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Imposter Phenomenon: The Occupational Experiences of First-Generation College Students

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The Occupational Experiences of First-Generation College Students

By

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Abstract

Background: First-generation college students (FGCS) represent an underserved population navigating through higher education and therefore receive less support. There is a current gap in the literature that overlooks the interactions of occupational experiences, imposter phenomenon (IP), and first-generation college students. The purpose of this study is to use grounded theory to observe the impact of IP among FGCS enrolled in a four-year university in California.

Method: This research is a qualitative study using thematic analysis grounded theory. Data was collected through a screening survey and follow-up interview via video chats and in-person sessions, and a live transcription software of 11 participants who identify as FGCS.

Results: Thematic analysis generated five themes: (a) emotional aspects of imposter phenomenon, (b) collectivism, (c) balance, (d) peers, (e) othering. FGCS often come from backgrounds that emphasize collectivism. When also experiencing intersectionality, FGCS may experience feelings of othering in spaces they do not fit in. After adjusting to their surroundings, FGCS become adaptable to reach a sense of belonging.

Conclusion: This study contributes to occupational science literature by expanding the understanding of occupational experiences with consideration to IP. From this, the theoretical approach of occupational therapy gains more cultural inclusivity to better serve diverse populations.

Keywords*:* First-generation college students (FGCS), Imposter Phenomenon (IP), intersectionality, grounded theory, occupation, occupational science

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Introduction

First-generation college students (FGCS) remain as an underserved class within the realm of academia (First-Generation Foundation, 2013). FGCS represent an underserved population that introduces the presence of minorities in U.S. higher education. The Department of Education estimated in 2010, FGCSs amounted to 50% of students attending a four-year university (First-Generation Foundation, 2013). However, further research shows a decline in attendance of U.S. undergraduates whose parents did not receive higher education. During the 2011 to 2012 academic year, the population size reduced to one-third of undergraduate students attending college (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Considering the progressive decline of FGCS enrollment into four-year universities, this population needs attention.

As multifaceted beings, FGCS introduce various backgrounds and identities into campus cultures. Despite all the contributing factors that promote diversity, it is important to solidify a common framework that classifies what being a FGCS means. We must first acknowledge that there are multiple definitions that exist within literature when defining the term first-generation college student. In an article written by Gibbons, Rhinehart, and Hardin (2019), FGCS is defined as, “those who are the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education, often lack information about the career development process” (p. 488). Another article written by Huynh (2019), defines FGCS as, “the first in their family to attend college and therefore have different characteristics than students whose parents attended college, or later generation students” (p. 125). However, for the purpose of this research, FGCS is defined as the following: a student whose parent or guardian has not obtained a degree from a four-year university in the United States.

Imposter Phenomenon (IP) can be described as a feeling of incompetence despite evidence of competence. Individuals who have or are experiencing imposter phenomenon see themselves as less capable than their peers and have difficulty internalizing success. Therefore, people experience notions of fraudulence, and thoughts that their peers will find out that they are not as competent (Lane, 2015). It is shown that people of many different experiences, backgrounds, and populations experience imposter phenomenon, but there is no research on how it impacts FGCS specifically; more so how it interacts with their occupational engagement.

Literature Review

The occupational experiences of FGCS within higher education have the potential to reinforce inequity if not clearly understood or attended to. Current literature has yet to bridge the gap between college students and occupations. The lack of understanding regarding college students' occupational experiences becomes a disservice to the quality of engagement for the individual. Therefore, when discussing lived experiences, an occupational lens will be used to provide holistic insight into the dynamic of first-generation students and IP.

Beyond engagement, an occupational lens offers a psychosocial perspective as to how meaningful an occupation is to a person. Here is where the discussion of purpose and well-being may be introduced. Imposter Phenomenon, an emerging paradigm, addresses feelings of self-doubt about one's abilities and accomplishments, accompanied by a fear of being seen as a fraud. By adopting the perspectives of intersectionality, lived experiences, and college support services, the impacts of IP upon FGCS will be investigated.

Intersectionality

The philosophy founded upon intersectionality provides peripheral insight as to why marginalized groups face adversity**.** By extracting various identities that comprise a person—such as race and gender—while focusing on the interdependence by which these identities interact, the origin of marginalization against an individual, group, or population can be better understood.

In its beginning phases, intersectionality was employed to articulate the epistemology of oppression against African American women (Crenshaw, 1964). However, its ambiguity coined the domino effect that made intersectionality applicable to wider identities and groups. Thus, calling more complex social categorizations to attention, such as socioeconomic status (SES),

ethnicity, sexuality, and other oppressed identities/experiences (Secules, Sochaka, & Walther, 2018). College campuses are becoming increasingly more diverse as greater numbers of students from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences are pursuing higher education (Mitchell & Sawyer, 2014). Therefore, the array of oppressional systems that can impact students is simultaneously increasing, including those who identify with being FGCS.

The Center for First-Generation Student Success (2017) acknowledges race and SES as two prominent factors that link FGCS with oppression. A reported 51% of all college students claim racial identities other than white (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). FGCS typically identify with low SES, which can result in employment or economic challenges during students' education. Through the lens of intersectionality, the overlap of these identities per student could vary upon outcome. For instance, the race and SES of a student could determine their eligibility for potential scholarships and support services- regardless of whether they identify as a FGCS. In other words, a student who does not report low SES or a student who does not identify with a marginalized racial identity may receive less or different aids (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2019). Even though intersectionality assists in understanding the origin of oppression, there are byproducts, such as access to resources, privileges, and opportunities that continue to impact the way one navigates through their education and course of life.

The intention of intersectionality is not to excuse maleficence or grant special treatment upon oppressed communities or individuals, but to provide a structural framework that deciphers the etiology of and critiques social problems.

