

Blue-Collar Scholar: a critical analysis of multiple identities in first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds at Manchester College



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Prior research indicates first-generation college students from working-class families enter an academic world in which “blue-collar work is invisible (Dews & Law, back cover).” The following research conducted at Manchester College explores the dissension that exists between contemporary academic culture and blue-collar culture. Surveys completed by 134 students analyze the communicative attitudes and behaviors enacted by first-generation, working-class college students at Manchester College and their home—why these students negotiate multiple identities in communicating with academia and their parents. The survey data reveals nearly 40% of first-generation, working-class college students negotiate multiple identities interacting with academia and their parents. Suggestions are offered to Manchester College for diminishing the dissension between higher education and the working-class.

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My research examines why first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds negotiate multiple identities in their interaction with Manchester College and their home, analyzing the complex ways they communicate on campus and at home. After analyzing my data I offer recommendations for diminishing the dissension between contemporary academic culture and blue-collar culture, addressing socioeconomic diversity and discrimination on campus and improving the communication between academia and the working-class.

Prior Research

Prior research indicates first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds face a unique set of social and intellectual challenges compared to their middle- and upper-class peers whose parents attended college. An excerpt from Humble and Hopeful: Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College illustrates why attending college as a first-generation college student from a working-class family is such a challenging experience:

“Students who are the first in their family to enter higher education join a rarified and often mystifying culture of rules, rites, and rituals (Oldfield, 2). First-generation students from poor and working-class backgrounds must understand that their new surroundings will require much more from them than just getting good marks. No matter what distance they have physically traveled to their campus, college requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one they knew as youngsters. For first-generation poor and working-class students, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average (Oldfield, 3).”

First-generation, working-class college students experience difficulty surviving the social challenges of higher education because they lack the “cultural capital” many of their non first-generation, middle- and upper-class peers possess. Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily (Oldfield, 1).

An excerpt from the narrative “A Real Class Act” in This Fine Place So Far From: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class illustrates cultural-capital:

“Those graduates who are to the manor born have been groomed; everything in their backgrounds has prepared them for this life. They studied Russian in high school, read the

classics as undergraduates, traveled extensively. And while I have bested many of them with ease, I will always feel that I have to work harder simply because my background has not entitled me (Dews & Law, 38).”

In the October 16, 2009 edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Bobby Allyn, a first-generation, working-class college student discusses how his lack of cultural capital affected his transition from a working-class upbringing in northeastern Pennsylvania to studying philosophy at a private university:

“As my social life started to expand, and I began to learn about my friends’ families and histories, I realized that I was different. Most of the students I encountered were from affluent suburbs and were raised in conditions foreign to me. They’d had trips to Europe, private preparatory schools, and well-connected, educated parents. Having to confront uncomfortable realities, like not being able to pay for dinner and having parents who don’t know what the LSAT’s or MCAT’s are, let alone give advice about them, contributes to the divide I felt between myself and my friends (Allyn, B33).”

In Mark Orbe’s 2004 study, Negotiating Multiple Identities Within Frames: An Analysis of First-Generation College Students, a first-generation student illustrates cultural-capital while responding to how salient first-generation student status was in framing her personal identity:

“I think about it all the time because they [students whose parents went to college] have so many more benefits than us [first-generation college students]. Take my one friend, for example. She got the same score on the ACT test that I did. But then her dad made her take that Princeton Review course—paid \$800 for her—and then had her retake the test. She got a 27 on it after she scored an 18. I couldn’t believe it. I just remember telling my mom, and she was like, “I wish I could do it for you, but is it that important (Orbe, April 2004, 138)?”

