussed how sense of loneliness was exacerbated with

how relationships with her family and friends changed and became more distant as they pursued college. For some students, not sharing honestly the struggles they experienced navigating college, led to disconnection. However, some students who shared experiences with mental health symptoms with their parents, only confirmed that they could not understand, relate, or support them. One student shared her parent's response at her disclosure of mental health symptoms as, "well, you chose to move away to college. Deal with it." Students who shared experiences of othering or discrimination and had no social support, often did not successfully surpass this challenge. Students shared having peers who dropped out or that they took time off school as a result. One participant, Julie, described feeling invisible on campus and like she didn't belong. This escalated to believing that no one would notice or care if she died by suicide. She did not have any friends, had recently disconnected from even her roommate, and felt like a burden to others. She requested a crisis appointment at the counseling center, but the experience caused increased feelings of being a burden due to overhearing comments about her made by a therapist at the counseling center while she waited in their waiting room. She shared not attending classes for weeks due to depressive symptoms and was unresponsive to emails from friends or faculty. However, she was alarmed when one day she heard intense knocks at her dormitory door by campus police who were conducting a wellness check. This student shared that she took a leave of absence for a year and nearly never returned. Although she acknowledged the importance of time away from campus to heal, due to financial insecurity, she could not get adequate mental health care while on leave even though she was interested in care and knew she needed it. She returned to campus a year later only because a family friend empowered her to feel she could do it. While she

stated that not much has changed regarding her isolation, Julie shared that she had grown to "enjoy and adapt" to the isolation on campus. Therefore, the adaptation came mostly from the student and not the institution offering its resources for support to this student. She now instead focuses on graduating as her motivator so she can move forward to the next chapters in her life. This student found support from family as a critical protective factor that contributed to her wellbeing and return to campus. For students who feel in limbo and disconnected from both campus and their family community, it may increase risk and possible negative outcomes.

The experience of parentification and sense of responsibility to take care of oneself financially impacted sense of belonging and psychological wellbeing for many students, including Deborah, in this study. The financial responsibility and sense of being a burden played a large role in students feeling disconnected in college. This was compounded by sense of loss due to not experiencing the "college experience" that they seemingly witnessed their peers experiencing. Further supporting the "in limbo" argument by Lubrano (2004), Deborah stated, "it's like being in different places at once" in terms of being in the same economic space and "still feel very poor" regardless of attending a prestigious university living "in the second most expensive suburb in Pennsylvania." She then discussed feeling misunderstood by supervisors or faculty who dismissively say, "just work fewer hours" or by peers who "go to parties, and they can do whatever they want and be social" while she "has to work that day." Although parentification showed up in financially supporting oneself or their family, it also showed up in having been the emotional caregiver for their parents.

Many students shared experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, frustration, and stress related to finances, academics, exhaustion, and loneliness. One common theme found in the study included that many students were so accustomed to being independent and self-sufficient so there was a reduced likelihood for them to ask for help even when they needed it. For some of these students, they didn't know how to ask for help, they assumed it wasn't an option to request flexibility from professors, and there was shame at being a burden or exposing their feelings of imposter syndrome. Students who were parentified shared that a big change in relationships with family manifested in having more private time for self to engage in activities that prioritized own needs over their family's needs. Although difficult at times, participants shared finding it empowering to have physical distance from family where a natural boundary was created with family. This then limited the participants continued engagement in caretaking for the family. Several participants shared practicing for the first time prioritizing themselves and own self-care. Although embedded with guilt, students took steps in asking parents to find alternative help with translating or with duties for the family. Shelby illustrates this in the example below.

> …Yeah, in terms of like some of the things that they would ask me to do. It's like helping my little sisters with their homework or paying the bills and helping them during meetings where they needed someone to translate for them or be present during a phone call. And things like that. Unfortunately, it sucks a lot, for a lack of better words, because I am someone who is very compassionate and very community driven so not being there to help my parents whenever there's an emergency, or something comes up, is unfortunate. It's made me realize that I

might not always be able to help them but I'm here for them in other ways. It's been a little bit of a painful experience… I've had this conversation with multiple people who are in within my circle and have similar circumstances… my family always taught me to do what's best for the community, for your family, for the people around you that care about you, and not necessarily to be selfish, and do what's best for yourself. And to improve yourself. And having to change this mentality is still something I'm trying to outgrow. (Shelby)

For Shelby, being able to prioritize her own needs led to feeling relief in stress, less depressive symptoms, and more happiness. She shared how she was never able to participate in dance classes in high school because they were in the evenings after school, and she was responsible for babysitting her much younger brother while her parents both left to work their evening jobs. Shelby found stress relief, empowerment, and joy when she began to take time each month in college, on weekends, to attend dance classes. She shared the experience of having to learn to prioritize herself and let it be ok that she spent money on "getting my nails done" if that brought her joy. Shelby illustrates here how she may have initially accepted the expectation that families should not rely on their children for help and that she experienced this as a stressor or burden that began to impact her psychological wellbeing. This internal conflict, however, included at times envying or favoring the expectations of her peers who grew up with more privilege. This experience of feeling alienated by both the world of her family and the presumptions of the elite college experience, eventually led Shelby to try to figure out her own path, one more in the middle, and one different from the constraints she was feeling from both worlds.

In summary, this first finding chapter focused on how many first-generation college students were confronted with renegotiating their intersecting identities, how this impacted sense of belonging or experience of connection/disconnection, and the psychological impact this took on them while in college.

Chapter 5: Melancholia & Sense of Loss: Missed Opportunities

The concepts of racial melancholia and racial dissociation will be used as a lens for understanding the theme of loss and sadness described by first-generation college students in this dissertation chapter. A theme of sadness and loss described by first-generation college students in this study, came from reconciling that being the first in multiple domains, while they saw it as an accomplishment, also came with a realization of missed opportunities, loss of connections, and psychological distress. The theme of loss is usefully conceptualized in Eng and Han's (2018) recent study of first- and second-generation Asian Americans, particularly Asian American young adults. They also apply these concepts to "parachute children" who are described as international students who move to the United States on their own at a young age.

I expand upon these concepts introduced by Eng and Han (2018) to be inclusive of first-generation college students who hold diverse and multiple intersecting identities related to social class, race, ethnic, and first-generation identities. Eng and Han (2018) describe the concept of *racial melancholia* as a psychological and emotional depressive response to racial traumas by Asian American young adults. These emotional and psychological responses include mourning and melancholia experienced by these young adults that are nuanced and difficult to find language for. For those who experience melancholia, at times the authors described the melancholia in these students as including not just a depressive state, but also physical ambivalence about one's own life. This could take the form of suicidal thoughts or disownment of parts of themselves. There was also an impact on the student's identity, sense of belonging, and sense of self. These authors introduce the concept of *racial dissociation* as a form of coping mechanism and response

by these Asian American young adults because of societal challenges related to assimilating and related to identity factors such as race and ethnicity. These authors describe this racial dissociation as dissonance by these young adults where there is an intrapsychic conflict between their internal values or beliefs and their external behavior. These authors describe this racial dissociation also as a defense mechanism where there is fragmentation intrapsychically creating internal distress that is not shown on the outside by these individuals.

Through the voice of student participants in this study, this chapter will elaborate on the previous chapter to discuss the theme of sadness and loss described by these students. Many students also had experiences of being very independent in their familial households and describe the impact of these stressors on their mental health – experiences that will be conceptualized as melancholia and racial disassociation. For example, Ashley shared, "What it means to be first gen is to be a trailblazer, we are breaking barriers, we already accomplished a feat in getting into college as first in family to do so." Living for many years with the perspective of, "you only really have yourself to depend on" led students to believe they had to figure things out on their own, or the sense that, "I can *or should* do this myself" (Irene).

Independence - A Strength and Barrier

Characteristics such as self-sufficiency and independence are seen by many students as a strength contributing to their success, but it can also be a factor that can hinder help seeking behavior in college – a critical factor to success in college. Being independent and self-reliant was a familiar feeling to many of these students. The skills that were required to support themselves while also supporting their parents, while also

successfully succeeding in school, contributed to these students' academic success prior to college. Surpassing these challenges, all while also navigating the college admissions process, as the first member of their family to do so, demonstrates students' skills that may be transferrable to college.

It is important to understand what it means to be independent in a family system, or to be parentified, as it will help contextualize how this experience could affect a first-generation college student's adjustment to college. As described in an earlier chapter, Hooper (2008) defines parentification as a family system where the child is a caretaker for parents in different ways. In line with Hooper's definition, for students in this study who described experiences that aligned with those of being parentified, the experience of figuring things out on their own and of holding more responsibility, was a familiar one from their life before college. Although these experiences of independence for some time demonstrate skills and strengths, the concept of parentification is often utilized in ways that pathologize or blame working class parents. Therefore, as discussed in a previous chapter, it is important to critically examine this term using Lareau's (2011) concepts of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth. This lens sheds context and a more compassionate lens to the "parentified" experiences of first-generation college students as children from working class families are raised in an environment that fosters more independence and self-reliance in their household and family dynamic. Many of these students were left with a responsibility to figure out how to navigate college and higher education on her own. Utilizing Lareau's (2011) framework, these parents may have held the perspective that educational institutions would prepare and guide their children for college. However, these students learned quickly this was not the case as

they navigated many firsts throughout high school and college as first-generation college students.