Lived Experience of First-Generation College Students

The day-to-day experiences of FGCS are significant aspects of their lives that set them apart from continuing-generation college students (CGCS), which are considered students whose parents attained a degree from a four-year university. In an article from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ellis et al. (2019) discuss how microaggressions and micro affirmations are some of the most pertinent encounters FGCS commonly face. The article refers to microaggressions as a form of everyday discrimination that is more discrete and indirect but does serve as a discriminatory remark to people of marginalized groups. Conversely, micro affirmations are remarks that are received and give people of marginalized groups a sense of belonging (Ellis et al., 2019). These two constructs are not only faced by FGCSs, but also by people who face other adversities, students face microaggressions not only because they potentially lack knowledge of the collegiate system due to being first-generation, but also due to their SES, race or ethnicity, or gender or sexuality.

Specific to being a first-generation college student, Ellis et al. (2019) found that there were three recurring types of microaggressions that students experienced related to them being first-generation: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. The participants' encounters ranged from people assuming their level of education, to making remarks such as, “you're doing very well for a first-generation college student.” It’s these types of exposures that often inhibit FGCS’ from feeling a sense of belonging in higher education.

Many FGCS experience economic struggles that lead them to reassess their individual motives as a college student. One obligation FGCS experience while in school is providing financial support for their families. In an article written by Covarrubias et al. (2019), it was reported that FGCS feel that attending college as a member of a low-income family made them

expand their efforts toward supporting their family at the potential risk of increasing their own financial challenges at the university. This leads FGCS to feel propelled to continue working so that they can support themselves and their family while balancing the demands of school. FGCS understand that not all students attending university have to support themselves or their families in a comparable way that FGCS do while being full-time students. There are ways some FGCS receive monetary support, such as through scholarship awards, which can provide relief from not having to pay the entire tuition cost. Financial struggles while attending university is a hardship many FGCS experience but receiving financial support through scholarship money makes it easier for some FGCS to pursue their dreams of going to college.

Although families are not always able to provide financial support to their students, they are often able to contribute an opinion on the benefit of further education. Family is an important influence on the success of many FGCS as they often feel an obligation or desire to stay connected to where they came from. Some FGCS share that they "broke tradition" by attending college because there was an expectation placed on them by their families to fulfill more traditional roles (Covarrubias et al., 2019, p. 401). While there is an array of attitudes on the value of education, some families of FGCS value the education of their children and see higher education as an opportunity for success (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Although the parents of FGCS did not attend college and could offer little relatable experiences, their families provide the emotional foundations necessary for students to press on through the unknown (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2019). By primarily providing emotional support, families are not demonstrating a lack of value for education, instead, they are providing the only form of support they are able to for their students given their own circumstances and experiences.

Support from College

Many FGCS lack the resources needed to be successful in higher education. To support FGCS in being successful in college there must be resources students can utilize at a universal level that will give them the tools necessary to thrive in their environment. Students who have little experience in college culture may face more challenges in understanding how to guide themselves through the near future regarding what their expectations of college are. Unfortunately, opportunities for support and resources for FGCS are limited, and only about half complete their bachelor's degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). In an article written by Quinn and Cornelius-White (2018), the author states that the lack of needed support would be more of a predicted outcome than the presence of support. This study found a correlation between family support and grade point averages, and commitment and adjustment to their newly added identity as a college student. As stated earlier, the lack of support is strongly associated with outcomes. For example, the results of Quinn and Cornelius-White (2018) suggest students struggling with academics and adjustment experience more of a need for help, guidance, and support, whereas those students who do not face these challenges. Other outlets for support are available for students, such as faculty and peers. A research study, addressing mentoring workshops, from the University of California Davis indicated the importance of maintaining relationships with faculty as necessary for development. Staff members increase their interactions with students to promote professional development, advising, and other significant resources.

As observed in the literature, the lack of resources that some experience at home continues into the college experience for FGCS. In an article that was previously discussed from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of the most important sources of support for students who are experiencing hardships is support from the school itself (Ellis et al., 2019).

Training staff and faculty on the experiences of FGCS and their encounters with diversity will begin to set the stage for an inclusive environment for the rest of the university. This training could be put into programs that are supported by knowledgeable staff. Potential program interventions include providing students with the appropriate resources to encourage study groups or connecting them with peers of similar first-generation experiences.

Additionally, Ellis et al. (2019) showed that FGCS often struggle to access the resources that are already provided by the school. FGCS may view school provided programs as "charity" towards them. In other words, the perception of accepting support services may correlate with vulnerability. Therefore, support services for this population must be precisely handled. Remen (1999) organized the complex relationship between groups and those providing assistance into three constructs, including "Helping", "Fixing", and "Serving." The purpose of this framework is to critique the approach in which those who aid an individual, group, or population perform and the impact they have on those who benefit from assistance. Universally, the three constructs assume a transactional relationship from one party to the next. However, Remen argues that "Helping" creates a divide between the two parties and a hierarchy of power. The assumption is that one party holds greater power than the next and controls the volume at which the second party benefits from services. "Fixing" carries the stigma of being broken or incompetent. As a provider of assistance, there is a greater distance perceived from ones' self and the direct party receiving assistance. Alternatively, "Serving" untethers the perceptions of hierarchy and stigma and allows humanity to be achieved. Remen (2019) describes this as the act in which "wholeness and its power" can be discovered (p. 6). In doing so, empathy and equity can be introduced which then counteracts the perception of assistance as charity. When interacting with underrepresented populations, such as FGCS, the intention to do good may not translate clearly if

performed poorly. By adopting this Helping, Fixing, Serving framework, college campuses can influence the outcome of service usage, consistency, and satisfaction of FGCS.

