

Negotiating Multiple Identities Within Multiple Frames: An Analysis of First-Generation College Students

Mark P. Orbe

This article draws from narratives, collected from 79 first-generation college (FGC) students across several different campuses, to explore the saliency of FGC student status and the various ways in which it is enacted during interactions with others. Communication theory of identity serves as the study's theoretic foundation. Multiple points of analysis capture the complex nature of identity negotiation for FGC students. Findings warrant three conclusions: (1) the salience of FGC status in their daily interactions varies considerably among students; (2) FGC status appears to be more important for individuals who also identify as co-cultural group members; and (3) FGC students appear to lack any significant sense of communal identity.

Keywords: identity; identity negotiation; first-generation college students; communication theory of identity

First-generation college (FGC) students are enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities in increasing numbers, yet we know little of how this aspect of identity is negotiated in their communication with others. Research has documented that FGC students have entered colleges and universities—particularly within community colleges (Shor, 1987)—at a growing proportion since the 1920s (Billson & Terry, 1982; National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Yet, little has been written on the experiences of FGC students (Hertel, 2002; Riehl, 1994). Conducting such research is especially difficult because of incomplete data regarding the number of FGC students in higher education (Padron, 1992), as well as the great heterogeneity associated with the group.

To be sure, FGC students often overlap with those who fall under the rubrics of “nontraditional” (Query, Parry, & Flint, 1992), “under-prepared” (Bartholomae,

Mark P. Orbe (PhD, Ohio University, 1993) is associate professor in the Department of Communication and the Center for Women's Studies at Western Michigan University, Department of Communication, 1903 W. Michigan Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008. The research reported here was funded by a grant from the Western Michigan University's Faculty Research and Creative Activities Support Fund. Mark P. Orbe can be contacted at orbe@wmich.edu

1985; Rose, 1989), or “disadvantaged” students (Rodriguez, 1975). In fact, research that describes how higher education has, or has not, been true to its commitment to provide accessible public education to these groups (Shor, 1987) serves as an important backdrop for current research on FGC students. However, it is important to recognize that not all FGC students enter college from nontraditional, disadvantaged backgrounds. Some, as described by Orbe (2003) come from families with considerable “cultural capital” (Karabel & Halsey, 1977) that, in the absence of a college education, still provide significant support for FGC students.

Lavin and Hyllegard’s (1996) longitudinal study of the City University of New York’s (CUNY) open admissions program serves as one of the most extensive treatments regarding the long-term benefits that come with a college education—especially those who are the first in their family to earn a college education. These scholars make a strong argument about the short- and long-term benefits of greater accessibility to higher education. Yet, they recognize that not all of those who took advantage of open admissions at CUNY during the years in which it was in operation were FGC students (p. 19). In this regard, Lavin and Hyllegard’s (1996) study, and others like it, do not provide precise data regarding FGC students. The small amount of research that does focus solely on FGC students typically examines statistical relations with other important variables related to college success. For instance, FGC students (as compared to students whose parents had some college experience) have lower SAT scores (Riehl, 1994), make the decision to attend college later in their high-school careers (Fallon, 1997), and choose less selective colleges (MacDermott, Conn, & Owen, 1987). Once enrolled, they tend to experience more difficulties adjusting to college and “have less commitment to the role of student” (Orozco, 1999, p. 70). Some of these difficulties can be tied to lack of support at home (Bartels, 1995; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). FGC students typically do not participate in student organizations, interact with other students or faculty, or study hard (Billson & Terry, 1982), when compared to those whose parents had some college experience.

Given this information, it should come as no surprise that FGC students on average have lower first-semester grades, are more likely to drop out the first semester, or do not return for their second year (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Riehl, 1994). Billson and Terry (1982) suggest that this academic achievement gap may be in part due to the tendency for FGC students to spend almost twice as much time working part-time or full-time jobs (as compared to their second-generation counterparts). While some of the studies cited here were conducted in the 1980s, their findings were mirrored by recent longitudinal research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (1998). According to Rose (1995), the strength of this type of data lies in its ability to sample widely and generalize broadly. Yet, he adds that “the weakness is that detail gets lost” (p. 6).

In 1992, Zwerling and London produced an edited volume dedicated to the experiences of FGC students. While the volume’s focus was primarily on the community college experience, the studies collected therein nonetheless constitute the most comprehensive treatment of FGC students to date. Within this volume,

education scholars explored the similarities and differences among FGC students (based on age, race/ethnicity, gender and class; Kiang, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992), and also described some existing programs designed to enhance the success of FGC students (Chaffe, 1992; Padron, 1992; Stein, 1992). In addition, several chapters (e.g., Lara, 1992; London, 1992) described how the ongoing negotiation of home and college life results in “trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds” (Rendon, 1992, p. 56). The consistent conclusion that FGC students may feel like outsiders at school as well as home is especially relevant to research regarding multiple-identity negotiation.

In fact, some scholars have described the experiences of FGC students as similar to entering an “alien culture” (Chaffe, 1992; Rose, 1989) complete with peculiar ways of seeing, doing, and communicating about things (Bartholomae, 1985). While the transition from high school/full-time employment to college involves some adaptation for all students (in terms of learning a new set of academic and social rules; see Terenzini et al., 1994), FGC students do not have the benefit of parental experience to guide them, either in preparing for college or in helping them understand what will be expected of them after they enroll (Riehl, 1994). In addition to attempting to learn an “alien culture” of academic and social rules, FGC students must also negotiate issues of marginality—on both ends—as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes/families/neighborhoods and college life (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Orbe, 2003). A central aspect of this ongoing process involves negotiating multiple layers of identity.

