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As higher education institutions make intentional steps to include underrepresented groups and ensure their success in school, it is particularly important to understand their epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development as a key factor of supporting their academic and developmental needs. Institutions of higher education are challenged to prepare graduates for engaged citizenship in an increasingly multifaceted world that requires college graduates to demonstrate higher-level order epistemological abilities to successfully navigate in the 21st century. This qualitative study investigates self-authorship theory through the perceptions and experiences of first-generation undergraduate students, contextualizes periods of cognitive dissonance, examines contextual and environmental factors related to development, and frames these experiences as catalysts that promote self-authoring behaviors. This study captures the unique stories of 14 first-generation undergraduates at a public 4-year comprehensive liberal arts institution on the West Coast of the United States. Future research and practical application strategies to promote self-authorship are provided for higher education professionals to intentionally design supportive learning environments in an effort to better serve the developmental needs of first-generation undergraduates.

Keywords: college student development, epistemological development, first-generation undergraduate, self-authorship theory

Institutions of higher education are increasingly becoming diverse, with more students enrolling who are the first in their families to attend college (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; Levin & Dean, 2012). Currently, more than 40% of first-year students enrolled in higher education identify as first-generation undergraduates (Davis, 2010). Because college completion rates are lower for first-generation college students compared to their counterparts (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2005), most of the existing scholarship on first-generation college students focuses on their retention and persistence (Petty, 2014; De-Freitas & Rinn, 2013). Consequently, much less attention has been allocated to nontraditional measures of student development and learning that contribute to holistic developmental outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In a broader context, college graduates are expected to make complex moral decisions, balance mutual relationships, behave in ways reflective of their values, and integrate their internal belief system with their decision-making methods (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2014). Indeed, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has adopted revised standards that include intrapersonal development and interpersonal competences (CAS, 2008). Similarly, the desired student learning outcomes articulated by most colleges and universities include expectations that students develop the capacity to self-author. Self-authorship is an "orientation to knowledge construction and evaluation based on balancing an understanding of the con-

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textual nature of knowledge with interpersonally grounded goals, beliefs, and values" (Baxter Magolda, 2007a, p. 32). An internally grounded perspective, self-authorship guides how college students choose to interact with the world. Baxter Magolda (2009) affirms that people who move toward self-authorship are more capable of responding appropriately to life's difficulties, participating in genuine relationships, and focusing on a sense of internal control. Baxter Magolda articulated the significant role of higher education in the context of developing students:

> Higher education has a responsibility to help young adults make the transition from being shaped by society to shaping society in their role as leaders in society's future. Balancing individual goals with responsibility to the community requires an internally defined sense of self from which productive interactions with others stem. The curriculum and cocurriculum of undergraduate, graduate and professional educational settings are opportunities to assist in this transition. (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 630)

Whereas studies on self-authorship suggest that almost all undergraduates do not typically achieve self-authorship during their college tenure (e.g., Kegan, 1994; Pizzolato, 2007), the ways in which first-generation students experience self-authorship is not yet understood. On the contrary, studies involving underrepresented populations have noted different results (Pizzolato, 2003; Pizzolato et al., 2012). More studies on the epistemological development of underrepresented student groups, including first-generation college students, are needed to ensure that the documented journey of self-authorship development represents the diverse population enrolled in today's higher education institutions.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions: (a) How do first-generation undergraduate students experience self-authorship? (b) What collegiate experiences and conditions foster self-authorship development among first-generation undergraduates? This research study draws heavily from the foundational theoretical framework of self-authorship theory developed by Baxter Magolda (1999) based on her 25-year longitudinal study.

Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda's influential research is considered to be one of the most comprehensive frameworks of epistemological and psychoso-

cial development to date. Baxter Magolda drew on the theoretical underpinnings of Kegan (1994), Perry (1968), and King and Kitchener (1994) as a foundation to evolve the theory of self-authorship. Kegan's (1980) research was rooted in the work of Piaget (1965), who identified constructive developmental psychology as the study of progression in terms of how individuals construct meaning making. Kegan (1980) concluded the role of internal self-awareness is critical to one's understanding of how one orients with the world. Developing the capacity to think contextually and behave in ways that are congruent with one's belief system are central components to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

The three dimensions of self-authorship include epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains (Baxter Magolda, 2007b; Kegan, 1994). Three fundamental questions address each of the dimensions of self-authorship: (a) Epistemological – "How do I know?" (b) Intrapersonal –"Who am I?" (c) Interpersonal – "How do I want to construct relationships with others" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p.15). Advancement through the developmental phases involves a shift in meaning making where an individual transitions from relying on sources of external control to an internal locus of control (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Based on Baxter Magolda's (1999) seminal study of 101 college student participants, fewer than 2% demonstrated self-authoring behaviors during their undergraduate education, failing to develop the ability to establish their own beliefs, values, or knowledge. Rather than possessing an internal locus of control, participants were heavily reliant on authority figures as a guiding force of knowledge and followed external formulas for achievement in both their academic and personal lives. This lack of independence led to a full dependence on external sources for formulaic approaches to lived experiences and knowledge construction (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Self-Authorship Phases of Development

Baxter Magolda and King (2012) advanced Baxter Magolda's (2001) existing model of self-authorship to include specific developmental pathways identified as a spectrum of progressive growth. The first phase, external meaning

making, depicts a reliance on external authority for knowledge construction and lacking internal self-directive behavior. The next phase, entering crossroads, involves questioning authority and developing the internal voice through external and internal conflict negotiation. The following phase, leaving crossroads, is identified as a more independent construction of meaning and recognition of the internal voice with a commitment to fostering the internal voice. In the final phase, internal foundations, one develops a profound commitment to trusting and using one's internal voice as the basis to make sense of the external world and understand their role in life (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). The term internal foundations will be utilized throughout the article to specify the last phase of self-authorship development.