Imposter Phenomenon

Imposter Phenomenon, also known as "imposter syndrome," refers to an internal feeling of incompetency although the person is competent in their setting. Additionally, those experiencing IP oftentimes have feelings of fraudulence as if they know less than they truly do. There is no one way to experience IP; it is unpredictable by nature and does not discriminate by race, class, or gender. A prominent factor of IP is that those experiencing this phenomenon typically fear that their peers will find out that they are not equipped with knowledge that is necessary to be competent in an academic or professional setting; therefore, continuing to ostracize individuals from a sense of competency (Lane, 2015).

In its original reference, IP was developed to describe lived experiences of those in the workforce or those transitioning from academia into an entry-level job. The importance of discussing IP is to highlight the level of incompetence many individuals feel, even with the external reinforcements that assure many are skilled enough to perform at high quality. This feeling of incompetency extends into feelings of fraudulence, which impedes one's ability to accept or experience a sense of accomplishment. Typically, those experiencing IP who continue to earn accomplishments would attribute their success to intangible factors, such as luck; further preventing these individuals from internalizing any sense of accomplishment or competency. Regarding FGCS, students who identify with IP may have a shared experience of incompetency and fraudulence in their academic environments. Students with IP typically report feeling unworthy or unprepared to attend a four-year university, based solely on their social environments. Additionally, when participating in internships or fieldwork opportunities,

students may express feelings as if they are not well equipped with academic knowledge in their respective fields to meet performance standards. Academic and personal growth are projected areas of concern for those who report experiencing IP (Lane, 2015).

Summary

Through the lens of intersectionality, FGCS are susceptible to facing discrimination throughout their academic careers. With financial challenges, racism, and microaggressions being identified as barriers, the perception of one's potentials and social standing can initiate the development of IP. Though there is no clear understanding of IP's emergence, contributing factors placed upon students by societal categorizations can impact perceptions of self-competency, occupational engagement, and well-being for FGCS.

Statement of Purpose, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

Current literature has evaluated the dynamic of IP amongst college graduates transitioning into entry-level jobs, professionals in their careers, and minority groups entering higher education. However, there is a gap in the current literature that overlooks the interaction between occupational experiences, IP, and FGCS. The purpose of this study is to use grounded theory to observe the experiences of IP among FGCS enrolled in four-year universities in California. The research question developed to guide this study asks: What are the occupational experiences of FGCS who identify with the IP? Based on the gap between IP and FGCS, it is hypothesized that FGCS do encounter IP. Moreover, the way they encounter their occupations may be dissimilar to CGCS or to those who do not identify with IP.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) to design questions for the full-length interviews (Polatajko, Townsend, & Craik, 2007). The CMOP-E comprised three domains: person, environment, and occupation for the purpose of recognizing how these different dimensions can impact occupational engagement and performance. The "Person" category looks at who that individual is by examining their strengths, their capabilities, and at the core, their spirituality. The "Environment" refers to the surroundings in which the person does his or her occupations by observing physical, cultural, social, and temporal aspects that may affect how a person performs tasks. The "Occupation" addresses activities of self-care, leisure, work, social, and education with the consideration of the person and environment to assess unique demands and strengths. Therefore, when all three components work simultaneously, the CMOP-E used a holistic approach that allowed the interview questions to take on an expanded lens of the participant's occupational experiences and perceptions (Polatajko et al., 2007).

Ethical Considerations

To abide by ethical and legal rules that protect researchers and participants, multiple steps were taken, such as use of pseudonyms to keep participant identities anonymous. Participants signed a form that outlined what they will do in the study. Researchers asked for permission to keep an audio record. To avoid bias, five out of six researchers identify as FGCS. The researchers reflected on their personal perspectives about FGCS before and after the interview process to enhance reflexivity and address bias. To, Integrative Capstone Experience permission slip templates were used.

Qualitative Methods

Overview

Through thematic analysis and grounded theory, this study created an understanding of the occupational experiences and feelings of IP among FGCS enrolled in a four-year university. Based on the current gap in the literature, the research question used to guide the study was: *What are the occupational experiences of first-generation students who identify with IP?*

Procedures

The methods of this study were structured similar to the study by Lane (2015) researching the relationship between IP and emerging adults. To ensure that the perception of IP is consistent between the study's inclusion criteria and its participants, students were asked to take a screening survey for the purpose of collecting demographic information. In the screening survey, participants were asked their age, gender, ethnicity, what year they are in college, which situation that describes who they are, sexuality, and their socioeconomic status. To screen the participants who experienced IP, the survey included a passage about an individual with feelings of IP. This passage was derived from Lane's (2015) study with his permission. Participants were then asked to respond to questions that determined whether they resonated with the feelings of the IP based on that narrative. If the participant found themselves identifying with the narrative, then they were able to continue if they chose to participate in the semi-structured interview. If they did not identify with the passage or meet necessary inclusion criteria, they were excluded from the formal interview.

To build a theory around the research question, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with all 11 participants that have qualified under the inclusion criteria who had chosen

to proceed with the interview portion of the study. Researchers then prioritized questions that are influenced by the CMOP-E (Table 1) and questions directed toward the result of an occupational profile.

Table 1 Interview Questions

CMOP-E Domains	Interview Questions
Environment	
Cultural & Institution	1. Describe the cultural environment at home? 2. Describe the cultural environment of your university? 3. How would you change the cultural environment of your campus/ university?
Social & Physical	1. Describe your social environment before college? 2. Describe your current social environment as a college student?
Occupation	
Productivity	1. When are you most productive? 2. In what types of settings are you most productive? 3. Do you find yourself being more productive around certain people? 4. Do you ever find yourself losing motivation?
Self-Care	1. What do you do for your everyday self-care? 2. What do you do for self-care under high-stress conditions? 3. Has the way you take care of yourself changed from before entering college to now?
Leisure	1. Do you participate in any social activities that are provided by the university? 2. Do you ever feel unproductive when engaging in leisure or self-care activities? 3. What do you like to do when you have free time? 4. Have your leisure activities/ amount of time engaging in leisure time changes since entering college?
Person	
Affective	1. How would you describe your mental health now versus when you entered college? 2. Do you ever experience self-doubt? 3. Do you ever experience a change in mood or attitude when being around other university students? 4. What inspires you to pursue your college degree? 5. If you feel comfortable sharing, what are some of your personal struggles with being a first-generation college student?
Cognitive	1. Do you find your current courses challenging? If so, what resources do you use to support yourself? 2. What are your experiences working in groups?
Physical	3. How would you describe your physical health prior to college versus right now?