The increasing number of FGC students on college campuses across the U.S. therefore presents itself as a valuable point of analysis for research that seeks insight into how multiple aspects of identity are negotiated in an educational environment. Specifically, emerging research on FGC students can benefit from scholarship that explores how multidimensional sense of identity is constructed and enacted with others across various contexts. This type of study is also responsive to recent mandates for studies that pay increasing attention to intersections of race, class, and gender and their conjoined impact on communication behaviors (e.g., Allen, 2002; Jackson, 1999). Houston (2002), for example, criticizes existing research in which one aspect of identity is “conceived as universally ‘more important’ than the others” (p. 37). It is thus incumbent on studies focusing on identity negotiation among FGC students to acknowledge that the salience of FGC student status will vary among participants. Research that takes such an approach can apply and extend current communication theories regarding identity negotiation, as well as offer practical guidance to educators who are interested in maximizing the educational experiences of all of their students.

Theoretical Framework

Michael Hecht (1993) outlined the initial conceptualization of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) more than a decade ago. Since that time, he and colleagues have used the theory to study identity negotiation among different cultural groups,

including Jewish Americans (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002; Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Hecht, Jackson, Lindsley, Strauss, & Johnson, 2001) and African Americans (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). According to CTI, identity is “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 230). Identity is located within four different “frames”: (1) within individuals, (2) within relationships, (3) within groups, and (4) communicated between relational partners and group members (Golden et al., 2002). It is important to recognize that these frames permeate all discussions of identity and should not be seen as static or linear (Hecht et al., 2003). Studies of identity should include an awareness of the “interpenetration of frames” (Hecht, 1993, p. 80)—or the ways in which frames can be studied simultaneously. Such analyses can illustrate how frames of identity are competing and/or complementary with one another (Golden et al., 2002) and, consequently, capture the intricate ways that the communication of identity is a complex, multidimensional process. In this regard, each of the frames discussed here serves as a “frame of reference” for a person’s identity (Hecht et al., 2003).

The first frame of identity is the personal frame. Within this context, identity is the result of a person’s self-cognitions, self-concept, and sense of well-being (Golden et al., 2002). The second frame of identity involves the enactment of identity to others. According to CTI, identities are enacted to others through communication (Hecht et al., 2003); thus, the second frame focuses on messages that a person sends that express his or her identity. Individuals can use either direct or indirect messages to reveal their identity to others (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000). A relationship frame of identity, the third in the model, focuses on how identity emerges through our relationships with others, as well as how relationships themselves construct their own identities (Golden et al., 2002; Hecht et al., 2003). The fourth location of identity, identity as a communal frame, occurs in the context of a larger community. “Identity is something held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 237). In this regard, a community possesses a group identity that represents a shared identity of all of its members.

Most of the current work drawing on CTI (e.g., Golden et al., 2002; Hecht et al., 2003) has focused primarily on identity-negotiation processes with specific racial and ethnic groups. However, the theory’s utility for studying other types of cultural identification (age, gender, class, disability, and sexual orientation)—and the ways that each of these may be simultaneously negotiated in different ways—is clear. For example, Orbe (2003) focused on the communicative experiences of African American FGC students. His research found that these students’ communicative experiences varied significantly; in many instances, the divergence could be attributed to how FGC status intersected with other characteristics such as age, gender, and class. Accordingly, being an FGC student may be highly salient to one person’s identity, not important at all to another, or somewhere in between for a third, depending on the situation. (See Hecht & Faulkner, 2000, for a similar discussion of varying ethnic salience among Jewish Americans.) Given the lack of research on the

identity messages of FGC students, and the usefulness of CTI in studying negotiations of multiple identities, the following two research questions were posed:

RQ1: How central is FGC status to the identities of FGC students on different college campuses?

RQ2: How, if at all, is FGC identity negotiated at the personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames of identity?

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were part of a larger project that focused on the communicative experiences of FGC students. Over the course of a two-year period (Summer 1999–Summer 2001), I conducted 13 focus group discussions and four individual in-depth interviews with a total of 71 FGC students and eight FGC graduates. This group comprised 46 women and 33 men. Thirty-four were European Americans, 29 African Americans, 12 Hispanic/Latinos, and four Asian Americans. Fifty-five were traditionally aged and 24 were nontraditionally aged students.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted on six different campuses across three Midwestern states. Participants were drawn from one mid-sized competitively selective university ($n = 16$), one mid-sized public state university ($n = 6$), one large public state university ($n = 27$), one small public university ($n = 6$), one small commuter regional campus ($n = 10$), and one small commuter college focusing on business and legal studies ($n = 14$). At each campus, a faculty/staff liaison assisted in identifying potential study participants. These campus liaisons made announcements to classes and campus organizations. The announcements included a definition of FGC status, and some study volunteers indicated that this announcement was the first time they had consciously thought of themselves as FGC students. Thus, this solicitation procedure was apparently successful in recruiting a sample for which FGC status held varying levels of salience.