First-Generation
Students/Underrepresented Populations

For the purposes of this study, first-generation students are defined as students whose parents earned a high school diploma or less (NCES, 2005). First-generation students experience a considerable range of unique challenges associated with attaining their dream of earning a college degree. These challenges can include low self-confidence, low persistence, lack of family support, feelings of seclusion, lack of social capital, and lack of academic preparedness (Astin, 1984; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although research on self-authorship development among first-generation students is incomplete, prior studies involving other marginalized and underrepresented groups suggest that increased life challenges lead to more opportunities for dissonance at an earlier age than traditional students (Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011; Pizzolato et al., 2012). In turn, the experiences of dissonance create opportunities for self-authorship development (Pizzolato, 2005). Studies by Pizzolato, Chaudhari, Murrell, Podobnik, and Schaeffer (2008), Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda, (2013), and Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) document a positive association with ethnic identity development and self-authorship during undergraduate education. As participants were confronted with dissonant experiences, they were challenged to utilize multiple psychological contexts and prompted to question their

epistemological, intrapersonal, and intrapersonal frameworks. Pizzolato et al. (2012) described psychological contexts as "not specific to the campus, nor is it bound to perceptions of others' attitudes or actions. Rather, the psychological context deals with the psychological schemas that students carry with them across physical environments" (p. 661). Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004), for instance, found that Latina/o undergraduates who had experienced racial discrimination in their college years were impelled to challenge their current ways of making meaning and develop a more clearly defined internal voice. Indeed, in a study by Barber et al. (2013), 30% of participants who experienced significant transformations in self-authorship were students of color. Torres and Hernandez (2007) proposed a model to outline the distinctive features associated with ethnic identity development in relation to each phase of self-authorship development. The model illustrates contextual factors related to self-authorship development including family, culture, environment, and social relationships.

Pizzolato's (2003) study of high-risk students provides pertinent clues about first-generation students. Pizzolato defined a high-risk student as "one whose academic background, prior performance, or personal characteristics may contribute to academic failure or early withdrawal from college" (p. 798), many of which are first-generation students. The findings from this study revealed that provocative experiences in high-risk students' lives led to dissonance but were not enough to stimulate self-authorship development. That is, the student must be willing "to cognitively engage in the self-authoring process, along with appropriate scaffolding from others" (p. 808). Put another way, support from family, peers, and institutions can equip students to cope with life's challenges and shape self-authorship pathways. Pizzolato et al. (2012) affirmed that university, family, and peer expectations emerged as influential to participants' self-authorship development.

Jehangir et al. (2011) investigated first-generation students who participated in a multicultural learning community as a way to foster self-authorship. In their study, only a few students of 24 reached the self-authoring phase. When students engaged in learning that integrated their lived experiences and had structured opportunities to reflect on their multiple

identities, they developed the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship. Though the study circumscribed participants' experiences to the multicultural learning community without factoring in other life experiences, the study confirms that postsecondary initiatives can make a difference in self-authorship development among first-generation students.

Based on more than 30 years of well-documented research, first-generation students remain at a disadvantage for completing their degree compared with their counterparts (Astin, 1984; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Developmental research on first-generation students' experiences with self-authorship development is sparse. First-generation students who successfully matriculate may encounter unique experiences that influence their epistemological development. Without an understanding of the ways in which college contexts and experiences facilitate this development, educators will not have sufficient knowledge from which to draw to serve students.

Method

This research study employs a phenomenological qualitative approach as the research design to explore self-authorship among first-generation undergraduates. Phenomenology is both a philosophical assumption and a qualitative research method (Creswell, 2012). The primary principle behind phenomenological research is to capture individual experiences related to a phenomenon and describe the essence of the shared experience (Van Manen, 1990). A common data collection method utilized in phenomenology research includes conducting interviews with multiple participants who have experienced the phenomena. A phenomenon is a foundation for reflection and analysis to examine the meaning and essence of the lived experience. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, we initially analyzed the qualitative data inductively, without theoretical constraints, to identify emergent themes (Patton, 2001) that described what and how first-generation student's experienced epistemological development. In the second phase of analysis, we departed from a traditional phenomenological approach by comparing the ways in which experiences of first-

generation students fit within the existing framework of self-authorship development in the literature. Taken together, these phases of analysis revealed a framework of experiences, interactions, and contexts—what we call catalysts—that contribute to self-authorship in first-generation college students.