Participants

For the recruitment of participants, purposeful sampling was used by distributing flyers that advertised the study around the Dominican University of California campus. Additionally, groups such as the Students Rising Above Foundation (SRA) and the Torch Leadership Program (TLP) at Dominican University of California were invited to take the survey for first-generation students. Snowball sampling was also used to expand participation rates. The inclusion criteria of FGCS include students who have a parent or parents that did not attain a degree from a four-year university in the United States. Additionally, the students themselves must be full or part-time and located in California. The exclusion criteria include students who identify alumni or a graduate student at a four-year university are not eligible to participate in the study. Moreover, students who are in community college, vocational, or trade school do not comply with the inclusion criteria for this study.

There were a total of 23 individuals who participated in the initial screening survey. Out of the 23 participants, 22 were found to identify with the narrative of IP. Out of the 22 individuals who did identify with IP, three did not meet the study's inclusion criteria, and eight did not choose to progress with the interview portion of the study. There were a total of 11 completed interviews that were held over video chats and in-person sessions.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a screening survey and follow-up interview via video chats and in-person sessions via Otter, a live transcription software. All data collected through Otter was transferred into Dedoose, a coding engine, then deleted for the protection of all participant's confidentiality. Therefore, data collection through triangulation was included to ensure that all participants were accurately represented throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory and thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Mediani, 2017). Under the principles of grounded theory, inductive research methods are used to develop new theories from data acquired by rigorous research (Mediani, 2017). Through the process of thematic analysis, five phases of data analysis are sequenced to generate themes that are most representative of the data collected (Braun & Clark, 2006). The process of data collection within this study was implemented as following:

Beginning with thematic analysis, researchers familiarized themselves with the collected data reading and re-reading the transcriptions in Phase 1 of data collection. Phase 2 of data analysis involved generalizing the initial codes and reviewing them by assigned second coders. In phase 3 of searching for themes, data was condensed by all researchers to combine related codes into initial themes. Following this, phase 4 required a collective revision of codes and data to generate refined themes. Phase 5 of defining and naming candidate themes consisted of creating definitions and titles for each theme that best represented its supporting data.

Following this, the process of data analysis was then guided by grounded theory. Once themes were refined, defined, and named, researchers revisited the literature on each theme to expand the findings. This then supported the development of the grounded theory.

Findings

Through data analysis five themes were discovered: emotional aspects of IP, collectivism, balance, peers, and othering. These five themes reveal how first-generation college students who identify with IP experience their occupations and interact with their resources, environments, and themselves.

Emotional Aspects of Imposter Phenomenon

This theme has implications throughout the data analysis and experiences of FGCS. First generation college students experiencing IP, expressed feelings of self-doubt, stress, and anxiety. The participants felt incompetent attending college courses thinking they were not as smart as their classmates. Some participants had thoughts of dropping out of college because of this feeling. They expressed self-doubt during class discussions, feeling their opinion would not matter. One participant named Natalia that said:

> *"I had to get myself prepared for what was I was going, what I was going to do so I was going through a lot of things mentally, a lot of anxiety when I even enter school again because I thought that am I going to be able to do this?"*

This participant felt the need to be prepared in returning to college because they doubted their ability to overcome the barriers that came along with obtaining a college degree. Moreover, other participants shared their own mental health experiences which involved personal life and school environment. Most of the participants felt waves of insecurity, depression, and doubt. Molly expressed:

> *"I had someone told me about like, [kinesiology] was not in my field, ... and it made me [feel] down about myself like a grade defines me, but like well like no, a letter grade does not define how smart I am or how dumb I am or anything in that category."*

The participants were in a situation where their school environment and personal life evolved into negativity, doubt, and sadness which led to impacting their mental health. The participants spoke about coping strategies on how to combat their mental health. For example, a participant named Victoria stated,

"I take the time to mediate, like, you know, or I take showers to cool myself down."

Overall, the participants had coping strategies to maintain their stress and anxiety levels low. They expressed that it was important to take care of their mental health to feel relaxed and confident to engage being a college student in pursuing their college degree.

Collectivism

Collectivism includes an individual's prioritization of a group over the self. When evaluating the participant's responses, it was evident that many of them found themselves holding their culture, background, and family as a priority over themselves as an individual. For example, when it came to career choice or the decision of attending college, their family's wants for them were highly valued by the participants. When asked what inspires you to pursue your college career, one participant stated:

"My mom. I want to, but I also know that that's what she wants for me... It will make me happy to make her happy" (Briana).