To elaborate on this idea further, for many students in this study, their family system resulted in students taking on increased responsibility because their cultural expectations emphasized a more interdependent interpersonal style as opposed to a more individualistic culture. To help in these responsibilities often meant holding more responsibility than what their peers experienced at the same age, meant maturing more quickly, and it also meant loss of opportunities including not experiencing a typical high school student life. One participant below describes how holding responsibility in her family began at an early age, how it became a part of her identity, and how it led to guilt and conflict with her family when she applied to colleges.

> He is my only sibling, and he is 5 years younger than me. So, the moment he was born, my parents worked landscaping, and I was too young to go with them so they were like, you're gonna take care of him, you're going to feed him, you're going to clothe him, you're going to tutor him, you're gonna do whatever you can… I was basically a second mother almost… I was 6 when I started taking care of my brother alone in the home. And then growing up, I was like this is all I know… I didn't really go out, my friends all knew I had to take care of my little brother. My little brother was like my best friend so I was like, well you know I don't know what I could imagine life to be like without my brother right there next to him kind of thing… (Lucy)

Lucy describes how her taking on a caretaking role was normalized in her household from a young age. She describes its strengths on the one hand of building strong

attachment and connection with her sibling, while on the other hand, describes how it contributed to loss of social opportunities because of this responsibility. She further expands on this quote to illustrate how this sense of responsibility also contributed to her identity development in adolescence and subsequently in college.

> So, when I began to think about how my identity going into middle school, going into high school was shaped around being a big sister, or being a help to my parents like our landscapers, and when I would go to work with them, when my brother and I were old enough to go. I was like the translator for my dad, and that was my personality to him, like being a translator, being a help at work. And, it made me feel really bad, like I felt almost guilt for even applying to college so far away… But I also built that kind of guilt and self-doubt, like how are you gonna survive this? And there was that doubt that I cast on myself those days… And there is that kind of guilt every single day… like just my brother, like are you being a supportive sister? How are my parents doing without me as a translator? They say… we really need you. And yea like some days like they say, we pray just you come back, like one day we like prayed that you transfer back to Chicago. (Lucy)

As described by Lucy, this responsibility of *helper* became her identity. It was how she saw herself and seemingly how she believed others saw her as well - she was the caretaker for her brother, the translator for her father, and worker at her parent's landscaping job. It speaks to the heaviness of Lucy's sense of responsibility to care for her family when you hear she worries daily while in college about not being there for her family. Although she was caretaking, this student's family was her primary support

system leading up to college, and she excelled academically even while juggling many responsibilities. Lucy entered college holding caretaker and helper as a core part of her identity, but experienced immense guilt and sense of failing in this responsibility, all while also losing access to her primary support system while living out-of-state. She stated, "and it does like bring a lot of guilt because I love being here, of course there's a caveat and a lot of cons but I don't think I would want to come back. But then there's a lot of guilt, because if I go back, I can be with my brother again." These losses, particularly of core components of her identity, can cause significant psychological impact.

The absence of family, guilt for not being able to do more for her family, and therefore sense of loss in this identity can be stressful and impactful. Many students described experiencing sadness that impacted academic focus due to such guilt. For others, however, if processed and reconciled, students found opportunities to create space for new experiences and to explore identity development in the normative ways young adults do during this period. For students holding a caretaker identity, they can feel psychological distress when they are no longer able to be in this role. It requires prioritizing taking care of themselves, a new, at times lonely, and unfamiliar feeling for many first-generation college students.

For many students, these experiences led to having to mature a lot quicker than their peers and led to missed opportunities of just being able to live the life of a typical high school student. Carolina's mother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) before Carolina was born, and she knew that having children might lead to a relapse of symptoms. Her mother indeed relapsed when she was five years old and Caroline became

the primary caretaker of the home, particularly when their father moved out and her sister left for college.

>Yeah, I would say like I think I matured a lot earlier then, or like had to mature a lot earlier than some people. in terms of like my mom being sick, but also just like I said, by the time once my dad left, it was really kind of like my mom's and my relationship became a sense of like caring for each other. Like to an extent, she was my mom, she was still caring for me, and, like, obviously like monetarily, was providing for me, and like doing whatever she could to care for me like as a parent. But to an extent, I was also caring for her, just me being able bodied and not sick. So, to an extent, I was having to mature in a different way than a lot of kids… I had more than just myself to worry about I guess. (Carolina)

The role of a helper was normalized as it was occurring for as far back as this student could remember. Carolina also felt a sense of obligation due to the many sacrifices her mother had made for the family. Carolina shared how she was the primary cook for the home, that she cleaned the entire home, and that she took care of her own travel to and from her magnet school by asking friends for transportation. She moved her mother's bedroom into the living room of their home after her mother's disease progressed limiting her ability to climb the stairs of the home. Carolina expressed worries about her mother now, but she shared that without child support, her mother wouldn't have enough finances to provide for them both. Thus, for this student, during the height of the COVID pandemic, she remained living on campus. Carolina shared preferring to go home and engage in college from home like many of her peers. However, due to financial aid support at the school with dining hall meals, housing support, and the financial stressors

her mother was experiencing, she understood that staying at the college, even if it was lonely, was a way she was being helpful and caretaking for her mother.

Although many of these students' examples of caretaking were of basic house caring needs such as cooking, cleaning, running errands, and taking care of own needs as well, Carolina also held the role of emotional caretaker for her mother. Prior to college, as the only person in the home with her mother, she described how her mother would lean on the student for emotional support and to process depressive symptoms and grief about her father's departure. Carolina shared that it was a difficult role to take on when she was still processing many of her own emotions about the situation. She described holding a wish at the time for her mother to give her emotional support. This role in providing emotional caretaking for her mother continued into college, but Carolina felt that the distance created a barrier that limited its frequency. As is evident in Carolina's story, she demonstrated self-sufficiency. She seemingly experienced fewer opportunities where she may have been on the receiving end of emotional, academic, or physical support from her mother. Along with sense of loss for missed opportunities of a more typical high school experience like their peers with less responsibility, an additional sense of loss around missed opportunities was also experienced in college for all study participants.

Loss - Missed Opportunities

Being independent and self-sufficient was necessary for these students prior to college; however, it became both a strength and a challenge in college that contributed to feelings of loss and loneliness. Many students who were independent or parentified in college, expected that entering college would look differently, maybe it would be less

stressful. These students had accomplished something no one in their family had before

that could move them towards upward career and class mobility. However, entering

college, became its own seemingly new world where the struggles continued but the

recipe for success was different – being autonomous was no longer helpful but instead

could work against you. This is illustrated by Irene below who described the challenge of

learning to ask for help.

> Well like, being first gen. it's sort of… like you only really have yourself to
>
> depend on, in a way. like you can't look for your parents to help you with certain
>
> tasks, because they don't know. And so, it's like difficult to navigate the space of
>
> college because of that. Like you don't really have a mentor unless you establish a
>
> connection with someone on campus. But I think like personally, for me, I didn't
>
> even know this was a thing until my sister-in-law told me that… Oh, go to office
>
> hours for like any reason, doesn't matter… get to know the professor and stuff…
>
> For me I always thought of it as like… well, I don't, I don't want to look for help,
>
> or I don't *need* help. I *should* be able to exist for myself so I'm not gonna go to
>
> office hours. Then I lose those opportunities that maybe were given to like other
>
> people… if I ever needed help, I felt like I had to only depend on myself. (Irene)

Irene describes how help-seeking was previously perceived as a negative thing in her life.

With a history of being self-reliant with no choice but to figure it out on her own, it was

then challenging to suddenly change this mindset. Irene shared not knowing if this

difficulty was due to her first-generation identity, or just how she felt. It was only through

time and after challenging academic experiences, where they realized that help-seeking

70

was not only normalized, but it was expected and encouraged in higher education to build networking relationships and to succeed.