There is also a considerable amount of research concerning the integration of first-generation college students into academia both socially and academically and how these students have trouble acclimating themselves on campus. The research involves many empirical studies discussing the integration issues, often aimed at increasing academic success or retention rates of

first-generation college students. An article published in *NASPA Journal* in 2009, The Integration of First-Year, First-Generation College Students from Ohio Appalachia determined first-generation students are at a higher risk of failure than their nonfirst-generation peers despite the increasing likelihood of college enrollment among students whose parents did not attend college (Bradbury & Mather, 1). The study examined the academic, social, and interpersonal experiences of nine first-generation, first-year students from Ohio Appalachia at a college that enrolls primarily first-generation students from the Appalachia region. Findings revealed connections to family, academic success, a sense of belonging, and financial issues to be salient issues for these students (Bradbury & Mather, 1).

A 2004 study published in *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* by Mark Orbe and Christopher Groscurth titled, A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Communicating on Campus and at Home: Exploring the Negotiation Strategies of First Generation (FGC) Students explores the complex ways that first-generation college students communicate on campus and at home. The authors argue first-generation college students “must negotiate issues of marginality-on both ends – as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes and college life (Orbe & Groscurth, 42).” The authors study first-generation college students using a co-cultural approach, which studies how members of underrepresented groups enact certain communicative practices in contexts where a person’s membership in one or more social groups renders their experiences as marginalized (Orbe & Groscurth, 41).”

The previous two studies provide useful information for understanding the difficulties first-generation college students face in their relationships with their respective college or university and their home. The studies, however, only examine first-generation college students without concern for their socioeconomic status, yet this group can vary widely in their attitudes and behaviors toward higher education. Some first-generation college students come from families with considerable “cultural capital” that, in the absence of a college education, still provide significant support for those students (Orbe, April 2004, 132).

Most of the literature discussing the specific questions I am researching utilizes the ethnographic method, using narratives from first-generation, working-class college students and professors. This Fine Place So Far From: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class is a compilation of autobiographical and analytical essays by a diverse group of professors and graduate students from working-class backgrounds that exposes the division between a working-class upbringing and higher education. The narratives serve as an ethnographic method of studying not only first-

generation, working-class students, but also the culture of higher education and the working-class so appropriate recommendations can be made to help eliminate classism and dissension on campus and at home. An essay in the book titled “Stupid Rich Bastards” by Laurel Black, discusses the purpose of using narratives to study first-generation college students and professors from working-class backgrounds:

“Here, on paper, I can be in two worlds and control them both. But on the phone, my father asks me how that “school thing” is going, and what I still need to do, and what kind of salary I expect next year when I finally get a job. And I find it easier to slip into his world than bring him to mine, to listen to his odysseys and believe him...I can bring their world into my own only in narratives, only distantly...I am seeking a way to keep the language of working-class in academia. I would like my colleagues to listen for the narratives embedded in their own writing, to feel the power of that movement forward just as they feel the power of the turning concept, the academic idea. And I would like my colleagues to turn my language over in their mouths with respect (Dews & Law, 24-25).”

Lacking the cultural capital of many of their middle- and upper-class peers, first-generation, working-class college students often have trouble initially identifying themselves with their respective college or university for many reasons, most importantly because first-generation, working-class college students realize their decision to identify themselves with academia is an attempt to transcend arbitrary socioeconomic boundaries or identify themselves with another class. Identifying themselves with academia means trying to simultaneously exist in two dissenting worlds—their working-class home and higher education. Author of [This Fine Place So Far From: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class](#), Carolyn Leste Law illustrates:

“These parents gave their children mixed messages about school and learning (do well but don’t get too smart; succeed but don’t make us look stupid; pursue your lofty goals with enthusiasm but don’t become one of “them”) that reflected their own mixed feelings. Working-class families, whether they are able to articulate it or not, know that a college degree has everything to do with class, unlike professional or managerial-class families, who believe it has to do with merit and entitlement. They know that somehow the very

existence of a college degree undermines and actually threatens their children's and, consequently, their own working-class identity. In the end, they do not want what they would wish for (Dews & Law, 5)."

The transition of first-generation, working-class college students from their working-class upbringings to the more privileged institution of higher education cause them to negotiate multiple identities, in which they enact different, contradictory, communicative attitudes and behaviors on campus and at home.