Site and Participants

The research study was conducted at a small, public, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) geographically located in the southwestern United States. Students at the 4-year institution consisted of a diverse student body, with nearly 30% of the enrollment comprising first-generation student representation. Participants were invited to participate in the study via an email invitation letter. Purposeful sampling was utilized as a way of selecting the 14 participants. Students served by Student Support Services, a federally funded TRIO program, which serves low-income, first-generation undergraduates, were recruited to be participants. The primary criteria for selection in this study were for the participants to identify as a 3rd or 4th year undergraduate first-generation student between ages 20 and 30. Because self-authorship is more likely to occur as one matures with age and experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2001), we wanted to explore the extent to which students had experienced self-authorship toward the end of their collegiate tenure.

Several trends emerged in the representation of ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status of the participants. The majority of research participants—12 of 14—were female between the ages of 21 and 28. The ethnic makeup of the group was predominately Hispanic, with two participants identifying as Caucasian. Nine of the 14 participants reported household incomes of $40,000 or less, and 13 were receiving financial aid to fund their education. Additionally, 12 of 14 participants were employed while enrolled as a full-time student.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. The data were collected during a single 60-min interview with each participant. The theoretical research on self-authorship, including items from Jane Pizzolato's Self-Authorship Survey (Pizzolato,

2007), informed the construction of semistructured interview questions. The interviews flowed in a conversational manner, allowing us to probe further into particular stories about self-authorship development. The semistructured approach allowed us to explore students' epistemological development on a deeper level to obtain rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Patton, 2001). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Researchers' Positionalities

As qualitative researchers, our experiences and epistemological perspectives influence our interpretation of the data. We represent diverse backgrounds, with one of us identifying as a white, female, first-generation college student from a low-income background, and the other as a Latina female, with college-educated family members. Being closely connected to the research study, we recognized a need to explore our intersectional identities, experiences, assumptions of knowledge, and beliefs related to first-generation college student development through the use of a research memo. We employed an interpretivist perspective within a constructivist lens guided in an effort to explore how the participants make sense of their experiences (Maxwell, 2005).

Data Analysis

Two phases of analysis were conducted to make sense of the data collected and draw conclusions to answer the research questions. For the first phase, data were analyzed inductively, for emergent themes that described what and how first-generation student's experienced epistemological development. Specifically, the first phase of data analysis involved a horizonalization technique to understand the initial emerging themes by analyzing the written transcripts to identify significant statements expressed by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalization is defined as identifying significant statements, key words, or phrases that describe how the participant experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through the use of a data analysis software program, Saturate, we created and applied codes to the identified significant statements as a way of assigning meaning. Each significant statement was analyzed individually to propose a textural, structural,

and essence description (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description referenced the specific details of what the participant experienced when articulating the significant statement, whereas the structural description included a detailed account of how the participants experienced what was described in their significant statement. Contextual factors such as environment and setting were noted in the structural description (Creswell, 2012). The essence description—the combination of texture and structure—referred to the fundamental overarching meaning of the significant statement. In total, we applied a total of 120 codes throughout the 14 transcripts. We then grouped the codes into shared meaning units, or themes. Naturally, themes emerged from the data based on the participants' descriptions of their experiences related to self-authorship and conditions that foster development (Maxwell, 2005). To maintain consistency in the coding process, each transcript was first coded individually followed by a discussion on the reasoning for the code assignment and agreement on the code name.

In a second phase of analysis, we compared the ways in which experiences of first-generation students fit within the existing framework of self-authorship development in the literature. Taken together, these phases of analysis revealed a new framework of catalysts—experiences, interactions, and contexts that contribute to self-authorship in first-generation college students. This process involved comparing the overarching themes to Baxter Magolda's model of the phases and dimensions of self-authorship development. We compared our findings to the existing model in an effort to understand how Baxter Magolda's model of self-authorship theory "fits" the experiences of first-generation undergraduates involved in this study. This analysis technique replicated Museus and Quaye's (2009) study on the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students. As a second source of data comparison, we also utilized Baxter Magolda and King's (2012) refined pathways to self-authorship model as a tool to assess the specific phase of self-authorship for each participant. The identification of each participant's placement on the self-authorship continuum was determined after analyzing each transcription in extensive detail to classify specific quotes that exemplified evidence to demonstrate the appropriate position.

Trustworthiness

We addressed trustworthiness in a variety of ways to ensure data were dependable and credible. First, a bracketing technique was utilized that included research memos to document research experiences and a personal research blog to encourage continuous analytical thinking throughout the data analysis process. The bracketing technique served as an exercise to place biases and predetermined viewpoints aside to best analyze the data provided by the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). Second, to address validity threats we utilized member checks through sharing the data with participants to confirm if our interpretation was an authentic representation of their experience(s) (Maxwell, 2005; Creswell, 2012). Third, to increase trustworthiness of our findings we engaged in multiple reviews of each significant statement and theme including verbal and written discussions of our assessments. This technique also ensured selected quotes from the transcriptions illustrated direct evidence to support the identified placement on the self-authorship continuum for each participant.

Results

Designation on Self-Authorship Development Spectrum

Our findings revealed several ways in which participants in this study experienced self-authorship distinctively in comparison to previous findings involving other undergraduate populations. Eight of the 14 participants were identified as being in the final phase of self-authorship, suggesting that more first-generation students may achieve self-authorship at earlier stages in life. These participants were committed to using their internal voice as a guide to navigate the complexities they encountered as first-generation students. In addition to those who achieved self-authorship, three participants were identified as being in the entering crossroads phase and three in the leaving crossroads phase. The data presented will predominately focus on our most pertinent findings surrounding those who achieved the final phase of self-authorship to illustrate this phenomenon.