All participants named feeling like they missed opportunities in college because they were unaware of them. They shared realizing that other students had increased access to these opportunities due to their more privileged backgrounds that allowed for a smoother transition in college and even graduate school. For example, Lucy shared,

> it's just the difference in how different students were raised, and the opportunities that they were able to get, because your parents like were more familiar with different opportunities because of their careers… it sometimes felt like those who were not first-gen might have a little more of a guide of what to expect, or things to try to do, to set them up for success, which we kind of had to figure out on your own." (Lucy)

These missed opportunities were also related to not know where to go when support was needed or wanted. For example, Becca shared feeling very alone when in distress and when she needed help. She stated, "I didn't know who to ask and what to ask." By the end of sophomore year, she realized all of this, particularly all the support that she had missed. One example included learning about career services at the university to help with editing resumes and internship opportunities, and learning about the many recruitment tools students were expected to understand, such as LinkedIn. Anne shared how it was difficult to ask for help from anyone, including faculty, when as first-generation she had a history of self-reliance. Below, Anne describes that it took time to figure out the support available at her institution, to understand help-seeking was integral to succeeding, and then to adjust and include it as part of her routine.

…I don't know how much this factors in being first-generation, but in my first-year, I was very reluctant to ask for help. Whether that was from professors or from TAs. Or like just like getting a tutor or there's also this center, which is also helpful, its more for like drop-in science related help. In my first year, I just thought that I had to do everything by myself. So, coming from high school to college, it was a big change in like what was expected of me because a lot in high school like I just didn't have to study… I just did my homework and studied through my homework. But in college, you just do a lot of studying and then you have like a test or something, and that's it. That was a big difference for me, and I didn't anticipate that… Well now that I know better, I was able to use resources a lot more. Like going to the writing center… I went there a lot more, I went to office hours, I went to tutoring sessions… it took me a year to really understand what resources I needed to use and how I needed to structure my work time and everything that factors into having good grades. (Anne)

This student, Anne, describes below how it took time to understand how to succeed in college and she also described the sense of loss she navigated throughout this experience at having to let go of her dream of becoming an engineer. She explained that although she understood school wasn't just about "grades," she needed to do well because she didn't have a "back-up plan." She stated, "it's a privilege to have a back-up." (Anne) Therefore, she instead dedicated her time to another major that provided her with more of an opportunity to succeed.

Through my experience with computer science, it like made me be passionate into helping other underrepresented groups go into the tech industry and specifically

go into being a software engineer… I wanted to be a software engineer. But

because of the lack of resources, guidance, mentorship, I wasn't able to go

through that route. Because, oh and especially this, professors, especially with

these intro level classes. They expect you to know a lot of the concepts, the

theories, a lot of like the information that they just expect us to know way

beforehand, when in reality an intro level class should be like barely starting off

in the first chapter. Where in reality it felt like they were starting off in the tenth

chapter or fifth chapter. (Anne)

For Anne, it was important that she succeed in college and graduate on-time because a

back-up plan was not an option. In her introduction class, there was already an

expectation of having more than just foundational knowledge. Without this foundational

content, the introduction class was too difficult for her. She failed this class and struggled

in other classes that semester for similar reasons. She realized that she needed to let go of

her dreams to major in this field and instead focus on lifting her GPA so she could be

removed from academic probation. For her, shifting career paths eventually allowed her a

role in helping other students enter the engineering field and felt healing of some of the

loss she experienced. If she could not enter the field herself, she would work to provide

guidance to other students like her so that they could succeed.

As described in this chapter, for many students, the experience of being first

generation included an overall sense of loss from missed opportunities both prior to

college and while in college; additionally, for many students, the feeling of sadness

existed but recognizing it as a loss only became consciously understood after some time

in college due to the ambiguity of the experience. The experience of being independent

or being parentified, or what Lareau (2011) may describe as having a parenting style of *accomplishment through natural growth* led to maturing more quickly and holding more responsibility than others prior to college. Additionally, it contributed to the experience of missed opportunities prior to and into college, and it also gave these students survivor skills that for many helped adapt to the many challenges of college. These skills also became a challenge when self-reliance held them back from asking for help or contributed to continued sense of caretaking, even due to financial stressors, that were described in the previous findings chapter. However, along with sense of loss due to missed opportunities, these students also grappled with loss related to their identity and loss in social support due to disconnection.

Psychological Distress: Loneliness & Melancholia

Psychological distress in the form of grief and loss, loneliness, or sadness may come as no surprise when contextualized with the experiences of these students grappling with a renegotiation of their identities, working to change their mindset around help-seeking, experiences of parentification, loss of connection in college, and realization of missed opportunities. These students are navigating these processes on top of the normative challenges experienced by this age group which provides support for increased institutional support of these students. Many participants used the language of "depression," "loneliness," and "suicidal" in describing their psychological experience in college. The majority did not receive any mental health treatment, even when they vocalized needing it or wanting it. Several participants discussed how their mental health symptoms nearly caused them to drop out of the university and that they felt it was fortunate that they had the opportunity to continue.

As described briefly in the first findings chapter, loneliness was a common experience named by nearly every participant in the study due to feelings of disconnection. Some loneliness resulted from their acculturative experience or normative college adjustment challenges. However, some loneliness resulted from these students' nuanced experiences of having to figure things out on their own due to parentification or because being the "first" in multiple domains meant that no one could help them prepare for what to expect or help solve issues that arose. Although a familiar feeling, it was painful to do so in a new environment, thousands of miles away from family, and where they were surrounded by hundreds of students who were seemingly not struggling. As described in a previous chapter on renegotiating identities, this loneliness experienced by these students wasn't just normative, but also associated with their disconnection from their home or familial community and current college community – a feeling that resulted in feeling like they didn't belong in either or any community. This loss included loss in sense of belonging due to amplified loneliness at home and at school along with a loss in identity and sense of self due to a renegotiation of identities. Lizzette stated, "Being first gen can feel lonely, especially being first gen and a person of color…parenting yourself was a lonely experience." Anne shared how it was "a new process navigating the feeling of being alone," even when she was not alone, and that it was "hard not to feel like an outsider" in college. For other students, just the distance from home became a large contributor to their sadness when they did not have the opportunities to visit family or for their parents to visit them compared to their peers. Emily stated, "I cannot see my family. I just live here. In a foreign country by myself. So, when you have all your work to do, and all this like stuff to do, you feel lonely sometimes."

For many students, it felt difficult connecting with support on campus around academics let alone for mental health reasons. Anne stated, "Because I had really bad depression my first and second year, I just couldn't get myself to like work out, you know, focus on my mental health." When students experience the compounded stressors outlined already in these findings chapters, the loneliness can be exacerbated and increase mental health risk. For example, as mentioned in a previous chapter, Julie, experienced sadness and disconnection in college, and these feelings led to thoughts about suicide. These thoughts escalated to believing that no one would notice or care if she died by suicide. After a wellness check that led to campus safety knocking loudly on her door, Julie made the decision to take a leave of absence. She feels fortunate to have returned from the leave of absence as she nearly did not, and she described not having mental health support even during her time away. She discusses how many of her peers dropped out of college due to psychological distress and inadequate support. Julie had described her dormitory room as the only place on campus where she felt a sense of safety. She described growing up in a violent neighborhood where gunshots were so common that it was normalized, where her home was robbed multiple times, and where she often experienced older men following her home when she walked to and from school by herself.

In moving to a new community by herself, it took time for her to learn the university system, let alone have time or feel safe enough to explore the neighborhood outside the university. Therefore, she describes below how it took time upon returning from her leave of absence to feel comfortable even being back on campus due to

increased anxiety upon her return. However, exploring the surrounding community was integral as a coping technique to find relief from stress in college.

> I feel a lot more comfortable now walking around like just anywhere any time… And after that, when I came back, I always felt so on edge and like anxious just walking around… I didn't want people to notice me, or look at me, or perceive me, every time I would walk across campus, I would repeat in my head kind of like a mantra. Maybe it was like compulsive or something talking. Like, oh do not look at me, do not look at me, just keep walking. In hopes that no one would come up to me like, yeah… But now I'm fine like I feel comfortable walking around I feel more in my element. I guess more time is passed. But there was a period of time where I felt that sort of similar anxiousness walking around like I did in my violent neighborhood at home. (Julie)

Julie described how taking a leave of absence helped in many ways but being back in a home environment where she lived alone, since her father was often working, and where the neighborhood wasn't safe to walk around alone, led to increased anxiety and some adjustment challenges upon her return to campus. However, when she was ready, she named that exploring more areas off campus upon her return from leave, felt like a positive coping mechanism that allowed her to have perspective on stressors experienced in school. Leaving campus also created a feeling of "freedom" by getting "outside the bubble" of school where she felt "trapped" sometimes. This feeling of being "trapped" was shared by other students as well. This coping technique allowed her to reduce some of the stress from the loneliness or sadness which in the past would have escalated to thoughts of self-harm.