Procedures

Lasting approximately 45–75 minutes, focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews used an interview guide (topical protocol) to generate a conversation about “what it’s like to be a first-generation college student.” Consistent with the practices of qualitative research (e.g., van Manen, 1990), open-ended and broadly structured questions were used to allow participants to give attention to issues they regarded as most significant. The interview protocol included questions such as, “How would you describe your transition to college during your first year?”, “What has been the most difficult part of your adjustment?”, “What advice would you give other first-generation college students preparing to attend college?”, “How conscious are you about being the first in your family to attend college?”, and “What are some specific things that made your transition more or less successful?” All in-depth

interviews and focus group discussions, which each included between four and ten participants, were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

I utilized McCracken's (1988) guidelines in order to discover emerging themes within the interview transcripts. According to McCracken (1988, p. 19), analysis can follow these steps: (a) initial sorting out of important from unimportant data; (b) examination of the slices of data for logical relationships and contradictions; (c) rereading of transcripts to confirm or disconfirm emerging relationships and beginning recognition of general properties of the data; (d) identification of general themes and sorting of the themes in a hierarchical fashion, while discarding those that prove useless in the organization; and (e) a review of the emergent themes for each of the transcripts and determination of how these can be synthesized into themes. Van Manen (1990) describes the thematization process as an attempt to give "shape to the shapeless" (p. 88). Therefore, while the procedures can be described in a clear, linear manner, the actual process is often one which is less clear cut and more spiraling (Wright & Orbe, 2003). For example, in the case of some participants' comments, a single narrative was classified within multiple general themes. Multiple classification was especially common for accounts that were lengthy, as well as for those that, regardless of length, reflected multiple points of analysis.

Following procedures for identifying emerging themes in qualitative data (McCracken, 1988), narratives that focused on identity negotiation were isolated from those discussing other FGC communicative experiences. Three criteria—repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984)—helped shape the next step in the analysis process. The *repetition* criterion refers to the repetition of keywords and phrases, and words that are "special" or significant in describing a certain experience or feeling. The *recurrence* criterion examines the meanings that were threaded throughout the text, even if the participants used different wording to represent the same meaning. The *forcefulness* criterion enables the researcher to understand the importance or uniqueness of certain words or phrases. Forcefulness is typically displayed through vocal inflection, volume, or emphasis. Transcription conventions indicated vocal forcefulness within the interview and focus group transcripts by using all capital letters or boldface type.

To allow participants to provide meaningful feedback on how their narratives were analyzed and interpreted, focus groups facilitated at the later stages of data collection were used as a source of member checking (Scheibel, 1992). Replicating a naturalistic inquiry process utilized by Bauer and Orbe (2001), I divided data collection into two parts. Initially, nine focus groups were conducted, and their discussions transcribed and analyzed to reveal 18 different preliminary themes. Once these preliminary topical ideas were established, four additional focus groups were facilitated. The same topical protocol was used for these discussions as for the first nine, but in addition, I also asked participants in these latter groups to provide feedback on the preliminary themes that were beginning to emerge from the

thematization process. In this regard, I was able to understand the narratives from participants within a contextual framework broader than any one particular focus-group discussion.

Findings

The analysis of transcripts generated a number of themes regarding the identity of FGC students. Utilizing the four identity frames of CTI (Hecht, 1993), the findings are organized into two major sections. The first describes various levels of FGC student status among participants (RQ1), while the second shares accounts of how the personal frame of identity is enacted relationally with others (RQ2).

Centrality of Identity via Personal Frames

High-salience FGC student identity. When asked, “How conscious are you about being the first in your family to attend college?”, many participants stated that it was something that they thought about “every day.” One African American male FGC student attending a selective university explained:

It sits in my head every day. It’s like I know that I’m the first one to get this far for my family ... I know that my mom is depending on me to make a very good example for my little brother. So, I have to do my best at all times.

Many of the participants described how their FGC student status helped to motivate them at college. Several students of color were particularly adamant in describing how this aspect of their identity is important because it serves as an important link to others in their families who can build on their collegiate success. One African American woman who was excelling at a selective Midwestern university explained:

Sometimes it gets really hard—What keeps me going is that I am the first in my family [to attend college]. And I have four younger brothers and sisters that look up to me ... That’s what keeps me going instead of just shutting down or throwing a temper tantrum. I just keep going. I can’t do anything else but finish.

For some, the centrality of their FGC student identity served as a key motivator for success. However, other participants acknowledged the pressure that this status exerted on their college experiences. Like the student who earlier described his FGC student status as like “sitting in his head everyday,” a Latina student from a public university also shared the weight that sometimes accompanied this aspect of her identity:

I think about it a lot. I stress a lot about classes, knowing that it is all of my family’s hopes and dreams ... everything that they couldn’t do, that my brothers and sisters could not do. I’m doing it for everyone. I’m the youngest of four and the first person to graduate from high school, first and only one to attend the university. My dad is one of 12 and my mom is one of 13. Out of all of my dad’s side and all of my mom’s side, I’m actually the second person to go to the university.

Another European American woman at a more selective university in the same state

described how she attempted to avoid the extra pressure that came with being an FGC student:

I know that I think about it all of the time. Sometimes I try to avoid thinking about it, in terms of being a first generation college student. I just think that, okay, I'm here, I have to do this. I have to get it done. I have to do what I want [to] do—my goals. Okay, I'm the only one. I'm the last one in my family. So, I have to do this. I have to get my college degree and bring it back home to my parents.