Entering crossroads. Participants in the crossroads phase were mostly reliant on exter-

nal sources to set parameters for their lives but started to question external authority and identified a desire to understand the development of an internal voice. At the same time, these participants faced a range of challenges associated with following the formulas provided by others. For example, Luis, described self-identity related to balancing external influences as follows:

> I'm very stubborn and I have very much to grow as a person, spiritually, and growing up is harder than I thought. I'm taking everything that [my mom] gave me and I'm forming it—I'm molding it into my own self. So I'm still trying to figure out who I am. This is a turning point in my life where I have to grow out of my moms shadow and become more independent.

Typical of being in the crossroads phase, the participant indicates being unsatisfied with following the external formula, yet is having difficulty balancing perspectives of others along with their own beliefs. Transitioning from the crossroads phase to solely internal meaning-making or self-authoring is characterized by a triggering experience which prompts an individual to become unsatisfied with relying on external sources while striving for a more internally defined self.

Leaving crossroads. Participants who were identified as leaving crossroads became dissatisfied with relying on external sources and found the need to possess a more internally defined belief system to align their lives with their emerging internal sense of self. Learning to nurture the internal voice is a key indicator of this phase. One participant, Maricela, was prompted to make a decision on staying in school versus working. Maricela describes this experience as follows:

> My first semester in college my Mom got diagnosed with diabetes and she was not doing good so my grades were [low]. I thought about just dropping out and getting a job and just supporting [the] family. . . . I had to figure out what I wanted and talked to my mom. [The first semester] was one of the hardest. . . . [It] was really hard being able to adapt to the college environment and not dropping out, making the choice to stick it out and tell my mom . . . was really hard. Yeah, but I chose to not drop out and just continue to stay in college.

Finding balance between the different life roles seemed to be a challenge to navigate for many participants. For those in the leaving crossroads phase, they were able to make criti-

cal decisions related to their pathway but were not able to fully connect their decision with an internal commitment.

Internal foundations. First-generation students who demonstrated sole internal meaning-making experienced particularly challenging life events and processed them in a manner distinctive from their counterparts. One participant in our study, Kristin, described family expectations as a young child to become self-sufficient and make decisions without significant family involvement as a result of her parents working multiple jobs. She articulates this experience as:

> My mom would work all the time so we kind of had to raise ourselves . . . I felt like I was slower in maturing because I didn't have someone there to teach me and help me . . . I did have to learn on my own. My parents were never there . . . I learned that I do not need my parents. I can actually be independent. I do not need that special friend or best friend to help me. I can honestly be on my own and survive.

Kristin was prompted to become self-reliant and develop her own identity from an early age, which led to self-directive behavior. Throughout college she was faced with several opportunities where she navigated difficult interpersonal relationships. For instance, she described an experience with a roommate who "belittled" her and "put her down." Although Kristin preferred "not to hold resentment," it became evident to her that this was an "unhealthy relationship" and decided to tell her friend it was best to end their friendship due to a "lack of respect." In result, she decided to be "more alert of who [she] allows in her inner circle" because it was important for her to remain true to her authentic self in relationships.

One participant in our study, Maria, revealed a moving story about her experience as a lesbian woman and her struggle to tell her family the "truth" about her sexual identity. Verbally articulating her sexual identity during her interview was noticeably difficult for Maria. Instead of speaking, she wrote on a piece of paper, "I think I may be gay." She described the intensity of this experience:

> It's difficult because I think if I were to tell my mom, I would disappoint her. I have a tough time with it cause in my family it's not okay . . . and I like someone. It's so difficult. I'm kind of engaging in a relationship, but at the same time, I cannot fully do it

because I do not want those feelings to get stronger. Because I do not even know how to deal with them.

Unsure of her mother's potential reaction to this news, Maria surmised, "I think she would reject me at first and then come to her senses to realize that being gay doesn't mean I change as a person." Despite concerns of rejection, Maria made the choice to be true to her authentic self and share this with her mother through a letter. Maria displayed a strong ability to navigate her life in a way that honored her internal needs which, given the circumstances, was quite remarkable.

Another participant, Isabella, demonstrated her commitment to the internal foundations phase as she described navigating relationships with people who hold different perspectives, beliefs, and values. Though Isabella was verbally abused by her father at a young age, she learned how to establish healthy forms of communication with others.

> When I encounter someone who has different views, I'm mature enough to talk it out. You say your part and when you stop I can say mine without interruption. I do it more constructive rather than preaching or name-calling. Usually, I'm on the other end where they are yelling at me but I would never yell at them because I've been yelled at my whole life and I know what it feels like to feel itty bitty because of words used, whether or not you believe it. I refuse to let myself engage in that type of behavior.

In her description of the experience, Isabella demonstrated a grounded commitment to remain authentic to her internal belief system while demonstrating a mutual understanding of relationships with others. The data align with Baxter Magolda's (2003) description of the internal foundations phase described as an ability to make meaning of experiences while the internal voice provides the foundation for making sense of the external world and understanding the role of self.