Throughout the interviews, it was also found that participants internalized the idea that they needed to succeed in college because they owed it to their families. When asked what motivated them to pursue their college degree, one participant stated:

"Both my parents went to college in the Philippines, and so I feel like it's like, you've done it, now let me do it. And then like once I get my degree, I can give back to you as you've created for me. Also, for my little cousins... I want to show them that like, they can

> *do higher education if they want to, because when my father was in college, he stopped. So, I want them to be able to see that like, they can stop college, or they can keep going with it" (Sonny).*

Many participants felt either imposed or internalized pressure from their families. They felt if they were to fail or not do well, they would then be letting their families down causing their sacrifices to go to waste. Due to this notion, several participants experienced a heightened motivation to prioritize all occupations that were related to work and school. The feeling of being afraid to fail also manifested itself by far less engagement in self-care and leisure activities. Cardi stated:

> *"Whenever I disobey or if I want to do something instead of homework, my mom would always be like, um, 'you know... the life that you have right now, wasn't what it was like for your dad and I. I had to work so hard to get where I am. I came to America with only $500 and look where it's brought us, and you should always remember that.' And so, my... parents... drilled that into our minds, that you know, you can't take this life for granted and you need to work harder or else you're gonna fail, and that feeling was my biggest fear."*

Wanting to succeed was often associated with leaving behind leisure and self-care activities and being hyper focused on work and school- occupations that were perceived as getting them ahead. These internalized ideals have impacted what and how they engage with occupation, thus causing shifts in occupational balance.

Balance

A balanced life comes from creating time for the things an individual must do and would like to do. When an individual is living with balance in their life, they may experience a sense of

peace. However, when an individual begins to feel that they are not dedicating an equal distribution of their time across certain activities, they may feel unaccomplished. As a result of the participants effort to succeed in school, self-care, roles, and responsibilities were often neglected and affected. When Cardi was asked if she dedicates time to activities other than school, she expressed:

> *"Just school and then studying… that's pretty much my day. I wish I could do more to take care of myself. I used to go to the gym a lot but now… I feel like there's no time for anything."*

In addition, it was a common occurrence for participants to feel stress due to their inability to fulfill activities of their choice. This was a result of the excessive time demand of school. Cardi expressed that it is difficult to fulfill past activities such as speaking to family to the same extent that she was able to prior to attending college due to the amount of school related activities and requirements by stating:

> *"Driving to [clinicals or work] is my only actual freedom where I can call people and call my family and… it's just like right now there's so much demand from school."*

When participants had the opportunity to participate in leisure and self-care activities, they experienced a difference in quality of engagement. This difference in quality of engagement occurred because participants were not mentally present in the activity they were taking part in. Instead, they were thinking about assignments they had yet to complete. Elizabeth recognized that when she dedicates time to self-care activities, she feels unproductive and is hard on herself because there are many school related tasks she can complete:

> *"When I do work out and… stuff like that… I get everything done because... then I can't focus on my workout… if I say I'm gonna go work out I cannot work out… I'll be thinking*

> *about the things that I need to do and get done. Normally, I don't like doing anything other than schoolwork because if I am not doing schoolwork then I feel like I am falling behind."*

Furthermore, some participants experienced a sense of guilt and stress when engaging in self-care and leisure activities. For example, Sonny states:

> *"I… feel like I should constantly be doing something… with school. School becomes so fast paced that when I'm not doing anything, I like feel like I should be. And then sometimes I'll stress [when] I'm not doing anything because I feel like I need to be doing something."*

Balance between self-care and responsibilities of school proved to be an ongoing struggle for participants. Their unique desires to succeed in school led them to dedicate most of their daily life to the occupation of education. This resulted in difficulty to participate in meaningful occupations which causes an imbalance in their life.

Peers

Peers may provide support for barriers when acclimating to the college life since there is a lack of knowledge on how to navigate through this novel experience. Participants' experiences with peers either created feelings of belonging or feelings of othering, both of which directly impacted their occupational experiences. Some participants felt they did not belong and therefore did not participate in extracurricular activities. When asked about engagement in activities on campus, Elizabeth stated,

> *"I wonder what is going on like there's nobody like me like I feel stupid like[..] I feel like I am the only one struggling."*

As illustrated in the previous theme of mental health, internalized pressure to succeed induced feelings of guilt when engaging in leisure occupations with peers as this may be viewed as an inappropriate use of time. Meg said, “And sometimes I feel guilty for not being so stressed out all the time.” This feeling negatively impacted their perception of leisure activities with friends. Similarly, when asked if she ever felt guilty or unproductive when engaging in leisure or self-care activities, Sonny stated:

> *“Sometimes, if I have something really important that week, or like the next day or something. Then I feel like I'm wasting my time if I go and do these things. But then I will then try to reason myself and say that like oh this is a break, like a mental break self-care.”*

On the other side of the continuum, some participants felt comfort being with their peers as this fostered a sense of community. Peers provided a sense of inclusion, support, and a shared identity as students. Sonny highlighted this when she stated:

> *“Yeah, I feel like if I know other people in the class, it makes it really easier, but I guess more variable to like go through the class, and it'll be better, because I like to study with other people. So, it'd be more beneficial for me so I can... study with my friends, as opposed to like, if it were a class for[...] smart people like I wasn't really close to and I wouldn't want to like approach and be like hey can you study, you know.”*

Peers are also used as a tool in terms of resources from the colleges. Participants did not always directly accept support from their school but would indirectly use or hear about resources from their peers. In turn, relationships may be capable of promoting an individual’s self-efficacy in novel contexts and produce a variety of benefits for the incoming student, such as strengthening their study skills. Conversely, some participants felt at a disadvantage compared to their peers in

terms of academic preparation and expectation. They felt they faced distinct challenges that are a product of societal maladies.