"Even as early as my freshman year, I was learning to become a double agent, learning to lie with conviction in two contexts at once and fearing expulsion from both (Dews & Law, 4)."

Methodology

Two complementary techniques were used to conduct my research. I conducted a literature review to discover what is currently known about the communicative attitudes and behaviors enacted by first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds on campus and at home. My literature review yielded numerous articles concerning topics substantially similar to my question but few that addressed it specifically. There are several ethnographic narratives I utilized which specifically address my research question, but they fail to offer any recommendations for correcting the problem addressed. Therefore, I combined a literature review with an original survey completed by students at Manchester College.

The survey is composed of a combination of open- and close-ended questions. After identifying the year in school, sex, race and hometown of the students, students answered whether they are a first-generation college student and whether they are from a working-class family.

I define a first-generation college student as a student whose parents or guardians did not receive their college degree. The clarity of the definition is important because there were students completing the survey whose parents attended college but did not graduate which would still qualify the student as a first-generation college student. Other students had one parent who graduated with a college degree while the other parent did not. This scenario would exclude the student from being considered a first-generation college student.

For my survey, working-class is defined as a class of workers and their families who work in an occupation such as manual or industrial labor, and works for low, hourly wages. I offered the definition as a base for students to work off of but if there were any questions about whether the students were from a working-class family I let the student decide. I felt it more important for students to define themselves rather than imposing a definition on them that would limit or hinder their ability to make sense of their experiences. Carolyn Leste Law discusses the implications of class definitions for the working-class academics who contributed essays to This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class:

“Is income a viable marker of class? Should we define working-class by level of parent’s education or by how dirty or dangerous one’s job is?...Academics in this book are working class if they say they are. While several of the contributors speak of working-class “credentials,” more helpful I think is not pondering legitimacy but speaking with sincerity; those who identify with the working-class for whatever reasons know the sense of displacement this book is about and the complex, ambivalent feelings it represents (Dews & Law, 8).”

Another excerpt from Julie Charlip, a contributor to This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class discusses the difficulties in defining class:

“In late twentieth century America, it seems that society is splitting more and more into a plethora of class factions—the working-class, the working poor, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, lower uppers, upper uppers. I find myself not knowing what class I’m from. All of us are products not just of our immediate upbringing but also of the past that our parents and grandparents transmit. This is why class is never a matter of money alone (Dews & Law, 26-27).”

The questions that followed on the survey sought to find the students’ motivations for attending college and choosing their particular college major, their views of their communicative attitudes and behaviors with their parents, their parents’ motivations for the student attending or not attending college, their views of the advantages and disadvantages of being a first-generation, working-class college student and their communicative attitudes and behaviors on campus.

The only criterion I established in choosing a survey participant is requiring the student to be enrolled full-time at Manchester College. The reason for not limiting the selection criteria to only first-generation, working-class college students is two-fold: comparison data and limited knowledge of which students are first-generation and working-class. By gathering data from students who are neither first-generation nor from the working-class or students who only fit one of the criteria, I was able to get valuable comparison data for evaluating how the students views on issues differed depending on their socioeconomic status and whether they were first-generation or not.

The surveys were completed by students who are first-generation, working-class college students, students who are first-generation but not from working-class families, students who are not first-generation but are from working-class families and students who are not first-generation or from working-class families. The surveys were completed by females and males with a higher percentage of females completing the survey. A wide range of seniors, juniors, sophomores and first years from more than 20 different academic majors completed the survey for purposes of comparison and validity.

After conducting a literature review and compiling data from the original surveys I utilize these resources to offer solutions to the problems presented in the research. Recommendations are offered for addressing classism and making higher education a more comfortable place for first-generation, working-class students. I also offer recommendations for improving communication between first-generation, working-class college students and their parents. The suggestions are intended to diminish the dissension between the working-class and higher education.