The feeling of being trapped was often mentioned by first-generation college students in this study – at times feeling trapped on campus or feeling trapped upon returning to their hometown due to a new and more critical lens of their environment. A feeling of having choice and making decisions themselves that felt empowering and affirming provided relief from the feeling of being trapped. In this study, students navigated renegotiation of their identities in multiple ways that at times led to a more marginalized experience where they didn't feel like they were "enough" in any part of their identity, its own experience of being trapped. The feeling of being trapped often went along the feeling of being in between or "in limbo." Feeling trapped in a state of not belonging, loneliness, and loss in multiple domains. These feelings of being trapped were related to multiple domains: being low-income while attending an elite institution and struggling financially amidst wealthy peers, due to not finding community within any racial or ethnic identity group on campus and experiences of othering, due to losing sense of self in an attempt to adapt and fit-in with peers, due to loss in opportunities to live a *typical* high school or college life as a result of financial responsibilities, and trapped due to insidious sadness and grief they were experiencing internally yet was difficult to process or understand and therefore difficult to name. To experience distress in private was difficult particularly when a façade on the outside was presented to others, especially family, due to pressures and expectation that they should be thriving in college. This pressure existed given that they had reached an opportunity and milestone of privilege that no one else in the family had the opportunity to do.   This dissonance is described by Eng and Han (2018) as racial dissociation that can lead to intrapsychic distress such as fragmentation and loss in sense of self.

Chapter 6: Coping – Before and After College

In many families of different cultures, expectations vary for communicating needs and emotions. In some cultures, discussing mental health is accepted and supported, while in others it is shamed and dismissed as weakness. How students coped in high school and college or how intentional it was, was often connected to how they witnessed their family cope or the messages they received growing up about the validity of mental health symptoms. In this study, Deborah shared that a message heard repeatedly in her family was, "if you are busy, you can't be depressed." Similarly, if her family heard others reference feeling down, she would hear them say, "you're not busy enough if you have time to feel depressed." Other students described similar messaging referencing experiencing mental health symptoms as a "choice." Additionally, if one allowed themselves the choice or time to feel them, it meant they were "weak" or "not strong enough."

This is the messaging that would encourage students to try to "push through" or minimize any psychological distress. As described in a previous chapter, for many students, the stress they were experiencing was already causing shame and guilt due to the immense privilege they felt they had to be the first in their family to attend college. The tendency towards self-reliance and independence, compounded by messaging in their upbringing that mental health symptoms were a "choice" that they needed to "push through" and ignore, further decreased the likelihood of these students reaching out for help.

When coping is referenced in this chapter, it refers to how students navigated college using their strengths and capacities, along with how coping was a dialectic that

held meaning beyond their personal outlets for relief. Coping held cultural meaning and implications – coping did not mean finding ways to relieve stress and instead it meant figuring out a way to succeed, a way to not fail. More specifically, failure was not an option as they held a burden to excel to support the family as the first family member to attend college. This coping, however, also held nuanced meaning in terms of whether students felt freedom to engage in coping behavior if cultural or familial messaging about coping labeled it as a behavior that was indulgent, a "waste of time," or "selfish." If mental health symptoms were not legitimized, then there would be no need for time dedicated to "coping" to manage symptoms. To engage in coping behavior, it also required conscious identification of suffering which caused an intrapsychic conflict. Students engaged in self-blame of not being good enough or strong enough instead of identification of institutional or systemic factors that contributed to their hardships. Some students are defended against the experience of suffering and are therefore not able to access conscious coping for what they are defended against. Therefore, they may not seek help for themselves due to a history of self-sufficiency as described in a previous chapter but also due to a disconnection or defense against their suffering. Eng and Han (2018) describe racial melancholia and racial dissociation as at times including disownment of own identity and dissonance to protect oneself from intrapsychic discomfort.

Many students shared that the way they coped in high school was very connected to their social support, their large community of friends and family in their home, and that they learned that they needed new ways of coping in college. For many students, building these positive coping skills took time, after they had created safety on campus, connected to support on campus, connected to resources, or learned to prioritize their

mental health. For example, one student stated, "coping is different from high school where stress was self-induced by doing so much. Now it's different, stress now feels harder to understand. I run a lot. I listen to music now." (Gloria) She described how the factors that contributed to stress were hard to articulate and identify because so much was overwhelming at the time. For her, coping looked as small as sometimes just taking time away from her busy schedule to lay down on her bed to listen to music in her dorm room.

Other students shared how finding a mentor or staff member who understood them made a critical difference in their experience of coping with stress and loneliness. Crystal illustrates this in the example below:

> Yeah, um, I wanna say a huge help and blessing this year was having [a supportive staff member] as my boss this semester, or this entire school year. I got to know her in the fall and continue to work for her in the spring…she graduated from [this college], she knows the entire experience of sort of having to deal with your whole family back home. And we related a lot to similar circumstances. She's a little older, but she would mentor me a lot and guide me, and tell me, you know, this is what you should do. And often times when I felt like I wasn't taking on, taking on enough work for her, she would set the boundary for me and have a conversation with me and say, yea you're not gonna take this on, I'll take care of it, like you clearly have a lot of stuff on your plate right now this week, and we need to work on boundaries… So having someone who was really close and also understood my experience and mentored me throughout this year, has been really wonderful… and a huge support here. (Crystal)

Crystal named that having an older adult, with a similar background, be available to listen and to provide guidance, helped to validate and normalize her experience that otherwise had felt very isolating. For Crystal, this felt like the kind of support her non-first-generation peers received from their parents who had gone to college, sometimes even their same university.

Other students shared that they received support and felt less alone by joining student groups on campus. Through these student groups, they built social connections with peers and campus staff from similar backgrounds. Shelby elaborates on this below:

…Just the clubs on campus have really opened a lot of doors for me as a first year. Its connected me with so many students on campus, off campus, and often times with students who had similar backgrounds as me, or similar interests… and having those connections outside of academics or within academics, was really, really helpful because I felt like I actually had a community on campus… like these staff and faculty on campus… I've gotten to know people like in the financial department. So, it feels really great to have people who are older than me, and can help me out or check in on me and see how I'm doing because it just it feels really nice to you know be looked out for, especially when sometimes a place like [this university] for students who are BIPOC or are FGLI, can feel a little ostracizing at times. (Shelby)

This student was not alone in feeling more supported when connected to student groups on campus. Lucy shared how finding such caring spaces on campus, such as student groups or affinity groups, made a difference for her. Thus, it motivated her to create caring spaces for other students. For Lucy, it took until her final year or two in college to

find affinity spaces. Therefore, she wanted to help students of similar backgrounds connect to these caring spaces earlier in their college career. She stated that there was so much "burden to excel" for her family and that the financial responsibilities took away from connecting earlier with these student life experiences. These financial stressors were discussed in an earlier chapter of this dissertation. Lucy felt that by helping to create more caring spaces on campus, it would help other students like her feel more connected and feel a sense of belonging.

> I guess it's like something that I'm working on with [program staff] right now, we're thinking of ways that first-gen students could connect by relating to very similar experiences together. I noticed that there is an uprise in all the sessions and anonymous forum accounts surrounding [this university], and a lot of those accounts are dedicated to like the first-gen low-income experience… I started thinking about how much of a lack of community there is if we need to make confessions on anonymous accounts to connect with each other… we're doing a program, where we get first-gen low income students together, and we present to each other on issues related to like I said like student worker discrimination, racism, international student questions, or what does it mean to be first-gen as opposed to what does it mean to be first-gen low income. These are topics that should be broadcasted to the entire first-gen group or community on campus… [this university] really needs to step up their game in terms of like giving counseling to the first-gen low-income students… (Lucy)

You see that for Lucy above, she coped alone for most of college. However, upon realizing what was helpful, she worked to help fill this gap in support for other students

in her same position. She describes believing that the institution needed to "step up their game" to support first-generation college students which would result in more sense of community among these students. For many of these students, self-reliance and resilience helped them navigate the challenges of college; however, they felt that by creating more caring spaces where there were more honest conversations and normalization of challenges experienced by the first-generation college student community, there would be more opportunities for connection and normalization of help-seeking.

Prioritizing themselves, when accustomed to prioritizing others and caretaking for others, was unfamiliar and uncomfortable for many first-generation college students interviewed in this study. Students described how it felt "selfish" to prioritize themselves when they "should" be working or "should" be completing homework. However, it was after giving themselves the time to do this, to take breaks to rest or care for themselves through exercise, through going to therapy, talking to friends, or cooking, to name a few, that they began to feel stress was more manageable. They also saw a positive impact on their mood. For some students, prioritizing themselves meant allowing themselves to take a leave of absence, and for others, being forced to take a leave of absence was their wake-up call alerting them to the extent of their mental health symptoms. For one student, Anne, she ran in high school as part of the track and cross-country team. Running was a helpful coping tool for her at the time. However, allowing herself to incorporate this back into her schedule took time because it felt "selfish." For this student, it wasn't until senior year of college when she began to incorporate running as a coping strategy again into her daily routine. Other students echoed similar themes as described in this chapter but that a combination of coping approaches, not just one, was

necessary for success. For example, Gloria, shared that utilizing free campus or

community resources that allowed for travel and exploration of neighboring cities along

with seeking mental health counseling, led to management of mental health distress and

feeling less trapped.