Othering

Belonging is centralized on the idea that interpersonal relationships influence self-concept and life satisfaction. When an individual gains a sense of connection and contribution with others, they are affirmed that their life has value and they have acquired space within a greater community. Conversely, when an individual is disconnected from their surrounding environments, one's occupational engagement, sense of community, and wellbeing are all impacted. Due to a lack of belonging within their campus community, many participants expressed that academic performance and participation were directly affected. Elizabeth recognized a disconnect with her colleagues and described her experience as such,

> *"When I'm in class I don't like to share my opinions because I feel like others are smarter than me and I sound dumb- like I won't be valued."*

In addition to the integrity of one's relationships, cultural identity may impact one's sense of belonging within their groups and environment. Dominating groups may also have similar effects on those that do not belong to such groups. For example, students who are not under the most impacted major or department on campus may feel a disconnect that leads to further lack of belonging. As referenced by Pricilla, these gaps not only impacted her self-concept but also resulted in her feeling othered on campus,

> *"The cultural environment here sucks, it's all white and Filipino. I feel insecure about it. Especially since I am not of those ethnicities or nursing.*"

While participants were exemplifying how personal and social contexts can influence one's sense of belonging, the physical environment is another considerable factor in one's relationship

with their sense of belonging. While some based their school readiness and ability to succeed on volition, others focused on accessibility to resources. Pricilla speaks on this by saying,

> "*When people would have their laptops and nice phones, I always felt like I was not privileged enough to be here[...] It was a reminder that [Dominican] isn't where I belonged- especially when dorming."*

Interacting with one's immediate surroundings, whether social or physical, can impact one's sense of belonging. However, when looking from a macro perspective, the influence of society may also affect the way individuals interact with themselves and others. Elizabeth found this to be a barrier in her academic endeavors,

> *"I feel like not a lot of FGCS make it. Like people view us and expect us to not graduate."*

As participants began to recognize several ways in which they felt othered or disconnected from their peers and/or environments, quality of life and occupational experiences were two major areas that students struggled in. Thus, although each participant was on their own academic path, the concept of belonging was a significant theme that made an impact within each of their college experiences.

Critical analysis of findings: Doing, Being, Becoming & Belonging

The concepts of Doing, Being, Becoming & Belonging (DBBB) emerged as a finding of this study (Hitch, Pépin, & Stagnitti, 2014; Wilcock 1999). As participants described their individual experiences of navigating higher education institutions as FGCS, the essence of belonging (coupled with doing, being & becoming) were influential factors that impacted the quality of occupational engagement. But how they arrived at their own sense of belonging was highly individualized.

In its original form, Doing, Being, & Becoming (1999) was created to describe an individual's positionality, values, and contexts to understand how they may occupationally impact a person's pursuits. "Doing" (1999) evaluates one's actions- more specifically, their occupational engagement and disengagement (Wilcock, p. 5). "Being" (1999) represents the ability to think, reflect, and understand ourselves and how our existence may influence our relationships and outward presentation (Wilcock, p. 5). "Becoming" stands as the process of pursuing growth through "transformation and self-actualization" (Wilcock, 1999, p. 5). "Belonging," as the final construct, serves as the mechanism between the person, the occupation, and the environment to gain value, connectedness, and purpose within one's self and their surroundings (Hitch, Pépin, & Stagnitti, 2014). Therefore, when functioning in unison, the concept of DBBB pushed to expand the understanding of an individual and how they interact with themselves, their environments, and their occupations.

In relation to the targeted population of this study, the concept of DBBB served as a tool to understand the relationship between FGCS and higher education. However, there were limitations within this theoretical framework that did not fully represent the unique experiences and intersections of the FGCS population. Therefore, modifications were made to the current structure of DBBB using grounded theory to depict the process of how participants in this study achieved their sense of belonging.

Discussion

As stated in the literature review, intersectionality provided insight as to why certain groups may face adversity. To the present study, intersectionality gave reason as to why the participants experienced feelings of being othered. The findings aligned with the views of The Center for First-Generation Student Success, as they claimed that a link between race and low socioeconomic status in FGCS can be a precursor to employment and economic challenges during their education (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Being that all participants came from middle to low socioeconomic status and 10 of the 11 participants identified as people of color, 7 out of 11 participants were working while maintaining full-time student eligibility. The feeling of being othered led participants to react in ways that reflect their identity.

Going on to discuss the lived experiences of a FGCS, the finding in the study that many students worked while in school supports the findings that FGCS feel obligated to work while balancing the demands of education. FGCS often experience financial struggles that result in the feeling of being obligated to not only support themselves but their family's needs (Covarrubias et al., 2019). In the study, participants expressed increased difficulty when balancing work and school, but emphasized the struggle to balance their self-care occupations alongside work and school. Another finding of an article that supports Covarrubias et al. (2019) is how all the participants came from collectivist cultures. Covarrubias et al. (2019) stated that FGCS feel an internalized expectation or desire to stay connected to where they came when leaving for college. The participants of the study were heavily influenced by their families and culture in terms of what occupations they would or would not engage in. The collectivist background was also a significant role in what motivated them to pursue college in the first place. This aligns with an

article by Blackwell and Pinder (2014) where they stated that many families of FGCS saw their students going to college as an opportunity for greater success. The participants of this study often felt pressure from their families to do well in college. This served as an internalized motivation for them to keep going with their college career. The feeling of not fitting the standards of an individualistic society led to the heightened difficulty in balancing academia.

A major finding of the study was feelings of not belonging which often led to decreased engagement of school-provided resources and activities. This finding reflects the common occurrence of FGCS not accepting resources provided on campuses (Ellis et al., 2019). The research further adds to Ellis' study that not only do participants not access these resources, but it was found that the participants relied on their peers for information. Rather than accessing tools provided by the school, students felt more comfortable indirectly accepting these tools and resources as help from their peers. The support from peers then turned into their own self-made communities.