For a number of participants, FGC student status functioned as a salient aspect of their identity because of the hardships that they experienced, compared to students who had the benefits of parents who had gone to college. While this was an issue across a number of different focus group students, it seemed most relevant to students who were attending a selective university “where students had a lot of money.” Several of the students remarked that “they [had] pretty much put themselves through school,” a reality that situated their FGC status as a salient part of their personal identity frame—especially when they lacked the privilege afforded to non-FGC students. One Latina student offered the following example:

I think about it all the time, especially because they [students whose parents went to college] have so many more benefits than us [FGC students]. Take my one friend, for example. She got the same score on the ACT test that I did. But then her dad made her take that Princeton Review course—paid \$800 for her—and then had her retake the test. She got a 27 on it after she scored an 18. I couldn't believe it. I just remember telling my mom, and she was like, “I wish that I could do it for you, but is it that important?”

Another Latina student at the same selective university enumerated additional privileges that non-FGC students unconsciously benefited from:

Those kids have their own computers in their rooms ... you stand in line at the computer lab forever—late at night whenever you can get on a computer. But they can get up whenever they want and work on their computer. I don't know ... they just have that extra edge on everything. I mean they get their books right then and there, but we have to wait until the financial aid checks come in. So, we have to usually spend extra money on the new books. I don't know ... It's a lot of small things.

Variable-salience FGC student identity. Not all participants described their FGC student status as central to their personal frames of identity, however. A focus group comprising women at a large Midwestern public university manifested considerable difference of opinion about FGC status. For example, one European American woman stated, “If I were to describe myself, [FGC student status] wouldn't be the first thing that I would say about myself. It would come closer to the end of the list. It's not a big deal for me. When I talk with other people, it just doesn't come up.” However, another European American woman confessed, “I do think about it. I think about it a lot when I start thinking about my family. I am the only one who ever went to college.”

When asked directly about the salience of FGC student status on their identity, many participants described it as highly situational. In other words, it was contingent

on other things that were going on in their lives. This was most evident when participants discussed different periods of their college years. For example, when asked about how central being an FGC was to her identity, one European American nontraditional student who was currently working part-time on her Ph.D. at a mid-sized selective university said:

It depends on what is happening in my life ... when taking certain classes, I always felt like I didn't know what the heck they were talking about. I felt like I started on a different level than a lot of people. And I was always trying to catch up.

Another student thought about his family's lack of previous experience in college when he chose to attend a local branch campus instead of going away to college. "I thought it would be easier to be at home," he shared.

Two occasions in particular seem to trigger a greater consciousness for FGC students regarding their identities as the first in their families to attend college. The first occasion was during their initial experiences on campus. One Hispanic man, who was attending a large public university, explained the surreal nature of actually being on campus during his first semester:

I used to think about it a lot at the beginning. I kept thinking about it probably like the entire first month. "Wow, I'm in college. Wow, I'm the first one to go. Wow, I'm going to classes. I have my backpack and everything. I look like those people on TV that go to school."

Another student remembers thinking about being an FGC student during the first few days of class. The normal anxiety of being able to complete the work was magnified by feelings that "people like me don't go to college." She shared with the focus group that she "definitely felt out of place." In fact, she recalled, "looking around at all of the people in the room and thinking: 'I bet all of their parents went to college.'" For many of these participants, becoming acclimated to college life resulted in a reduced level of consciousness of their FGC student status. However, graduation was the second occasion that typically triggered a resurgence in terms of their identity of FGC students. One European American student, who relied on student loans throughout his tenure at a large public university, described how his FGC student status "hit him" when he received notification that he would be "paying the loans back until 2026!" Another FGC student, a Latina from the same university, shared that her feelings of being at a disadvantage resurfaced while she completed graduate school applications. She described "being amazed at the amount of support that her boyfriend [a non-FGC student] got from his family ... something completely lacking from [her] own family." For many participants, graduation represented a time when they were able to witness exactly how much their accomplishments at college meant to their families. One European American man at a small public university reflected:

The time that I thought about it most was at graduation. My parents and grandparents were there ... just seeing the smiles on their faces and how much they enjoyed that ... that was the most rewarding thing that I had ever gone through.

Nonsalient FGC student status. While the vast majority of participants described the central or variable ways in which FGC student status functioned as part of their identity, a small but significant number of participants reported that they had never really thought about being the first in their family to go to college. Most of these individuals reported that the first time they had recognized this aspect of their identities was when they were informed of the study. As one European American man, who attended a community college explained:

I never thought about it. When I heard about the study ... that was the first time I thought about [being an FGC student]. I don't think that there is a big difference. Everyone comes to college not knowing any one ... And we are all here, going to class on the first day. It's all the same.

FGC students who described their status as nonsalient were attending, or had attended, less prestigious campuses (e.g., a local two-year business college). Student comments from students at these schools revealed that being surrounded by students from similar circumstances reduced the likelihood that FGC status served as a point of differentiation in their educational experiences.

In addition, an analysis of the narratives across saliency levels revealed that certain types of students were more likely to regard their FGC status as more salient than others. Students of color, students from a lower socioeconomic status, and nontraditional female students most often described a high saliency regarding their FGC status. In comparison, those FGC students who were White, from a middle to high socioeconomic status, and of traditional college age were more likely to experience being a first-generation college student with variable salience. Interestingly, the only four-year university participants to describe their FGC status as nonsalient were traditionally aged European American male students.