> …But junior year, I really put in like 100% into like focusing on that [mental
>
> health]. So, I would go to the gym. Um, and the [community transportation
>
> program] is really, really nice, because I was able to go into [neighboring city]
>
> like 2-3 times a week. So, something as small as leaving campus for like a couple
>
> of hours helps out a lot. Cause something that a lot of us feel like that since [this
>
> university] is such a small campus, it's in the suburbs, you feel like you're in a
>
> bubble. So, it's just, it feels like extremely difficult to get out of that bubble, and
>
> when you feel in a bubble you feel trapped basically. Um, so yea, coping… I got
>
> on antidepressants and vitamins. Antidepressants helped out. Vitamins have given
>
> me energy… (Gloria)

When this student shared prioritizing her own care and mental health, it meant that she

needed to ask for her needs to be met even if that meant adjusting to how much time she

gave others. For some students, this looked like openly sharing their struggles and

sharing with family that they were connected to mental health services. Sometimes this

resulted in pushback and lack of support from family. For other students, this looked like

making the decision to not share this information with their family. Additionally, some

students prioritized not returning home during academic breaks if it felt best for them.

For example, for one student this looked like taking antidepressants and connecting with

university counseling without letting her parents know. For another student, this looked

like dedicating a portion of her school break to stay on campus or visit friends instead of returning home. Intentionally planning her free time to prioritize own care allowed her to catch up on sleep, allowed time to explore hobbies and engage in coping skills, and allowed for building connections and meaningful memories with friends. Most importantly, prioritizing her own care also affirmed that she was deserving of receiving care as much as others were of being on the receiving end of her care.

In combination with the previous chapter that describes a theme of sense of loss and sadness for these students as they navigated college, and at times as they even navigated high school, many of these students recognized that they were struggling and that they were missing out on many opportunities that their non-first-generation-college student peers were not missing out on. However, I noticed that for many of these students, the recognition of differences and loss were not recognized immediately but instead occurred over time when they had language to describe it. It took time to recognize the loss and relief, even longer to understand it, and much longer to have language to describe and process it. This nuanced yet insidious sadness and suffering that was difficult to name or to find language for due to the multiple factors related to race and other identities, is echoed in Eng & Han's (2018) book. Often, the recognition began first with emotions first – feelings of loneliness, sadness, low motivation, frustration, disappointment, and of feeling trapped or stuck in a situation that was complex and hard to resolve. Additionally, for many students, there was a theme of self-blame that it was their fault they were failing, or that they were not smart enough or good enough to succeed in school. For these students, finding a way to surpass this obstacle, or coping with the struggles, was imperative. However, their perspective was one where they felt at

fault and from a cultural perspective where mental health was not seen as legitimate and thus taking time to take care of oneself felt selfish or wrong. Often, many students would not give themselves credit for their perseverance and skills in coping through school. However, they often recognized and gave credit to sources outside of themselves that helped either guide them to college in the first place, helped them navigate struggles in college, or helped provide support for understanding and building language around processing their losses in college.

Programmatic Resources

Students shared that participating in or being connected to certain programs in high school or in college, played a critical role in guiding them towards pursuing a college education, helped them navigate the college application process, and helped provide educational support and connection during their challenges in college. These programs are important to recognize as possible paths for institutions to strengthen and support this student population. Although all these programs have their strengths and their areas for improvement, the purpose of this chapter is to share how these programs impacted the lived experience of first-generation college students.

Overall, students found the connection to resources, mentors, and a community of students with shared identities as most helpful in these programs as it reduced some of the work and responsibility already placed on them to figure all of it out on their own. In one program, students reported finding the support of a cohort helpful as students would meet weekly for a total of two hours beginning six months prior to attending college. Participants in the cohort were diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, social economic status, etc. For example, Lizzette stated, "not every student is a first-generation college

student, but many are." Another student, Shelly, elaborated on the benefits of this built-in

support system that she experienced.

> We go do leadership workshops. You get to know each other. And it's just I guess
>
> like preparing us for what [university] is like. But the 10 of us, we became like
>
> pretty good friends. And it's just really like a big support system that we have."
>
> (Shelly)

Shelly described how this support helped reduce fear of moving far from home because

they were now entering an environment where they at least knew *one* person. These

students connected with each other to request to live together in the dorms or helped each

other move-in together. In some instances, students shared feelings of gratefulness for

this social support, including the extended support of a parent of a fellow student in the

program who invited her to travel together across the country for college move-in. This

mother rented a car, provided transportation to the university, and helped shop at a store

to stock their dormitory. For some students whose parents could not travel due to

residency status in the United States, this assistance from other families made a

difference in not feeling as alone in the move far from home.

> One student, Gloria, discussed how the connection of a mentor through this

program decreased feelings of loneliness and nonbelonging.

> "my biggest help, I know it's not really from the school, is [program]…I also
>
> have a mentor, [mentor name]... and I also meet with him weekly and so that's a
>
> unique experience mostly because a lot of us are first gen, or we're like very
>
> diverse like almost all of us are from BIPOC communities. We all got chosen
>
> because of leadership but we all have like very different backgrounds because

there was no like socioeconomic or like race, or diversity like clause to the

scholarship just like if we see leadership, or like certain like qualities in you, we

will select you for the scholarship. But I guess I wish the school in general had

more of that, like cohort or mentor type, like opportunities for everyone, because

it's been so helpful to me. I could see it being helpful for other people.

This student further elaborated on how these mentors often functioned to support in ways

that non-first-generation college students receive directly from their parents. First-

generation college students cannot get this help from their parents because they are

unfamiliar with the necessary context due to not having the experience of being in

college. More specifically, she provides an example of asking her mentor a question she

realized many non-first-generation students are able to ask their own parents.

I definitely resonate with [program] and having a mentor that I meet with weekly

which is very, very helpful. Not only I could like socially, but also academically,

because I'm able to ask him questions. Like I had an art history paper, and I was

like these are the pieces that I can choose from to write about. And he was like

this is low hanging fruit, don't choose these pieces, everyone's going to choose

these pieces… Maybe try this piece because it has these qualities you can describe

and this one doesn't… or don't choose this piece, because this is what your

professor like did their PhD on, and that's gonna be a lot of pressure if you

describe that one. So, like that mentor figure has definitely been very, very useful

to navigate campus… (Gloria)

At this university, a required ten-week first year seminar and life skills course was

another helpful resource for students. In this seminar, students were "grouped in terms of

their identity. So, like if you are a first-generation college student, they put you in the same group." (Emily) It is also a PE-credit-bearing course that helps students better understand the university community, connect with peers, and connect with resources at the university. Students had mixed reactions to this class with some students sharing finding it helpful while others did not.

> I'm more like, I'm very quiet, I don't know it's like, I definitely know who I can share some of my problems with. And I think that in [seminar], it was helpful, you know those who decided to speak up to share their experiences, to let me know it's okay to feel a certain way, like it's okay to feel you don't belong… and at the same time so acknowledge that you know, like there is these resources and that we could still like you know be a student in college and succeed regardless of any barriers. (Rachel)

For this student, this seminar helped created connection and helped validate and normalize her challenging experiences. This then helped her feel like she wasn't alone in it and that she wasn't the only one experiencing challenges. As described in this study, feeling lonely and feeling disconnected were common; thus, opportunities for connection were important. Rachel felt more connected and looked forward to this seminar space because of the validating experience. Another student, Emily, however, did not find this space helpful. For Emily, not connecting with the class or with her first-generation college student peers in the seminar was partly related to this student not feeling as connected to her first-generation college identity and instead feeling more connected to her other identities. This example supports the nuanced psychosocial experience of renegotiating of identities first-generation college students experience, particularly those

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with multiple intersecting identities, and thus the nuanced approach one must take to provide adequate support.

One student described finding another organization on her own through anonymous chat boards online. This organization helps support low-income high achieving college students with a full scholarship to some of the most elite universities in the United States. Lucy describes below how she learned about this program independently by researching online anonymous message boards. She described how the anonymous message boards had first-generation college students answer questions for each other and it was her primary support navigating how to apply for college.

So when I was younger, I was really into like Anime and video games. And I used to write like, like say fictional stories on the internet. And through there I found out about this online message board, now these chatting apps, and that's why I found those groups on the web set up for first-gen students. I think the way I found out about this online message board in the first place was when I found out about this program… there are a lot of resources like on the internet about college in general. But I think it's very different, because they're writing to you as if they expect you to kind of have a grasp or have already known… you have this grade and you have to have done extra curriculars, and you've had to have an NPO. Or you have to have done this and done research and like all that I wasn't doing like in my junior year. So, whatever I was supposed to do had passed… and they discover that this application process can be so simplified by listening to people who had been through that process or can be simplified just because you have that resource… and there were students who were first gen low income who were

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representatives on most these colleges and they were describing their first-gen

low income experience at their specific colleges. And that was just really

interesting to me. (Lucy)

Lucy described the positive impact it made to hear directly from other first-generation

college students about their experiences at this university.