Participants also expressed their identification as a first-generation student, which aided their ability to solidify an internal sense of purpose and lead a life in alignment with their purpose. Pascual described this as "[I'm] the first one to go to college [which] makes me proud. . . . I'm not coming to school for just myself. . . . I want to help others, influence others, and make a change." Pascual felt inspired to utilize his strengths to help others and find a cure for diseases. Giving back to one's

community was commonly referenced as a core part of identity and sense of purpose. As Pascual reflected on his first-generation status he indicated, "It makes me feel like I was put here to help others and not just be selfish with myself and do everything for myself or just by myself. I feel like everyone has a purpose and mine I guess is to help someone else."

Catalysts That Foster Self-Authorship Development

Three key encounters served as catalysts to promote self-authorship development among participants. Catalysts included (a) overcoming difficult experiences, (b) epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning, and (c) role modeling. The findings suggest that the first two shared experiences tended to occur in the context of pre-collegiate relationships with family and significant others, whereas the role modeling did not take shape until college in the form of key postsecondary relationships and supports.

Difficult life events. As participants encountered difficult life experiences—from financial stressors to arguments with significant others to physical/mental illness—they were prompted to examine their current meaning making schemas to determine whether they aligned with their internal needs. By encountering a range of obstacles, first-generation undergraduates were challenged to think differently, consider various options, and determine how to proceed in a manner that aligned with their intrapersonal sense of self. In support of this finding, King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, and Lindsay (2009) suggest that there are "developmentally-effective experiences" that essentially encourage self-authorship. King et al. (2009) define developmentally effective experiences as the "interpretation of a participant's response to the experience as having changed an aspect of the student's meaning-making orientation" (p. 111). Although difficult experiences took on various manifestations, participants frequently referenced those related to family conflict as significant experiences that instigated cognitive dissonance and led to shifts in self-authorship.

Participants' narratives were replete with stories of familial conflict, including arguments among family members, physical violence, and emotional abuse. Not surprisingly, the strategies participants used to handle family conflict varied given their position on the spectrum of self-authorship development. The majority of participants in the internal foundations phase had extensive experience in addressing family conflict and finding resourceful solutions to multidimensional problems. Beyond handling a wide-range of family conflicts, numerous participants in the internal foundations phase demonstrated an ability to serve as a mediator in family conflicts, which influenced their self-authorship development. For example, Tracy describes her role as "being the middle person" between her mother and sister. Essentially, she "helps them see each other's perspective as the balanced middle person." This role appeared to be somewhat complicated at times as Tracy demonstrated in the following statement:

> Sometimes I really do not know how to help them, but most of the time I help them figure out how they can talk to each other better so that they are seeing each other's sides. I do not like leaving them when they are in a fight because it's like there is unfinished business there and you know I do not like that uncomfortable feeling . . . I help them talk it out so they are on the same level.

As a result of serving as a mediator in her family Tracy expanded her perspective and "sees the world differently." She is now able to create a mutually beneficial relationship where her mother and sister both feel understood which has also contributed to her self-confidence.

Epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning. Participants described experiences related to finding their voice, resiliency, and navigating their life pathway as a result of cognitive dissonance. Through those experiences, participants were forced to reexamine their needs and find new ways of constructing meaning in a manner that better aligned with their internal needs. With regard to finding one's voice, participants learned to voice their convictions, beliefs, and values. The extent of one's awareness and use of voice was naturally dependent on their developmental phase on the self-authorship spectrum. Participants in the more advanced phases of self-authorship more clearly articulated their perspectives and affirmed their belief system with a strong commitment. Participants in the internal foundations phase portrayed an instinctive abil-

ity to use the power of their voice to illustrate their perspective. Oftentimes, their voice became evident in situations where others had previously been silenced. Kristin articulates this clearly in a description of an experience with her family and their use of derogatory terms.

> My parents will say derogatory terms and it irks me the wrong way and I do speak up and that's another thing in our house you're not allowed to speak up. You're not allowed to say if something in contrary to what my dad says. . . . I finally [said] you know what I have a voice. Why cannot I use it? He said some derogatory term and [I said] that is a mean term and I do not think you should use that term. There is just no need for that. [I said] if you want to use that term just do not use it around me.

Kristin's ability to utilize her voice with her father displayed a commitment to representing herself in an authentic manner reflective of her own epistemological perspective.

Participants who achieved self-authorship also displayed resiliency by overcoming adversity and navigating their lives independently. First-generation students often took on roles beyond their years within the family structure, such as serving as support systems for parents and/or family members, becoming role models for younger family members, providing financial support, and providing emotional support within the family. Tracy explained "sometimes it is a little difficult when I feel like I'm kind of the mother." Similar to other student participants, Tracy had to take over the family finances at a young age. Tracy admitted that her family was "poor," but the difficulty was that her mom "hasn't known how to balance her money." Consequently, Tracy played a critical role in helping her mother "stay on track so that . . . she has enough money to take care of herself and [her] little sister." The responsibility of financial stability fell squarely on Tracy's shoulders, prompting her to take on a caretaker role in her family. The care-taking role that Tracy assumed extended beyond the family's financial situation. When Tracy's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, she poignantly described the toll this care-taking role took on her as:

> It kind of sometimes weighs heavy on my shoulders because I ended up being the one who had to shave her head because she trust—trusts me and she was losing her hair and she didn't want a whole bunch of like missing pieces so she wanted me to shave her head.