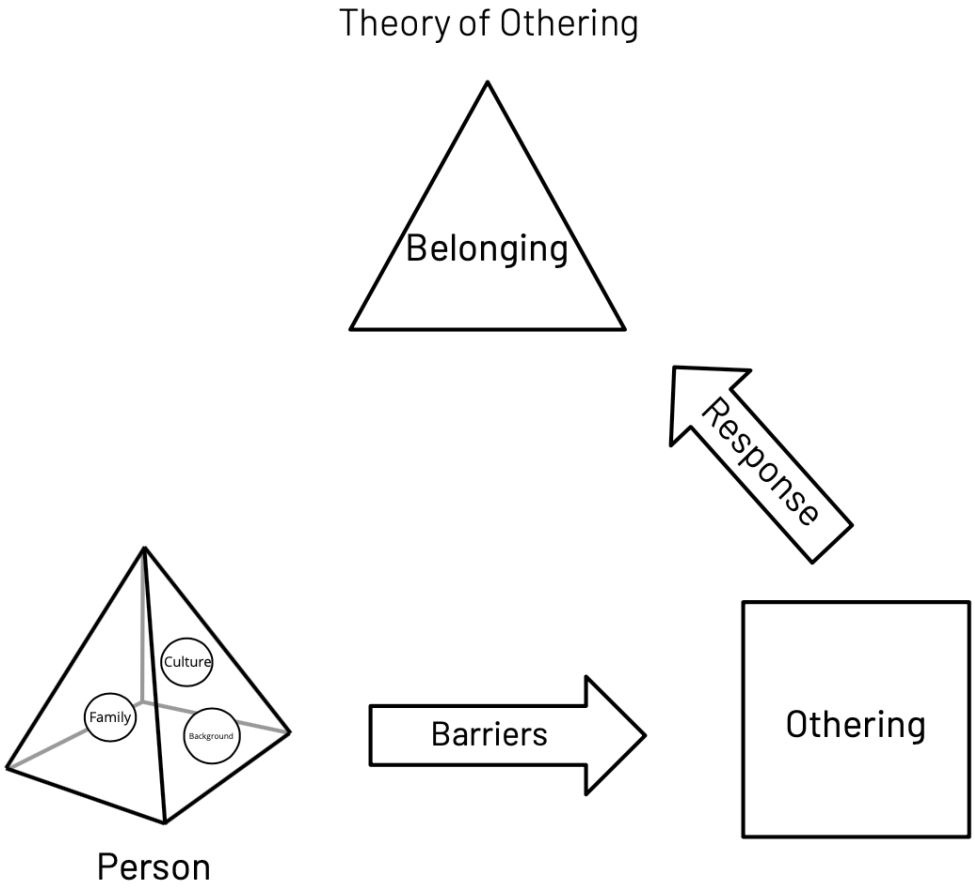
Lastly, the findings that link IP and FGCS are highly influenced by IPs emotional impacts on the student. The research supports Lane's (2015) study of IP in that there is a heightened level of incompetence that is felt by those who identify with experiencing this phenomenon. From interviewing the participants, it was found that many of them felt intimidated and disconnected inside the classroom. This manifested into them not feeling confident enough to speak aloud in class due to thinking their classmates would think poorly of them. Outside of the classroom, they felt feelings of not being able to succeed within their certain career field. These experiences overall contributed to greater feelings of distress and general anxiety when it came to tasks pertaining to their education. In addition to Lane's (2015) and Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, (2019) study, the research examined some tools used by the participants that negate

some of the negative emotions or feelings that came along with IP. It was found by the participants that engaging in meaningful leisure self-care activities while finding support systems in friends and family allowed them to stay motivated while striving toward their college degrees.

The findings of this study contributed to the modifications of DBBB that expand the acknowledgement of intersections within individuals. The emphasis on intersectionality within the context of FGCS allowed for the acknowledgement of various barriers that continuously impede the occupational performance and quality of engagement for these individuals throughout their academic endeavors. When evaluating the occupational experiences of FGCS who are experiencing IP, it is determined that a new framework is needed to fully understand these intersections and barriers.

From the findings, the conceptual framework of DBBB emerged to address the unique experiences of an individual. However, these concepts did not support diverse cultural backgrounds and values that were embodied within the context of the participants in this study. Ten of the 11 participants identified as being non-white as well as an individual coming from a collectivist culture. The application of collectivist values and roles did not fit into the structure of DBBB as the assumption was that the individual would do and become for themselves. Moreover, the essence of belonging was driven by individual values and did not support the consideration of a group's sense of belonging and growth. With these structures in place, individualistic cultural backgrounds disrupt the Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging of those who come from collectivist backgrounds. To prioritize the representation of diverse cultural backgrounds, The Theory of Othering (ToO) was developed to include these various intersections in the presence of DBBB.

Figure 1 Model of Theory of Othering



The Theory of Othering (ToO) is inspired by the analogy of a child's shape sorting toy to represent the "fit" between a person and their sense of belonging. The ToO is established to consider how individuals of collectivist cultural backgrounds navigate through the DBBB framework. Influenced by FGCS identifying with IP, this framework depicts how individuals of diverse intersections interact with their occupations, under dominating groups, to achieve a sense of belonging.

Pyramid: Person

Beginning at the pyramid, The Theory of Othering (ToO) starts by looking at the dynamic and multifaceted person. Like Doing, Being, Becoming, and Belonging, the pyramid is

similar to the ‘being’ aspect of Wilcock’s theory. One would typically think of a person as solely one being with their individualized beliefs, values, and so on. The person is different in the ToO in that rather than having an individualist perspective, the ToO emphasizes the person coming from a collectivist background. The person considers their families, their culture and background and its heavy influences on the self. This means that although FGCS have their own autonomy to choose which occupations they take part in, their choice of engagement is both motivated and limited by their family, culture, and their perceived expectations for the person. Those three domains of family, culture, and background are represented by the three bubbles within the pyramid.

Society today is so used to viewing individuals through a Eurocentric and individualistic lens, that when not everybody considers themselves to be that. Society today allows us to carry this mindset of “my life” or “my job”, but it is imperative to realize that just because a person is singular, does not mean that their motives, values, and beliefs have been developed on their own, nor are they centered around themselves. From what was seen in the participants, a person is heavily influenced by their surroundings, meaning what they value, want, and need to do are not only motivated by the self but their experiences of family, culture, and background.