School Traditions

Students shared that school traditions were another support that made a difference

to feeling connected and thus supported and less lonely on campus. One student stated,

Oh, I love the traditions. I almost forgot about that. Honestly… if the traditions

weren't there, I would've transferred by now because the traditions plays a huge

role in the, in the [university] community… All of those traditions has made, at

least for me, it has made me feel like welcomed, and made me feel like a part of

this community… And you're with friends, and not having to fully focus on

schoolwork, so professors keep in mind that it's [tradition] week, so they give less

homework, well that's for humanities, I don't know about STEM. So, I love

[tradition] week. (Anne)

Anne describes how these traditions feel special because there is room for creativity as

students can bring their own culture that can make it meaningful for everyone involved.

Anne shared that with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it led to the loss of

these traditions and activities that played a role in students feeling less connected, "And

COVID started in March, so, (laughs) but I remember sophomore year, we still had

traditions, but it was very limited. They tried to do it remote, but it just wasn't the same.

COVID, I feel like ruined a lot but yeah." (Anne) Another student shared how although

she enjoyed the traditions, she also found it could be strengthened to be more inclusive of students from different backgrounds. Thus, she decided to participate on the planning committee so she could change some of the traditions and therefore help make an impact for all students. Shelly illustrates this further below.

> But like the fun sometimes isn't fun for like us like students of color, because like, ya'll play like some Indie, like soft music. We want some banda, some regaetton… my friends were like this is like boring, but like it's supposed to be fun… But yeah, and then with like people who ran traditions, like a big majority of them were also white. We would be like this is like white people stuff like we don't do this… but a way that my friends and I are trying to like combat that, is signing up. So, we're going to like revamp this up like. When you get there, and you see like the head of traditions are like 2 like white people, you're like this is, like this is not for me… So a big thing that we want to do is like put leaders in who are people of color…so we're not scared, like we're not scared to go. (Shelly)

These traditions made a difference for students in feeling connected to the university and to other students at the university which may speak to implications on building connection among a student population who describe lived experiences of disconnection and loneliness in college.

Chapter 7: Discussion

In this chapter, I contextualize my research findings using a trauma informed conceptual frame that draws from the acculturative stress model and concepts from collective trauma (e.g. meaning making, loss of connections, fragmentation) to answer my primary research question, "What are the experiences of psychosocial stress among first-generation college students?" I argue that university campuses can function as microcosms of the stressors in society similar to, but not identical to, those experienced by immigrant populations as they adjust to relocating to the United States. This microcosm can trigger acculturative stress and psychosocial stressors among first-generation college students thus making an already challenging stage in life of emerging adulthood even more difficult. Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students is essential for the literature on risk and protective factors for this population. Research on risk and protective factors must be triangulated and deepened with studies about lived experiences of distress, resilience, and identity development.

Collective Trauma

The students who participated in my study described feeling similar experiences of loneliness, nonbelonging, renegotiation of identity, intrapsychic distress, and loss. This experience is nuanced and different enough that it is a shared pain experienced by many collectively, yet one that is deeply isolating and experienced individually. The concepts of collective trauma (eg fragmentation, loss of connection, and meaning making) provide a critical lens for understanding the psychosocial experiences of first-generation college students being beyond that of a normative college experience.

The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the

awareness of those who suffer from it, so it…[is] a gradual realization that the

community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an

important part of the self has disappeared… (Hirschberger, 2018, p. 3)

Similar to this description of collective trauma, the students in this study often could not

articulate this distress but for those who could identify it, they explained that it took years

to recognize and find language to describe their distress. These students experienced the

distress of collective trauma that was connected to the microcosm experience of a four-

year university.

Chapter five describes the psychosocial experience of sadness and sense of loss or

grief of students in this study. I connect this theme to Eng and Han's (2018) discussion of

melancholia, loss, and racial dissociation. The experience of acculturative stress helps us

to understand this finding as do the concepts of collective trauma. These first-generation

college students lose their social support systems from high school. They at times also

experience loss in identity as caretaker, as high achieving student, or as helper in the

family. This loss in identity further contributes to psychological distress that is

experienced internally. This internal experience that is not visible on the outside, can

exacerbate a sense of loneliness and distress, and contribute to a fragmentation of the self.

When students are performing well enough in classes and affectively are not drawing

attention to themselves, it leads others to assume they are doing fine. I heard in these

student's stories how distress went unnoticed. I also heard from these students that they

didn't fully understand their distress which made it difficult to talk about it or ask for

support. These were also students who only presented to the counseling center when they

were in crisis. Eng and Han (2018) describe in their book a pattern of anecdotally seeing Asian American students in university counseling only when they were in more acute distress. The use of language and storytelling can help a student cope as there can be healing power in recognizing the stressors and all the factors that contribute to it rather than seeing them as personal failings (Eng & Han, 2018; Hsu, 2019)

In a period that has seen heightened racism and discrimination due to the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, and backlash against the 2020 Black Lives Movement, it is expected that as a microcosm, college campuses will see displays of oppression, whether on a large scale or smaller scale that administrators may not always notice (Byers & Cerulli, 2019; Kumaria et al, 2023). In the last three years, college campuses have seen an increase in explicit displays of racism, xenophobia, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression (Tummala-Narra, 2021). We know that prolonged exposure to racism can result in psychological distress and traumatic stress (Tummala-Narra, 2021). However, the recipients of these micro and macroaggressions, will not forget them. First-generation college students and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience discrimination and racism at their institutions of higher education which contributes to stress and acculturative stress (Dawson, 2010). The experiences of discrimination and racism have shown to be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among some ethnic and minority populations (Espinal, 2019). For students who may be experiencing a macro/microaggression for the first time, adequate and timely support is critical in helping them process and not feel rejected by their new community.

Fragmentation was also observed in these student's stories in how they presented externally as self-sufficient but internally were experiencing distress and loneliness. Students at times chose to hide parts of their identity due to experiences of othering by their peers. When you hide parts of yourself, you can start to lose sense of self which can cause a feeling of emptiness or feeling trapped. We know that a response to discrimination can include a tendency to deny parts of the self-causing internal conflict (Tummala-Narra, 2021). Students in this study also seemed to internalize messages over time of not being "good enough" with respect to their racial or ethnic identity or good enough to succeed in school due to othering experiences. It will be important to examine the role that institutions of higher education that hold a history of exclusivity and elitism may play in contributing to implicit and explicit messaging to students that they do not belong. This supports literature that acculturative stress can influence feelings of not belonging and that disconnection from culture or family can contribute to psychosocial distress (Carrera, 2014; Jenkins, 2013l Langenkamp, 2018; Williams, 2015). This can also bring up existential processing about their meaning or purpose in higher education especially if the distress is associated with academic challenges. Although I only interviewed first-generation college students currently enrolled at one four-year institution, it is reasonable to wonder if the stories students shared of their peers who took a leave of absence or withdrew from school would have more to say about loss of meaning or purpose that contributed to their decision to withdraw.

Collective trauma can result in loss and increase "existential threat, which prompts a search for meaning, and the construction of a trans-generational collective self" (Hirschberger, 2018). Hirschberger also describes that an impact of one's

worldview is a component of collective trauma. As illustrated in these student's lived experience, navigating college impacted the way that these students viewed the world or perceived their relationships with other people. Part of this change in worldview was the sadness and disappointment in realization of such differences in social class and loss in past and future missed opportunities due to social class differences and lack of cultural wealth. For example, students described feeling surprised and frustrated with the lack of financial worry that their peers experienced in college and lack of ability to even comprehend that anyone could live below the poverty line – a real lived experience for these students who continued to work part-time jobs in college to pay for basic expenses. These experiences with peers made it challenging to connect, let alone respect, these students who were not burdened with the adult responsibility of financial stress for themselves or even their family. This change in how they perceive relationships contributed to the impact in their relationships with family and friends. These experiences of loss are connected to psychological distress and at times post-traumatic stress disorder (Liu, 2020). It is important to view the experiences of first-generation college students from a trauma informed lens to help understand the psychosocial distress that can impact their ability to seek support or impact ability to academically perform at their best.