The extent of resiliency appeared to be more powerful when participants faced varying degrees of dissonance in their lives. It was during those challenging experiences that their resiliency flourished and served as the foundation to guide their interactions with the external world. Tracy described her resiliency in the following statement:

> It goes back to that fire thing or whatever is inside me that just wants me to keep going and knowing that whatever determination I put into working hard—it will pay off and I can do it. I just think highly of myself [laughter]. If that's what I'm gonna put my mind to, I can do and that is what I've learned about myself; that I am able, I'm capable.

With a grounded sense of identity, participants in the internal foundations phase were able to navigate through financial, academic, and family difficulties while relying on their internal resiliency to direct their behavior in a productive manner toward self-development. In contrast, for those who were in the lower phases on the self-authorship development spectrum, navigating their pathway was extremely difficult due to their reliance on external sources for approval and their lack of internal self-awareness.

Participants in the internal foundations phase demonstrated a solid commitment to directing their lives in a way that was congruent with their internal needs and remained true to their authentic self. They displayed an ownership over their choices and did not seek approval on how to make decisions. Nancy described her family's perspective as "they know I have everything under control and they don't really direct me in any way." Ultimately, they consulted with external sources including family, peers, counselors, and professors but trusted their inner voice to serve as a guide to make decisions related to their education, career, or life. For most participants, family member's demonstrated trust related to their child's ability to make decisions. As Nancy indicated, "they feel like I would know more . . . they just assume I know what I'm doing and it's been pretty much up to me." Beyond making decisions, participants in the internal foundations phase were able to manage several multifaceted problems while devising effective solutions to support their decision-making process.

Several participants were forced to make critical decisions related to their life pathways that

sometimes ran counter to the perspectives of significant others. Those who were in the advanced phases of the self-authorship pursued solutions to their problems that were consistent with their individual values and internal needs. One participant, Kristin, painfully described her experience with an eating disorder that she battled for several years until finally making a commitment to seek professional help.

> I used to deal with eating disorders . . . I just got fed up with my eating issues and took charge even though . . . no one really understood it. I mean my friends did, but my parents didn't get it. They're like you're going to therapy for what? My Dad told me there's no need . . . no such thing as therapy or depression. I'm like you do not understand . . . But my life is pretty great. It's that feeling of going forward . . . Actually having that little triumph of I did something for myself, it feels great. I didn't get that feeling a lot. And I have it now and I—I love it. I can honestly say I'm content . . . In the end, I can only depend on myself. If I do not look out for myself who else will?

While working through the challenges of an eating disorder, she learned about the importance of being authentic to her own needs. Kristin emerged from this experience a stronger individual who demonstrated a heightened sense of pride and commitment to her internal needs.

Role modeling. In addition to the experience of difficult event(s) and epistemological dissonance, participants also described how role modeling and mentorship contributed to their ability to make independent decisions. Unlike the first two experiences, role modeling experiences typically emerged in postsecondary environments or were influenced by them. In several instances participants described the role of an institutional agent (e.g., professor, counselor, or staff member) who served as a facilitator to foster self-authorship development through challenging assumptions and supporting internal reflection. For example, Tracy, described a professor who encouraged her to think about a Ph.D. program, which helped her to "learn something new about [herself]" and with the support of the professor she was able to "learn more from [herself] and learn from the professor who helped her to grow." Participants also described mentorship relationships with faculty where they were challenged to think independently and prompted to make career and graduate school decisions aligned with their own belief systems. Diego articulated his decision

making-process while balancing perspectives of faculty as:

> I've gone to several professors who all had their own opinions but it's up to me to make the decision. Everyone has their own perception when it comes to me but I need to do what I need to make choices for myself and I cannot depend on what others have to say. In the end, it [will be] my decision, so I can definitely take their feedback into consideration but there is only one kind of right choice for me and it's what I will decide.

Further, participants described opportunities related to serving as a role model, which ultimately influenced their epistemological, intrapersonal, and intrapersonal development. In some instances, participants served as role models to peers in college. The majority described experiences related to being a college-student role model for their family members as pivotal in their development toward greater self-authorship. As Sandy indicated, "completing high school in my family was a big thing, yet alone to finish community college." She declared, "I know I should do it for myself, but in reality, it was more because I wanted to be a good influence and have somebody else in my family be next." Ultimately, she intended to pave the way to show her family that if she could complete a college degree they could also aspire to pursue a 4-year degree.

For several participants, serving as a role model was at the heart of building interpersonal relationships. Tracy "not only wanted to be a role model just to [her] sister, but to others especially kids in the foster care system who don't have anybody to look up to, who feel like they're on their own." The primary reason for Tracy's interest in serving as a role model was to make a difference in the lives of children in the foster care system yet this experience also contributed to her ability to self-author through sharing her personal and educational journey.