Enacted and Relational Frames of FGC Student Identity

According to CTI, individuals reveal their identities to others within the enacted frame of identity (Hecht et al., 2003). Decisions about disclosing identity, however, are situated in the context of other frames (or layers) of identity. The interpenetration of layers, or the ways in which each layer is present in one or multiple frames (Golden et al., 2002), made it extremely difficult to thematize FGC student identity messages via four separate sections. Therefore, instead of utilizing the four frames of identity as an organizational structure to address RQ2, I discuss the identity messages of FGC students by comparing and contrasting those that occur at home and on campus in the context of these frames of identity.

Identity enactment at home. By definition, being an FGC student is initially manifested with the relational frame of identity. In other words, being a first-generation college student is contingent on the fact that those to which you are relationally tied did not attend college. This is an important consideration given that many participants described that their FGC student status was enacted at home—a context where being a FGC student often emerged as a salient point of difference for

family members and friends. This section describes the identity negotiation process, sometimes mutual, sometimes not, that FGC students are challenged by within their home environments.

In several focus-group discussions, participants explained how they were given “special attention” during weekend trips home. Specifically, some FGC students explained that, while they were home, they benefited from special meals, shopping trips, monetary gifts, and extra attention from relatives. One African American student at a large public university explained how he was typically “treated like a king”:

I think about it [being an FGC student] a lot, especially when I go home and visit on the weekends. When I go home, I get treated like a king! I hear that my mom hadn't cooked the whole week, but as soon as I make it in town she's in there cooking up a storm! It definitely comes with its perks. My siblings definitely think that I get more attention now.

Another African American male student from the same university explained that, during his last trip home, his church acknowledged his presence and took up a special offering for him. He went on to explain how others—past classmates and younger children in the neighborhood—always want to talk with him to see how he is doing, something that is tied to “the neighborhood that [he] grew up in ... only a select few make it out.”

African American and Latino FGC students were especially likely to feel that they were representing the larger community back home. One African American man related a story that illustrated how many members of his community regarded him as a liaison to college life:

So, now when I go home, my mother is quick to say, “Come to work with me.” I would go to work with her, but I would basically sit in a chair and watch her do people's hair. All the women will say, “Oh, you are so-so's boy. You are so handsome. You go to college?” ... They talk to you like you are not a regular person any more. They talked to you like you are—not a superstar—but like you came back from outer space or something. “So what was it like there?”

For several students, additional attention from family and friends was less direct. Some, for instance, described how they would not receive direct messages from family members about the significance of their identity as college students. Instead, they would hear from others that those very family members frequently told them how proud they were. One European American man explained:

It's weird ... my older brothers and sisters tell me that my dad keeps telling everyone else how proud he is of me. But I've never heard it from him ... It's like he's keeping a secret from me that he's proud. He'll tell my brother how proud he is of me. And then I'll walk in the room, [and he'll scream]: “Hey your football team sucks!”

While several individuals described how their FGC student status was enacted at home in positive ways, such was not the case for all participants. Some explained that college was not a topic that was discussed in their home, and they received clear

messages that it was to be avoided. One woman explained that part of this, for her, related to sex roles in her culture:

When you get home, it's like, okay, you are not in this Latina college student identity any more. You are now back home where your college life doesn't matter ... you have to do what everyone tells you ... you have to learn to bite your lip.

Several nontraditional female FGC students also explained how they explicitly avoided behaviors that would give prominence to their college studies. For some, including one European American woman who had begun her doctoral studies at a mid-sized selective university, this included avoiding studying around certain family members:

My husband is still against college ... I don't really tell him a lot about it. It's like my own little world. He complains when I stay up late studying for tests. For a while I couldn't bring a book out if he was home. He had to be at work or out.

Despite attempts to downplay their identity as FGC students, several participants described instances where it remained a point of contention with others who were perceived to be "threatened by," or "jealous of" their accomplishments. One European American woman explained how this was the case when communicating with one of her older brothers:

I try to—to be honest with you—avoid acting like I've got all this new information in my head because they don't like it. I have a brother and we usually talk about different things. I can't remember the specific topic, but I asked him, "Where did you read that? Where did you get that statistic from?" He just got irate! "The big college woman wants proof!" He thinks that I've changed, [and am] trying to act better than the rest of them.

While FGC student identity is defined in terms of family, it also impinges on nonfamilial friendships. A European American woman at a mid-sized public university shared a story involving her best friend.

I have a best friend, and she never went to college. She could paint very well—and she could have had such a great career. But I get ... I don't know if it is being resentful ... but it seems as if she just gets mad at me because I am at school trying to do things. When I do go home, she wants to go out to the bar where she works. I usually go for a little while, but when I'm ready to leave, she'll say, "Oh, are you going to get your degree? Too good to hang out with us now?" ... You do get that friction sometimes which make it easy to just NOT go home.