Structural violence is structural because it is embedded in the institution. It is evidenced through the lack of diverse representation of university faculty and students, so students do not see representation of themselves around them in university life. When students spend large amounts of time at these institutions, particularly if they live there, they can experience challenges balancing family and community expectations. As this study showed, these students navigate this experience primarily on their own. A few

students in this study expressed connecting with a faculty or staff member with a shared lived experience or shared identity. Not many students in this study had such an opportunity, but those who did identified it as instrumental to feeling connected and succeeding in college. The concept of structural violence can help explain the stressful and isolating experience of being "in-between home and school" as well as the stress of adjusting to an institution of higher education that upholds Western values in how they teach. These experiences parallel the isolating "limbo" feeling of not belonging in school and home among first-generation college students. In institutions that are historically exclusive, these students may experience implicit or explicit experiences of discrimination that impact a first-generation college student's experience of making meaning and can further lead to a trauma response among these students. Such trauma responses may include loss of connections, a search for meaning, internal conflict between self and other, and fragmentation.

Feeling Trapped – Fragmentation & Intrapsychic Distress

The microcosm presented by college life often leads students to feel stuck or trapped intrapsychically, not just trapped in their physical environment. In bearing witness to these students' experiences, I heard and understood that they were feeling trapped in an insidious sadness and loneliness that was difficult to articulate or process due to psychosocial experiences of othering, renegotiating of their identity, sense of loss in experiences and loss in connections, and challenges with coping. Although they named that leaving university campus helped them feel less "trapped" with respect to the physical environment, relief from feeling trapped intrapsychically proved more difficult.

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I conceptualize the impact of this microcosm and acculturative stress using constructs from collective trauma to argue that these student's lived experiences generated intrapsychic distress that caused fragmentation, splitting of the self, and further loss in connection and sense of meaning. These concepts of melancholia and racial dissociation clarify how the intrapsychic conflict contributes to fragmentation (Eng and Han, 2018). For example, I understood that stressors from this microcosm environment, created internal psychological distress for these students that was exacerbated by lack of conscious understanding of what they were going through or language to describe their suffering. The fragmentation and splitting of the self due to intrapsychic conflict was a response to the collective trauma that created loss in identity and furthered mental health distress.

It was difficult to clearly understand or have language for the nuanced experience of renegotiation of identities, othering, and multilayered loss that was the psychosocial experience of first-generation college students. I noticed that first- and second-year students in college could describe the mental health symptoms of feeling "depressed," "unmotivated," "lonely," or even "suicidal." However, few, if any, students, could place language for this experience and it was usually advanced-year students who could name that psychosocial experiences of first-generation college students were more than just the normative experiences of "coming of age" due to entering college. These students could instead name that the stressors included their first experiences of navigating racism and othering, adapting to primarily white spaces as students of color, and renegotiating identity while trying not to lose themselves in the process. These older students were also less likely to self-blame. They more often recognized the systemic factors that

contributed to their challenging experiences in college. Some understood that this impact contributed to acculturative stress, code-switching, fragmentation, renegotiation of identity, deep sense of loss in who they are and in missed opportunities, feeling like an outsider that doesn't belong, and mental health symptoms. This difficulty with finding language to describe this experience, let alone identify that the experience was happening, contributes to the feeling of being trapped. If students don't know that they are in this microcosm of experience, then they don't know or can't ask for guidance out of this trap.

University as a Microcosm and Acculturative Stress

As described in chapter four of my findings, first-generation college students in this study described their lived experienced as feeling like they entered, "a completely different world." This description referenced by students throughout this study, supports my conceptualization of college functioning as a microcosm of the immigrant experience because students navigate acculturative stress associated with racial and ethnic identities but also with respect to other intersecting identities such as social class, cultural differences, differences in language, and differences in developmental age and responsibilities at this age. Lubrano (2004) describes a similar tension where low-income college students are "torn between the world they were raised in and the life they aspire… not quite accepted in either." However, my findings expand upon Lubrano's use of limbo to include not just social class but also a tense feeling of being trapped or alone between different worlds in relation to differences in racial identity, ethnic identity, developmental age, first-generation college student status, and burden to excel because of responsibilities that differ from their college peers. Similar to experiences of immigration

where individuals enter a new cultural and physical environment with limited to no social supports, first-generation college students enter the unfamiliar world of higher education as the first ones it their families to do so. For many of these students, they move across the country to geographic areas their family has never visited, where they have no family, and where they have no current social support. These students also hold financial responsibility to manage financial costs of living which require that they work while in school. These experiences add to experiences of being parentified, where they are the same age as their peers but developmentally hold lived experience and responsibility beyond that of those seen typically in emerging adulthood. These findings support that the university functioning as a microcosm, activates a renegotiation of their identity beyond that of normative identity development in college that produces psychological distress and increases risk.

Using an acculturative stress model conceptualization, the experience of not feeing "good enough" or feeling "in between" different worlds not connecting to either one, describes a lived experience of marginalization, for many first-generation college students (Berry, 2006; Yoon, 2013). The psychological experience of losing of one's own identity while trying to relate and connect with their environment, often left these students feeling lonely or with disingenuous connections with peers. The findings in this study add to the literature on acculturative stress resulting from adjusting to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2006; Torres, 2012; Yoon et al, 2013). These findings also add to the literature on the connection between acculturative stress and negative physical health (Waldman, 2019) and negative psychological outcomes such as increase in depression and suicidal thoughts (Cheref, 2015; Corona, 2017; Engle, 2006; Torres,

2010; Waldman, 2019). These findings are supported by the literature that bicultural participants hold more risk for mental health symptoms compared to monoracial participants and that higher depressive symptoms are reported for racial and ethnic minorities as compared to their white-identified peers (Cheref, 2015).

A part of this renegotiation of identity included decisions on whether they would disclose or hide parts of themselves which resulted in intrapsychic conflict that influenced splitting and feeling lost in their identity. Students described hiding their identity as first-generation or of low-income status; additionally, most students described a desire to fit-in with peers amongst an intense feeling of being an outsider. Therefore, they would at times pretend to be interested in topics they were not or spend time with people they did not connect with due to fear of being alone. This false presentation on the outside that was the opposite of the student's internal conflicted experience, inevitably took a toll.

This experience described by students in this study aligns with literature on "bicultural" challenges because of social class differences (Hermann, 2018). These bicultural challenges are seen as a component of the acculturative process resulting from attempting to navigate middle-to-higher class culture in higher education (Hermann, 2018). Students in this study shared examples of first learning about microaggressions or macroaggressions through experiences of being on the receiving end of these othering experiences while in college. These experiences further support the concept of universities functioning as a microcosm of the immigrant experience where othering can occur and where socio-political climate can influence discrimination. These implicit or explicit microaggressions contributed to feelings of disconnection and loneliness. My

study expands upon bicultural challenges to be inclusive of not just social class, but also of racial/ethnic identity, culture, and of developmental age (e.g. emerging adulthood). These findings provide further context of how the college system can function as a microcosm, that holding multiple intersecting identities and the experience of having to renegotiate their identity while in college, all contributes to psychological distress, fragmentation, and an experience of feeling trapped.

Implications for College Student Development

This dissertation also supports the critical lens on emerging adulthood literature as many first-generation college students do not navigate the typical stage of emerging adulthood as compared to peers. Katsiaficas (2017) challenges Arnett (2005) as not placing enough consideration on the role that social class or social inequality play in impacting the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Although these first-generation college students are not married, they are financially independent, many live far from home, and these students enter the workforce (part-time or full-time while in school). These factors arguably contribute to entering adulthood stage of development and not following the typical emerging adulthood stage of this age group. It is important not to generalize that these students are in the emerging adulthood stage just because they are in college as their experience is more nuanced, they hold adult responsibilities, but they also still navigate identity development. It may be helpful to consider students as being in limbo between the emerging adulthood and adulthood stage. For these students who are already functioning in an adult role in many ways yet limited in the full ability to live the life of an adult (e.g. financial limitations in school, cultural and family expectations at home), it can lead to the described lived experience of feeling trapped.

Practice Implications

  In understanding the complexity and trauma response that can happen due to the psychosocial experiences of first-generation college students, universities can be better prepared to help students cope with experiences of sadness, renegotiation of identity, and sense of loss. More specifically, understanding the affective experience of these participants and that the experience is intrapsychic and often not visible by others, particularly when these students are less likely to ask for help, it can help inform faculty and administrators on the importance of not dismissing requests for support from students who fly under the radar due to positive academic performance. Additionally, this dissertation helps add to the literature that supports that mental health risk is higher for biracial than monoracial minority participants, an important factor that can help inform institutional support to these students. As a clinician with experience working in university counseling centers, I have anecdotal experience of providing mental health services to first-generation college students. Noticing a theme of these students presenting to university counseling centers primarily when they were in crisis contributed to my research interest. Although the students shared stories of surpassing multiple barriers leading to college, limitations existed at that point in time of the semester due to level of distress. An increase in access to support and preventive outreach efforts could help influence increased help seeking behavior from these students. In understanding the complexity of psychosocial experiences among undergraduate first-generation college students, this study may help to contextualize possible stressors these students may experience if they pursue a graduate degree (Slates & Moedano, 2022). This study

contributes further to the literature that argues against the use of a deficit-based model in supporting these students.