Implications

The following statement was presented to students on the survey:

“Many scholars who’ve come from working-class backgrounds claim they’ve created two identities: the scholarly, intellectual identity they have at the university/college and the working-class identity they have with their parents/family. They claim their parents have trouble understanding the academic world and the academic world is usually condescending to the working-class. Do you agree with these statements? Elaborate if you wish.”

Nearly forty-percent of first-generation, working-class college students who completed the survey stated they create two identities—the scholarly, intellectual identity they have at Manchester College and the working-class identity they have with their parents. These students agreed their working-class parents have trouble understanding academia and academia is often condescending to the working-class. Here is a response from a first-year athletic training major from Manchester College in which he illustrates the identity negotiations:

“While an individual can exist in both environments, they are different, parallel environments and require different things from an individual.”

The student argues for the importance of situational context in communicative behaviors. The students’ communicative behaviors are determined by whether he is on campus or at home. This student seems to have a pragmatic view of negotiating separate identities. In this sense, negotiating identities is necessary for communicating with parents or communicating with the academic world. Many students who completed the survey responded with comments arguing for the practical value of negotiating identities. Here are a few responses from the surveys which illustrate the practical reasons students negotiate identities:

- A first-year accounting major responded, “when I talk with my intellectual identity my mother loses interest.”
- A sophomore management/marketing double major responded, “Students who choose to take in knowledge, as opposed to what they’ve learned from [their] parents may find it hard to express this to their parents.”
- A senior athletic training major responded, “I have a wider base of knowledge and am more informed culturally and globally which leads to trouble understanding.”

While these students argue for the practical value of negotiating identities many students discuss the negative feelings associated with negotiating identities. These responses illustrate how the dissension between higher education and the working-class force leave some students with trying to maintain two or more contradictory identities. A sophomore education major discusses the dissension existing between the two contexts:

“I think that the working-class and the academic world have different ideas and ways of looking at the world. Sometimes I think my parents don’t understand why I think the way I do. I think they think I am too idealistic sometimes.”

A sophomore communication studies major illustrates the difficulties in trying to negotiate different identities:

“I’ve been able to grow intellectually, which one parent gets but I need to maintain that I am still down to earth and hard working with the other.”

The argument the student was trying to make—that she has grown intellectually and one of her parents doesn’t understand it—actually does not argue that she is creating multiple identities. Intellectual growth does not mean you are framing another identity, rather it is a way of being more conscious of a current identity, although framing another identity could be a consequence of intellectual growth. Interestingly enough, the student inadvertently proves she creates multiple identities in the way she responds. The student separates intellectualism and “being down to earth and hard working.” She associates growing intellectually with being a member of academia, and being “down to earth and hard working” with being a member of the working-class. This student’s response illustrates the most visible area of dissension between working-class and higher education—language.

In Humble and Hopeful: Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College Kenneth Oldfield discusses his confusion in understanding what a Ph.D. meant when he first began college:

“Two of my first-semester teachers introduced themselves as ‘doctor.’ I was confused but too scared to ask for clarification. Later in that first week, as I walked by various faculty offices, I noticed that some had ‘Dr.’ on the door nameplate. Seeing some of these titles, I wondered why this college would hire physicians to teach subjects such as speech, German, and history. It made sense that some M.D.’s would teach the natural sciences, but not business or the humanities (Oldfield, 4).”

This example by Kenneth Oldfield exists within the larger context of language issues which contribute to the dissension between the working-class and higher education. “Research indicates that my peers whose parents had higher socioeconomic status would have developed a significantly larger vocabulary and better language skills early in life (Oldfield, 4).”