Identity enactment on campus. At home, being an FGC student was nearly always salient. Whether communicated overtly or covertly, family and friends would insist on identity negotiation regardless of the students' preference. On campus, however, FGC student identity was enacted mostly at the discretion of the FGC student, since there were no overt identifying markers. Out of the total number of participants, only one (a European American woman) explained that she was proud to disclose that she was an [FGC student] in her conversations with others. Being an FGC student was central to her self-concept and gave her accomplishments particular

importance. In comparison, a handful of students stated that they typically did not enact their identity as FGC students to others. For some, especially those who were attending the more selective universities, coming from a family without college degrees was “embarrassing.” One African American woman, for example, explained that she didn’t want others to think that her parents didn’t value education.

I do think about it [being an FGC student] a lot, but I don’t just go around and announce it. I do think about it a lot, and I do know and understand the reasons why neither one of my parents could go. But I don’t know if others will understand ... they may think that my parents don’t value what goes on at college.

For these students, a negative stigma was attached to being an FGC student. However, decisions to avoid enacting this aspect of identity were made based on other reasons as well. One European American student at a large public university was clear that the reason why he did not disclose that part of his identity is because he didn’t want to be defined primarily as an FGC student.

I don’t really tell other people that I’m first generation, it’s something that I just keep to myself ... but for no particular reason. I just don’t feel that they need to know. I don’t feel a need to share. I don’t want pity or praise for that, I want it for me. First-generation college student ... that’s not how I want to be known. I just want to be known as me, myself.

As revealed in the transcripts, many FGC students assume that most—if not all—of the students that they come into contact with come from families with a legacy of college experience. Such was the case with one nontraditional female student who was attending a community college.

I definitely felt out of place. I’m looking around at all of the people in the classroom and thinking: “I bet all of their parents went to college.” I don’t want to tell them that mine didn’t ... I would not tell people ... I still haven’t told people that my mom and dad didn’t graduate from high school. I bet I’ve only told 2–3 people total ... I kinda wait to see what they are going to say. But, I don’t know. I don’t want to be the only one in the group whose parents didn’t attend college.

Making decisions based on the situational elements inherent in the communication setting (relationship with the other person, timing, context of particular discussion) is common to the identity messages within the enacted frame of identity (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000). For FGC students, this was reflected in explicit identity messages that were enacted once they learned that others were FGC students themselves, or displayed some sensitivity to their experiences. However, in other instances, identity messages were expressed to others who were not aware of the privilege that was associated with having parents who went to college. Such was often the case for FGC students whose roommates seemed to take college less seriously because “it was handed to them on a silver platter by their parents.” Within each focus group discussion, participants described their disbelief in terms of how non-FGC roommates treated their college experience. Many recounted how roommates would “sleep until noon,” “miss class all the time,” and “not study at all,” while they “never missed a class despite holding down two jobs to help pay for

school.” In several instances, FGC students would get so frustrated with these types of roommates that they would confront them by “telling them how lucky they were to have so much family support.” Such conversations typically included disclosures about their own backgrounds, reaffirming the vigor in which the FGC students maximized their college experiences.

Discussion

Results indicated considerable variability among FGC students in terms of the centrality of that aspect of their identities. One of the most important determinants of that salience may have been the demographic composition of the student body on their campus. For example, the two participants quoted in the section on nonsalient FGC student identity both attended a regional campus that served a large proportion of FGC students. In short, these two traditionally aged students—and others like them—less frequently discussed the saliency of being an FGC student than their nontraditionally aged counterparts. Especially during the morning and afternoon hours when these two participants took most of their classes, they were no different than most of the classmates: 18–25-year-old European American FGC students. In this context, they were not “others,” but they were members of the predominant group.

The findings highlight three specific points of conclusion. First, the saliency of FGC student status in the overall construction of identity varied greatly. The centrality of FGC student identity was largely influenced by situational context (home versus school) and type of campus (selective, public, community college, or university). Second FGC student status appeared to be more salient when it intersected with other aspects of a person’s co-cultural identity, especially those based on race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. For some FGC students, the privilege associated with being male, European American, middle/upper class, and/or within the traditional age for college students enables FGC student status to remain on the margins of their self-concepts. Third, and finally, FGC students appear to lack any sense of community with other groups of FGC students. The findings reveal that first-generation college students are more likely to feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences with other FGC students; yet, this did not occur as frequently as one would expect. When FGC students did support one another, it was most often done within the context of one or two individuals. For the vast majority of participants, being a part of the study’s focus group was the very first time that they knowingly found themselves within a large group of FGC students. In the absence of any particular form of a collective “we,” individual relationships with others—family, friends, and roommates—have a greater influence in terms of how their identity is enacted. Each of these three points has clear implications in terms of research, theory, and practice.

Theoretical Implications

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) represents a theoretical framework that

has great utility for explorations of how multiple identities are negotiated across various contexts. At the core of theory is the idea that “communication shapes identity while identity shapes communication” (Golden et al., 2002, p. 46). The research described in this manuscript extends a small, but growing, body of research by communication scholars who have used the theory to study the complex ways in which identity is negotiated at multiple layers of interaction. While the study has demonstrated the utility of CTI in framing the identity messages of FGC students, it also has prompted a number of questions. Due to space limitations, I highlight two of the most pressing here.