Arrow 1: Barriers

Next in the model are the barriers that individuals experience represented by the arrow. From what was seen have found in the research, the barriers a person faces are often rooted in intersectionality. For example, their sexuality, socioeconomic status, and their racial identities. Oftentimes, these things serve as barriers to having proper access to resources. Other barriers are the emotions that come along with imposter phenomenon for example, many participants

experienced feelings of anxiety or disconnection inside the classroom. All things of which will directly impact their occupations.

Square: Point of Othering

Once at the square, this is the point of othering- as referenced in the findings. When othered, it is more than lacking a sense of belonging. Othering is a set of structures or processes that target marginalized groups by emphasizing their differences from the large majority. This act can be oppressive and used as a tool to disconnect someone, or groups, from their sense of belonging. Therefore, when observing othering, the findings revealed significant implications upon occupational engagement, quality of engagement, and wellbeing. Within the context of higher education, it was found that current structures in place impede the occupational experiences of FGCS with IP- which involves the dominance of individualism on college campuses. In other words, the existence of students who come from collectivist backgrounds are othered in higher education as the system is heavily founded on individualistic values and practices that neglect to consider cultural diversity.

When trying to fit the participants into the context, and dominating structures, of higher education they do not fit in. Like sorting blocks, you cannot fit a pyramid into a square. Similarly, you cannot force or change a person to fit into their university's systems. Maybe if the person were smaller, they would fit. But it is not the job of the person to *make* themselves fit into their environments. This is the point where students are confronted with the feelings of self-doubt, incompetency, fraudulence, and all other emotional experiences that are tied with imposter phenomenon. Moreover, this is where participants expressed significant changes in their occupational engagement, quality of engagement, and wellbeing. The significance of this

section is to exemplify the inflexibility and mismatching of FGCS within individualistic environments.

Arrow 2: Response

Consequently, the next component to this theory is the response. When students feel as though they are denied or forgotten about on campus, they respond by turning over to another environment, person(s), or occupations to achieve a sense of belonging that considers their multifaceted being. Therefore, when all of these components work together, students are led through the path of finding their truest belonging that does consider their cultural and personal contexts.

During this phase, the response to such barriers and challenges is an adaptive response by the person. In the context of the ToO this is demonstrated through the personal agency of social, occupational, and/or environmental modifications to best fit the person. For example, one of the participants began to feel othered by their roommates and as if their roommates did not understand them. They began to stray away from their roommates and found true belonging with other friends that were a part of their nursing cohort who were under the same conditions as they were. Their adaptation was finding a new group of friends where they felt like they better fit. Adaptation could also come at the cost of other occupations in a person's life. For example, take a FGCS with IP who does not feel as though they belong in the classroom. To feel like they belong in that setting, they adapt by overloading themselves with work to feel like they are meeting their perceived standards of what is surrounding them. While at the same time, they are neglecting self- care activities that would usually keep them feeling balanced.

Triangle: Belonging

With all components working together, students were led through the path that made space for their cultural and personal contexts. These were people, environments, and occupations that they chose in confidence, that they knew understood them. And once this was achieved, students felt as though they finally belonged. Under the ToO, it is important to understand that the achievement of belonging is highly individualistic and being better understood. While the fulfillment of belonging is understood to have positive implications on occupational engagement and wellbeing, there are no objective measurements being used to identify when students acquire such belonging.

The findings lead to the question of whether the existence of IP among FGCS is a product of feeling incompetent or a lack of inclusion and representation of cultural diversity among college campuses.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the small sample size that was observed. This impacts the validity of this research in that the population could have been larger and more diverse to expose more generalized occupational experiences. It might also be beneficial to observe FCGS outside of California to promote The Theory of Othering's generalizability to more backgrounds and cultures. Another limitation of this study is its ability to be applied to populations outside of FGCS. Although The Theory of Othering is meant to apply to minority groups in general, it was founded upon only observing the occupational experiences of FGCS within California.

Implications

Through the findings of this study, first-generation college students who identify with imposter phenomenon may experience shifts in quality of occupations, occupational balance, along with their sense of belonging. This study exemplifies that there is a need for OT practice in this area of working with first-generation college students. With the holistic approach that OTs are known to take, occupational therapy can observe every aspect of a person's life that can serve as a great tool for communities and the challenges they face. This research contributes to higher education in that it provides the real-life experiences of FGCS currently enrolled in a four-year university. This study not only brings awareness to the FGCS experiences but specifically the limitations to resources for academic achievement and how that adversely impacts their overall well-being. Thus, giving insight as to how higher education spaces can better accommodate various groups to promote success through inclusion. The Theory of Othering uses a generalized model that can be applied beyond the FGCS community. This gives room for ToO to identify additional spaces in which othering has imposed occupational implications and a removed sense of belonging. It brings to the surface the question of, does this person not belonging in this space because of personal and individualized reasons, or have these spaces been historically designed to benefit a specific individual? As OTs, it is imperative that we advocate for the altering of environments that disallow a person's belonging, rather than systems that encourage changes to the individual.

Conclusion

This study examines the occupational experiences of first-generation college students who identify imposter phenomenon. Using thematic analysis and grounded theory, the development of The Theory of Othering was created based on the study's participant's experiences in a four-year university. The Theory of Othering (ToO) adopts the lens of intersectionality to observe how minority groups navigate their spaces in dominated environments. While this theory may serve as a tool for representation, it also serves to better understand the occupational and emotional experiences of entering higher education as a FGCS. This theory adds valuable information to the existing literature of occupational science by allowing representation of an underserved population and expanding the potential for future practice. If our duty as OTs is to elevate others to achieve individual versions of belonging, we need to shift our thinking from why people do not belong and toward who is disallowing belonging in higher education.

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