Linguistic differences are one of the most noticeably distinguishing features in the social-class origins of college students. Consider the language in these survey responses from working-class students:

- The word “schooling” replaced education in several of the working-class students’ answers.
- “We don’t come from money” was a response demonstrating a disadvantage a working-class student faced
- When speaking of financial difficulties, many working-class students stated “money is tight.”
- “There are times when I have to ‘talk down’ to my family” was a response from a working-class student concerning communication with parents

Several of these phrases would be scoffed at in the classroom, but for many of these working-class students, this is the way they’ve grown up talking and the way their family talks. The relationship between language and socioeconomic status has been researched extensively. In “Complicity in Class Codes: The Exclusionary Function of Education” Irvin Peckham discusses how language used by the working-class is inadequate and often looked down upon by the academic world:

“Working-class language also conflicts with the language students are expected to use in the school environment. Working-class students quickly learn that their and their parents’ language is “incorrect.” This labeling means that they and their parents are “incorrect.” Although some working-class students may, for good reasons, resist “correction” of their language, themselves, and their parents, most learn to change the superficial linguistic markers of “substandard” usage: ain’t becomes am not, he don’t becomes he doesn’t, and (significantly) me no longer occupies the subject position. But deeper linguistic habits, reflecting their position-oriented social structure, remain embedded in the working-class students’ utterances. These habits hinder their abilities to speak and write in the ways that are rewarded in school, particularly at the university level (Dews & Law, 270-271).”

The language of academia makes it difficult for these students to excel academically and socially in the academic world. These language adjustments are only part of the issues that contribute to the negotiation of multiple identities for first-generation, working-class college students.

After analyzing the data I realized many of the students who disagreed that they negotiate multiple identities in interacting on campus or at home, actually responded to several other questions in the survey which support the idea they do negotiate multiple identities. Thus, I concluded one of the possible reasons some students disagreed with the statement was they agreed with parts of the statement but didn't agree with every idea presented in the statement. For example, several students who stated they do not negotiate multiple identities between campus and home, stated that when they are at home "they do [not] feel like they can discuss fully, and without any discomfort, [their] coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents."

College is a salient issue for these students and they're not comfortable discussing the issue with their parents. How do they accommodate their communicative attitudes and behaviors when they are at home? They do not enact the same communicative attitudes and behaviors at home as they do on campus. If we assume identities influence how we communicate and communication reinforces identities then I believe their decision to enact different communicative attitudes and behaviors are evidence that they negotiate multiple identities. Here is a response from a junior English major who partially agreed with the statement:

"I do feel like I have two identities but I try very hard to make them work together. I will never act condescending to the working-class."

All the first-generation, working-class students who completed the survey were supported by their parents in their decision to attend college. Support from parents is important for first-generation, working-class students to succeed academically and integrate socially. In [The Integration of First-Year, First-Generation College Students from Ohio Appalachia](#) the authors reveal nearly all of their research subjects received encouragement and support from family or friends to attend college and argue positive relationships and connections from home help students weather the ups and downs at college (Bradbury & Mather, 268).

An article written by Mark Orbe in 2008, [Theorizing Multidimensional Identity Negotiation: Reflections on the Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students](#) states "almost without exception, first-generation college students identify their families as key sources of support for their college success (Orbe 2008, 90)." The article discusses how parental and familial support can take the form of emotional, physical and logistical support. They also discuss how not all first-generation college students receive the same amount of consistent support from

home and in some cases, family members seem to simultaneously support and resist their collegial success (Orbe 2008, 90).

The parents' motivations for their child to attend college mostly fell into two categories: to get a good paying job and not have to work hard, and to get a great education and explore academic possibilities that interested the student. It is important to clarify what "work" means in both contexts. In "The Carpenter's Daughter" Renny Christopher, a Ph.D. candidate in literature who comes from a working-class family, discusses the ambiguity that exists between the working-class and the academic world in defining what "work" means:

"Work is a relative term. Because of my background, I have a hard time defining the activities of reading a book or writing a paper as work. Teaching is borderline: sometimes it seems like work, and sometimes it feels like a privilege. But still it doesn't feel like work because it isn't hard, it isn't unpleasant, it isn't boring or frustrating...Work, to me, is something someone does with one's hands (Dews & Law, 140)."