She further indicated how she planned to accomplish this goal in the following statement:

> I would like to kind of build a community with foster kids so they can lean on each other and support each other and so they can feel like they can move forward. . . . I hope that whatever story I have, kind of inspires them to move on to higher education so that there isn't that gap, so that they can be successful. . . . I want to motivate.

Tracy also noted impactful interpersonal development experiences during college, which facilitated opportunities to serve as a peer role

model. Tracy stated, "for the first time in my life I have good friends . . . I can connect with them because we have a similar story, we help each other out and have a support system."

Comparable with Tracy, most participants lived in complex worlds and faced a variety of challenges including financial struggles, family obligations, academic difficulties, and work commitments as they pursued their undergraduate studies. What makes their stories compelling is not that these experiences damaged students' chances at collegiate success; it is that students developed a stronger epistemological foundation and internal sense of self because of such experiences.

Discussion

The findings in this research study provide compelling data to demonstrate that first-generation students have the capacity to self-author at the final phase of self-authorship during undergraduate education. Eight of the 14 participants experienced the internal foundations phase of self-authorship. Whereas previous studies report that as little as 2% of college students achieve self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999), this study suggests that more first-generation students may achieve self-authorship at earlier stages in life. These findings are consistent with Pizzolato's (2003) and Torres and Hernandez's (2007) conclusions related to self-authorship being recognized earlier among underrepresented student populations compared with their counterparts who typically do not achieve the final phase of self-authorship until later in life. However, it is important to note that first- and second-year students were excluded from this study, limiting our ability to provide percentages of how many first-generation college students overall achieve self-authorship.

The following experiences directly related to conditions that supported self-authorship among participants in this research study: (a) difficult life events, (b) epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning, and (c) role modeling. Interestingly, the majority of catalysts for self-authorship occurred before first-generation students set foot on campus. The two significant postsecondary opportunities for epistemological development occurred when students were mentored or served as a role model to others. The combination of experiencing dif-

ficult life experiences, reconstructing meaning, and navigating and learning from mentoring relationships enabled first-generation students to develop a stronger sense of self.

First-Generation Undergraduates

The findings of this study may surprise educators who understand that first-generation students are less likely to be successful in college, which is oftentimes associated with lack of academic preparedness, persistence, family support, institutional support, and social capital (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although self-authorship may be a contributing factor to student success, the demonstration of self-authorship does not equate to all facets of student success (e.g., academic, social, campus engagement). Typically, first-generation students have been characterized as "at-risk" for experiencing academic, social, and financial challenges, yet our findings contradict existing deficit models and emphasize the unique strengths of first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Furthermore, first-generation student experiences are fluid, complex, and intersect by race, gender, sexual identity, and ability, which also influence identity development and opportunities that lead to self-authorship. The intersections of these multiple social identities likely contributed to participants' self-authorship development—as mostly Latina/o and female college students—in ways that other studies have documented (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). For instance, the experiences expressed by Maricela, Kristin, Pascual, and other participants of being the first in their family to go to college, raised by single parents, caregiving for an ill parent, forced to "raise ourselves" because parents worked multiple jobs, or experiencing financial stressors are common experiences among Latina/o college students (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015). In addition, Maria reported identifying as a lesbian, which led to epistemological dissonance surrounding her identity. Ironically, it is at the intersections of these kinds of experiences that encourage more provocative learning opportunities which cultivate self-authoring ways.

Along these lines, Barber et al. (2013) affirmed that substantial self-authorship development can occur from challenging life events and

meaningful learning experiences. In our study, difficult life events experienced by participants involving relationships with others prompted relational dissonance and ultimately led to new ways of meaning making. Similarly, Pizzolato et al. (2012) discovered participants experienced relational dissonance while negotiating their role in relationships with others. Barber et al. (2013) also found that transformational growth in self-authorship was dependent on the extent of involvement in roles requiring the use of one's internal voice. Given the lack of external resources, first-generation students are often prompted to independently navigate their college journey and seek out institutional resources to promote their success.

Implications for Practice

Institutions of higher education have a significant role to play in the epistemic development of undergraduates. It is imperative for higher education practitioners and policymakers to understand the needs of this historically marginalized group given the isolation first-generation students often experience during their undergraduate education. The goal is to provide opportunities for development and supportive learning contexts to strive toward equitable outcomes in higher education. Our findings demonstrate that institutional agents, such as faculty members and staff, play a key role in mediating potentially destructive experiences for first-generation students. Similarly, Pizzolato's (2004) findings indicate high-risk undergraduates illustrate self-authorship before college but the developmental growth can regress if marginalization occurs. Structured opportunities in which students can develop relationships with institutional agents are critical for those students who do not naturally develop relationships with campus practitioners on their own. Additionally, recent research articulates the importance of promoting development by providing impactful learning opportunities that require the use of the internal voice for both educators and students (King, 2014; Baxter Magolda, 2014). For example, the intentional design of Multicultural Learning Communities (MLC) can offer opportunities for first-generation students to develop relationships with institutional agents in a welcoming developmental environment, which encourages self-authorship partic-

ularly among underrepresented populations (Jehangir et al., 2011). Research demonstrates the positive impact of MLC's for first-generation undergraduates in the following areas: (a) social engagement, (b) academic engagement, (c) retention, (d) institutional connection, (e) shared learning, (f) increased awareness of knowledge construction, (g) recognition value of diverse perspectives, and (h) enhanced self-awareness. Effectively, political and programmatic strategies that promote student development are essential not only for students' academic and personal success but for institutional success as well.