Unlike most aspects of cultural identity studied by communication scholars, FGC student status does not exist within the context of a larger community with which individuals can identify. Many of the participants of this study were conscious of the unique challenges that came with being the first in the family to attend college, yet were unaware (until learning of the study) of the existing language and research surrounding this phenomenon. This scenario generates a number of questions for scholars interested in studying identity in educational contexts. First, how is identity negotiation affected when a salient aspect of a student’s identity exists without any form of communal association? Second, since the communal frame of identity is one of four levels of analysis that are central to the CTI paradigm (e.g., Hecht et al., 2002), does the absence of a communal frame of identity in the case of FGC student identity point to a fundamental flaw of CTI? Does CTI offer some alternate interpretation of this scenario that accommodates and explains a lack of a communal frame of identity? In the context of this study, FGC students appeared to rely more heavily, in the absence of a larger sense of community, on relational frames of identity. Does the same occur for other groups with salient identity markers that may be invisible to others?

A second pressing issue, which has not explicitly been explored in previous CTI studies, involves instances when a person has little choice to enact an aspect of their identity because it is directly or indirectly enacted by others. In more traditional identity theory terms, attributed identity as a college student is often inescapable when FGC students return to their communities of origin, regardless of whether the student chooses to avow such an identity. CTI, through the concept of interpenetration, allows researchers to look simultaneously at the personal, enacted, and relational frames of identity. However, the enacted frame of identity connotes agency on behalf of the individual (i.e., he or she makes decisions to send explicit or implicit messages regarding their identity to others). How would CTI scholars explain interactions where a person has less/no control over when a certain aspect of their identity is enacted within interactions by others?

Recognizing FGC Identity Negotiation in Classrooms

For those of us who experience higher education from the standpoint of an FGC student, it is clear that the academy changes “foreigners” who enter its culture, more so than being changed by them (Rendon, 1992). While a number of different

programs have been developed to increase the enrollment and matriculation of FGC students (Chaffe, 1992; Padron, 1992; Stein, 1992), the impact of these support services on the larger cultural framework of most universities is questionable (Shor, 1987). What has been largely absent from most discussions regarding this issue is the role that faculty members can play in facilitating a cultural environment that enhances the success of FGC students. Accordingly, this final section draws from the findings of this study to discuss how teachers can figure into identity negotiation processes for FGC students. First, I discuss how FGC student status can be added to existing discussions on how various forms of privilege are enacted in the classroom. Second, I identify several challenges faced by professors who are interested in enhancing their communication effectiveness with all students.

In the past ten to 15 years, the concept of privilege has been used to enlighten educators to the small, but significant, ways in which majority group members benefit from existing social, organizational, and societal structures. Initially, this work focused on White privilege and male privilege (e.g., McIntosh, 1988). Recently, Martin and Davis (2001) have offered specific guidelines as to how whiteness can be incorporated into intercultural communication courses. While their work points to an important area of application with communication curricula, I would argue that educators need to gain a greater awareness of various locations of privilege and conduct self-examinations of the current practices, in terms of both pedagogy and curricula. Some current treatments (e.g., Orbe & Harris, 2001) do explain how educators can expand traditional discussions of privilege beyond that which is closely associated with gender and race. By expanding the conversation about relative privilege in society in such a manner, students of all backgrounds can achieve greater consciousness regarding the dynamics of privileges as applied to FGC student status, as well as to age, disability, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Instructors in all manner of classes—not simply those that focus on issues of power, difference, or culture—can find ways to implement such conversations.

As articulated by McIntosh (1989), “unless we study what we haven’t noticed, we will never understand what we think we have noticed” (p. 11). Traditionally, the issues of race, ethnicity, and/or gender have taken center stage in terms of research that seeks to make connections between diversity issues and effective communication practices. Research on FGC students can extend this body of research and create new opportunities to explore the complexities regarding multiple-identity negotiation in the college classroom. It also can help sensitize educators to consider the diversity in their classrooms in the broadest possible terms. With an increased awareness of the multidimensional nature of students’ identities, teachers can then begin to discern what their role should be in terms of increasing their students’ sense of agency as those students negotiate multiple aspects of their identity.

I close this article by identifying several challenges for classroom teachers who are committed to embracing new conceptualizations of multiple diversities. First, acknowledge the diversity within your class beyond that which is most obvious in terms of race, gender, and age. This translates into giving attention to both the visible, and less visible, aspects of each student’s identity. Second, do not automati-

cally assume that one aspect of a student's identity is naturally more salient to his or her overall self-concept than others. This is only possible if individuals acknowledge the diversity within cultural group experiences (e.g., not all FGC students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds). Third, listen carefully to the identity messages that students send in their verbal, nonverbal, and written messages. This process can provide a productive point of reflection in terms of identifying course readings, assignments, and practices that may privilege certain group experiences over others. Each of these challenges speaks specifically to the experiences of FGC students but is also simultaneously applicable to general issues regarding identity, difference, and effective communication—each of which remains crucially important for communication education scholarship.