Mental health symptomatology tends to be framed in highly individualized terms. I encourage practitioners to consider these psychosocial stressors at a systemic level as well. There must be greater responsibility on the institution to further challenge a deficits-based understandings of mental health challenges. As the number of first-generation college students in higher education increases, college and universities have a responsibility to understand the lived experience of the psychosocial stressors for this population to ensure adequate support is provided to this population. Without adequate support, student service departments on campus may see increases in student need that may be challenging to meet without additional staffing or budget allocations, all which have domino impact on the university system. Additionally, the current university resources could be utilized in targeted ways with this increased support, including supporting resources named as helpful by these students in chapter 6 (e.g. investment in campus traditions, programs for mentorship, and programs that build community for students even prior to matriculation to campus).

Although many university counseling centers work hard to practice from a social justice and multicultural framework, additional training could help ensure thorough understanding of the nuance of psychosocial lived experiences of these students, so that these clinicians are well equipped to help students process and find language for their experiences. The themes outlined in these findings can be utilized for training of university counseling center clinicians or can be considerations for preparing psychoeducation outreach presentations or support groups for this population. Using an

acculturative stress and collective trauma framework with a conceptualization of universities functioning as a microcosm of the immigrant real-world experience, will help better understand the psychosocial experiences of college students and inform treatment recommendations.

Research Limitations

There are a number of limitations to consider when appraising this study. First, recruitment was based on volunteer participants who were incentivized with a gift card, which may have biased the sample in multiple ways. Second, no male-identified students participated in this study. The absence of this voice is important as many of the findings may be gendered. Additionally, there is a potential for social desirability bias as participants could have answered questions in the way that they believed. I wanted them to answer rather than answering them truthfully. Some shared identities with me, the researcher, which likely contributed to increased safety and trust for students to answer truthfully. However, this is difficult to assess, and participants may have bias also wanting my approval in particular because of our shared identities. To challenge my own potential for blind spots due to my own positionality, I memo-ed in my research journal and consulted with my doctoral committee and director of work.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many recommendations for future research. One recommendation is to replicate the study across multiple universities to recruit a diverse participant pool that is inclusive of diversity in gender. Additionally, such a study could examine differences in lived experience of psychosocial stressors across multiple universities that would supplement findings from this research study. One specific focus could include

examining differences in institutional structural make-up or how existing university supports impact the lived experience of first-generation college students in positive or negative ways. This replicated study could use findings from the current study to inform interview question development. A replicated study could gather additional data on the findings from this dissertation through additional qualitative interviews or through a quantitative survey. Future research would benefit from a phenomenological study approach with open-ended interviews of university administrators such as university counseling center clinicians, academic faculty, student service department staff, and admissions office staff. This would allow the opportunity to gain insights and perspectives on recruiting and supporting the student body, including the first-generation college student population. The literature also includes a variety of definitions for first-generation college students that are not consistent, so it is important to examine the term in future research to ensure the ability to generalize study findings.

The concept of toxic stress should be considered further to understand its implications among first-generation college students. A consideration of the concept of chronic stress and how it can cause toxic stress because of lived experiences in college, is important to understand the long-term implication for physical health, psychological health, and emotional health. Although stress is a natural response to the body, chronic stress is a significant predictor of distress and can impact the developing brain, affect emotional regulation, and increase impulsivity (Franke, 2014; Sheth, 2017; Lee McKay-Neorr, 2019). Three types of stress include: 1) positive stress, 2) tolerable stress, and 3) toxic stress (Franke, 2014; Lee McKay-Neorr, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Positive stress refers to acute or short-lived stress that is

normative and essential for positive growth development (Franke, 2014). Although the body may experience a physiological response to the stress, this is brief, and the stress response returns to baseline with social support. Tolerable stress refers to a more sustained stress response such as due to the death of a loved one. Tolerable stress results in a biochemical response in the brain that can more negatively impact the brain without adequate support, but it can also be buffered through social support once the adversity is surpassed (Franke, 2014; Lee McKay-Neorr, 2019). Toxic stress refers to experiencing a prolonged stress response with no recovery due to lack of adequate support. Examples of toxic stress can include poverty, abuse, home dysfunction, or violence (Franke, 2014; Lee McKay-Neorr, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Although positive stress can build resilience, toxic stress can result in negative physical and mental health outcomes (Lee Mackay-Neorr, 2019; Sheth, 2017). Over time, prolonged exposure to toxic stress can alter the biology of one's stress response system resulting in the body responding to normal situations as life-threatening (Van der Kolk, 2014). This "wear and tear" on the body over time can result in individuals engaging in maladaptive behaviors for relief that further damage health and well-being (Lee Mackay-Neorr, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014). Acculturative stress can take a toll on the body's stress response system by repeatedly activating the HPA axis which can result in excess release of cortisol in the body (Waldman, 2019). Excess release of cortisol is linked to negative physical health outcomes such as hypertension, insulin resistance, and increased risk for myocardial infarction (Waldman, 2019). Further research on the relationship between psychosocial

stressors outlined in this dissertation and toxic stress would be important to help identify its long-term impact and identify recommendations for coping.

Also, as an additional consideration in researching the impact of toxic stress on this population, it may be helpful to better understand risk and protective factors for depressive symptoms amongst this population. It would be important to examine the prevalence of suicidal thoughts or behavior amongst this population. Consideration of Joiner's (2009) Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behavior may be helpful in researching this risk.

Additionally, in using the conceptual lens of college campuses functioning as a microcosm of the immigrant experience, it would be important to gather data, through open-ended interviews or through a survey, of how the COVID-19 pandemic and socio-political climate contributed to the psychosocial experience of first-generation college students, particularly these students who hold intersecting marginalized identities.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Limited research exists that examines the lived experiences of psychosocial stress among first-generation college students. I utilize a trauma informed conceptual framework using the acculturative stress model and concepts of collective trauma to describe how colleges can function as a microcosm of the real-world immigrant experience and place first-generation college students at increased vulnerability on top of the normative developmental challenges of young adulthood. I conducted a qualitative research study using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design to gain insights from first-generation college students about their lived experiences related to psychosocial distress. A total of 13 undergraduate college students who identify as first-generation college students were interviewed using 60-90minute semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded. This data was transcribed and coded using thematic analysis.

This paper began with a literature review in chapter two of the psychosocial stressors reported among racial and ethnic minorities drawing connections to first-generation college students followed by an overview of acculturative stress contextualized as an additional stressor among first-generation college students. I critically reviewed emerging adulthood as a normative stressor among the college student population but a stage that looks different for students who identify as first-generation college students or who hold multiple intersecting identities. A review of collective trauma followed. Next, in chapter three, this paper provided an overview of the methodology for my qualitative research study. Then, three main study findings were described in chapters four, five, and six. The first main finding revealed a theme of first-

generation college students renegotiating their intersecting identities that impacted

feelings of connection and disconnection in college. Some identities were more salient

than others in their home community and this saliency changed in college. The identities

that stood out as most salient in college included identity as low-income, identity as a

first-generation college student, and racial/ethnic identity. The second main finding

revealed a theme of sense of loss and melancholia experienced by students that was

nuanced, took time to identify, and took time to articulate. This sense of grief, loss, and

sadness connected with trauma concepts of fragmentation, splitting of the self, and

intrapsychic conflict. The third main finding revealed a theme of challenges with coping

due to the intersectionality of identities, pattern of self-sufficiency and parentification,

and dissociation of the self that made it difficult to recognize a need for help. I conclude

with a discussion and conclusion chapter that connect my findings to theory, include

limitations, and include implications and recommendations for future research.

Appendix

Interview Guide

1) How do you define your identity as a first-generation college student? What does this identity mean to you and how has it contributed to your overall experience attending college/university (if at all)?

2) What are some of the challenges or stressors you have encountered in college? Any specific examples?

    a. How did you cope with stress in high school? How do you cope with stress in college? What has changed or stayed the same regarding how you handle stress since attending college?

    b. What are some of the factors that have helped you navigate and support you through these challenges while in college/university?

3) How does this experience (challenges or stressors) compare to your experience in education before college/university?

4) Have your relationships with family or friends from high school changed since you started college? Please give an example.

    a. What is your experience like with family/friends when you return from college/university?

5) What resources (including counseling centers) have you accessed while in school?

    a. Clarifying question: How do you perceive those factors (such as family culture, internal/pressure to succeed in the family, social constraint, or stigma) play a role in a first-generation college students' decision to access/not access services?

6) What are some of your most memorable experiences in your time so far in

school?

Debriefing Questions:
1) Is there anything I did not ask you about this topic or your role as a first-

generation college student that you find may be important to share with me?

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