Findings reveal the importance of incorporating the life experiences of first-generation students into both curricular and co-curricular initiatives relating to learning and development in varying psychological contexts. In alignment with these findings, Pizzolato et al. (2012) emphasize the necessity to examine contexts that extend the environment (e.g., campus climate, workplace culture) and consider the process of how individuals construct meaning about their surrounding context as a relevant factor in examining self-authorship development. The concept of psychological contexts also supports existing evidence that suggests self-authorship development can be supported in co-curricular and curricular environments when an intentional effort is made to facilitate developmental learning opportunities (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001; Day & Lane, 2014).

Despite the broad range of barriers experienced by first-generation students, this study provides direct evidence that self-authorship is attainable during their undergraduate education. First-generation undergraduates have significant stories to share about their experiences navigating the complexities of both their personal and academic lives while finding ways to become self-authored in spite of difficult circumstances. Although many participants in this study were able to successfully meet the challenges of college, many first-generation undergraduates may not possess the necessary tools for success in higher education. Given this likelihood, the role of the institution becomes critical to support the developmental needs of first-generation undergraduates. Creating inclusive learning environments where first-generation students are encouraged to bring their vast life experiences to the center of their learning will

not only create developmental learning opportunities but also enrich the classroom learning setting overall. The following interventions are worthy of further consideration: (a) faculty training on first-generation college student development with particular emphasis on self-authorship theory, (b) institutionally supported workshops on social justice in higher education, and (c) funding for research on innovative approaches to foster self-authorship among underrepresented populations.

Lastly, self-authorship theory provides a persuasive framework to advance the whole development of undergraduates through epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001). Institutions must be more intentional in designing co-curricular and curricular experiences to provide provocative learning opportunities to make sense of their experiences for students in a supportive learning environment (e.g., MLC, co-curricular and curricular partnerships, research opportunities, and internship programs). Such learning opportunities must challenge students to examine their current ways of knowing, to critically evaluate their internal belief systems, and to develop healthy mutual relationships. Ultimately, this type of learner-centered model will demand a substantial amount of risk-taking among both the educator and learner (Baxter Magolda, 2014). However, first-generation undergraduates bring to college rich life experiences that can be easily integrated into learning experiences.

Limitations

The majority of the participants in this study were female and Latina, which adds depth and richness to their experiences. The themes that emerged from first-generation students are likely colored by cultural and gender influences. Participants in this study represented a group of first-generation undergraduates who were engaged in TRIO programs with key institutional support agents. Additional research with a more diverse sample of first-generation undergraduates would advance our understanding of how underrepresented groups experience self-authorship. Another limitation to this study is that it excluded first- and second-year students, which did not allow the collection of data that

could reflect trajectories of development over time or progression and regression between self-authorship phases. Baxter Magolda (2008) contends that self-authorship development is ongoing and "more complex and nuanced than a simple linear trajectory" (p. 281). What we have captured is a snapshot of students' self-authorship at the time of their participation in the study. Future research on first-generation students should document data collected over students' college tenure to capture the developmental progression of self-authorship.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

Findings in this study mark the beginnings of filling the existing gap in the literature on self-authorship in first-generation students. The findings suggest that more needs to be understood about ways to develop self-authorship in college, not by merely exposing students to difficult experiences, but by coordinating healthy opportunities to address and make meaning of the difficult experiences that first-generation students tend to encounter in the first place. The journey toward self-authorship is seldom a smooth and effortless process because encouraging development requires stimulating dissonance and challenging students to go beyond their level of comfort to facilitate growth. Another way to think about this complex problem is to examine the positive experiences, like mentoring relationships and opportunities, offered at institutions that can be structured to promote self-authorship among first-generation undergraduates in more formative ways. The participants' experiences with catalysts for self-authorship development in a postsecondary setting is limited to the institutional agents and structures at the institution in which student participants were enrolled. Researchers can dig deeper into understanding the specific ways in which institutional agents, mentors, and other support structures offered in different postsecondary contexts can scaffold self-authorship development among first-generation students. Considering high-impact practices in self-authorship across different higher education settings will uncover the various relationships and interactions that prompt students to develop the capacity to "consider multiple perspectives, reflect on their own values and motivations, and

utilize goals and perspectives that are internally grounded and evaluated as a foundation for meaning making" (Barber et al., 2013, p. 870). In this process, researchers will continue to identify and define the key features and nature of postsecondary experiences and relationships, both in and out of the classroom, that stimulate the ability for first-generation students to behave in self-authored ways. This is a complex problem to address because each student, whether first-generation or not, enters higher education with different levels of self-authorship; as such, researchers must not only identify particular catalysts for self-authorship on college campuses, but take into account where on the self-authorship spectrum students fall as they begin their collegiate tenure. Further, researchers can assume a more holistic view that explores the intersectionality of first-generation students' multiple identities in conjunction with self-authorship development. Research on historically marginalized groups and intersecting identities of race, gender, ability, and others is necessary to identify ways to facilitate supportive learning contexts and strive toward equitable outcomes in higher education for all students.

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