References

- Allen, B. J. (2002). Goals for emancipatory communication research on black women. In M. Houston & O. I. Davis (Eds.), *Centering ourselves: African American feminist and womanist studies of discourse* (pp. 21–34). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Bartels, K. (1995). *Psychosocial predictors of adjustment to the first year of college: A comparison of first-generation and SGCs*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write* (pp. 134–165). New York: Guilford.
- Bauer, K., & Orbe, M. (2001). Networking, coping, and communicating about a medical crisis: A phenomenological inquiry of transplant recipient communication. *Health Communication, 13*, 141–161.
- Billson, J. M., & Terry, M. B. (1982). In search of the silken purse: Factors in attrition among first-generation students. *College and University, 58*, 57–75.
- Brooks-Terry, M. (1988). Tracing the disadvantages of first-generation college students: An application of Sussman's option sequence model. In S. K. Steinmetz (Ed.), *Family support systems across the life span* (pp. 121–134). New York: Plenum Press.
- Chaffe, J. (1992). Transforming educational dreams into education reality. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 81–88). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fallon, M. V. (1997). The school counselor's role in first generation students' college plans. *The School Counselor, 44*, 384–393.
- Golden, D. R., Niles, T. A., & Hecht, M. L. (2002). Jewish American identity. In J. N. Martin, T. K. Nakayama, & L. A. Flores (Eds.), *Readings in intercultural communication: Experiences and contexts* (pp. 44–52). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hecht, M. L. (1993). 2002—A research odyssey: Toward the development of a communication theory of identity. *Communication Monographs, 60*, 76–81.
- Hecht, M. L., & Faulkner, S. (2000). Sometimes Jewish, sometimes not: The closeting of Jewish American identity. *Communication Studies, 51*, 372–287.
- Hecht, M. L., Faulkner, S. L., Meyer, C., Niles, T. A., Golden, D. A., & Cutler, M. (2002). Jewish American identity: A communication theory of identity analysis of the television series "Northern Exposure." *Journal of Communication, 52*, 852–869.
- Hecht, M. L., Jackson, R. L., Lindsley, S., Strauss, S., & Johnson, K. (2001). Language and ethnicity: Layering identities as frames. In H. Giles & W. P. Robinson (Eds.), *The new handbook of language and social psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 429–450). New York: Wiley.

- Hecht, M. L., Jackson, R. L., & Ribeau, S. A. (2003). *African American communication: Exploring identity and culture*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hertel, J. B. (2002). College student generational status: Similarities, differences, and factors in college adjustment. *Psychological Record*, 52(1), 3–18.
- Houston, M. (2002). Seeking difference: African Americans in interpersonal communication research, 1975–2000. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 13, 25–41.
- Jackson, R. L. (1999). *The negotiation of cultural identity*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Karabel, J., & Halsey, A. H. (1977). Educational research: A review and interpretation. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 323–347). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kiang, P. N. (1992). Issues of curriculum and community for first-generation Asian Americans in college. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 97–112). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lara, J. (1992). Reflections: Bridging cultures. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 65–70). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lavin, D. E., & Hyllegard, D. (1996). *Changing the odds: Open admissions and the life chances of the disadvantaged*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- London, H. B. (1992). Transformations: Cultural challenges faced by first-generation students. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 5–12). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- MacDermott, K. G., Conn, P. A., & Owen, J. W. (1987). The influence of parental education level on college choice. *Journal of College Admissions*, 115, 3–10.
- Martin, J., & Davis, O. I. (2001). Conceptual foundations for teaching about whiteness in intercultural communication courses. *Communication Education*, 50, 298–313.
- McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondence through work in women's studies. *Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Paper Series*, 189, 1–19.
- McIntosh, P. (1989). Feeling like a fraud: Part Two. *Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Paper Series*, 37, 1–14.
- National Center for Education Statistics (1998). First-generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education. Retrieved December 15, 2002, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98082.html>
- Orbe, M. (2003). African American first generation college student communicative experiences. *Electronic Journal of Communication/La Revue Electronique de Communication*, 13(2/3).
- Orbe, M., & Harris, T. M. (2001). *Interracial communication: Theory into practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Orozco, C. D. (1999). Factors contributing to the psychosocial adjustment of Mexican American college students. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59, 4359.
- Owen, W. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 274–287.
- Padron, E. J. (1992). The challenge of first-generation college students: A Miami-Dade perspective. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 71–80). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Query, J. M., Parry, D., & Flint, L. J. (1992). The relationship among social support, communication competence, and cognitive depression for nontraditional students. *Journal of Applied Communication*, 20, 78–94.
- Rendon, L. I. (1992). From the barrio to the academy: Revelations of a Mexican American “scholarship girl.” In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 55–64). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Richardson, R. C., & Skinner, E. F. (1992). Helping first-generation minority students achieve

- degrees. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 29–44). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Riehl, R. J. (1994). The academic preparation, aspirations, and first-year performance of first-generation students. *College and University*, 70, 14–19.
- Rodriguez, R. (1975). Going home again: The new American scholarship boy. *American Scholar*, 44, 15–28.
- Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the boundary: The struggles and achievements of America's underprepared*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rose, M. (1995). *Possible lives: The promise of public education in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Scheibel, D. (1992). Faking identity in clubland: The communicative performance of “fake ID.” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 12, 160–175.
- Shor, I. (1987). *Critical teaching and everyday life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stein, W. J. (1992). Tribal colleges: A success story. In L. S. Zwerling & H. B. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 89–96). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Upcraft, M. L., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35(1), 57–73.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching the lived experience: Human science for action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wright, T. J., & Orbe, M. (2003). Turning the tables of analysis in intercultural communication research: Studying the facework strategies used by “anonymous” European American reviewers. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 14, 1–14.
- York-Anderson, D. C., & Bowman, S. L. (1991). Assessing the college knowledge of first-generation and second-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 116–122.
- Zwerling, L. S., & London, H. B. (Eds.) (1992). *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Received September 20, 2003

Accepted January 19, 2004

Copyright of Communication Education is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.