Since research has shown motivation and support from parents are important factors in a students' decision to attend college and succeed academically and socially, the parents' motivation for their child to attend affects the students' motivation to attend. Here is an excerpt from This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working-Class to explain the motivation for many parents' of first-generation, working-class college students in sending their children off to the college or university, and how their motivations often conflict with the reality of higher education:

"Go to college, they said, learn to do less back-breaking, soul-breaking work than we had to suffer, learn to wear white collars. Be better off than your drop-out cousins, live easier lives overall, but come home to us essentially the same. In their heart of hearts, these parents wanted their children to return home to them virtually unchanged by their sojourn in the academy, so mysterious and impenetrable a place they might as well have sent their kids up the Amazon (Dews & Law, 5)."

For many first-generation, working-class college students college is viewed as an "escape." These students had lived in and witnessed the difficulties in being working-class. Many of these students' parents' also saw college as a way for them to "escape the realities of the working-class.

These parents want their children to live a better life than they have lived, often meaning they want them to go to college so they can get a job that pays well. Several survey responses from first-generation, working-class students support the idea that they and their parents view college as a place for escaping the harsh realities of the working-class:

- “Working-class students understand what happens when you don’t have a degree.”
- “You feel proud of yourself and your parents share in your pride.”
- “I wanted a better life for myself.”
- “I wanted to make something of myself and go far in life.”
- “I do not want to struggle with money like my parents.”

In the majority of the survey responses from first-generation, working-class students, their motivation for attending college was similar to their parents’ motivation for the student to attend college. Several responses indicate financial and career motivations:

- “I want options for jobs and the ability to do what I want.”
- “I wanted a good job.”
- “I do not want to have to suffer financially like my parents.”
- “I want to make more money than as a high school grad.”
- “I know the more schooling I have the better I will be at my future job.”

These responses reinforce the idea that first-generation, working-class college students see higher education as a way out or escape their working-class background. For many students their exposure to academia reinforces their working-class identity because they feel alienated at college and because they realize the values of the working-class which are valuable and not represented as often in higher education. Not only do parents’ motivations influence the students’ decision to attend college, they also influence the students’ decision in choosing an academic major as well.

In response to which academic major first-generation, working-class students chose when they began college, more than one-third of students replied they were an education major of some sort. The major is home to the most first-generation, working-class students. This data corresponds with arguments made in the essay “Bronx Syndrome,” by Stephen Garger.

“Of all the disciplines, education has the most first-generation college graduates and the largest proportion of faculty with working-class backgrounds. Further, since most education professors began as elementary or secondary school teachers, they are often

perceived to be more practical, less theoretical, or intellectually less rigorous than their colleagues in other fields (Dews & Law, 49).”

This could be considered one of many instances of overt or indirect classism that exists in higher education. An excerpt from elaborates on the relationship between education and socioeconomic status:

“Working-class teachers will generally be found at the elementary and secondary levels. Academics with professional/managerial-class origins disproportionately constitute the professorate. Further, the more elite the institution, the higher the percentage of professors who come from the professional and managerial classes; working-class teachers who have managed to slip into the professorate will be more frequently found in community and state colleges than they will at Berkeley or Harvard. I am suggesting that elementary, secondary and college teachers value the sociocognitive habits that characterize their own classes (Dews & Law, 268).”

Many parents of first-generation, working-class college students see college as a bounded body of knowledge—a place where people go to learn “how” to do something. In essence, these parents view college as a technical school of sorts. For them, college is a place where you learn the technical skills you need for an occupation. Usually their view is even more limited than this because they view college as a place where you learn the “right” technical skills to use in an occupation. Many don’t view college as a place where knowledge is free-flowing with different points of view and multiple approaches. Often they view college as the place that has the right answers, the right point of view and the right approach. An excerpt from “Complicity in Class Codes: The Exclusionary Function of Education” elaborates on how these views also exist in working-class students:

“Working-class students learn that there are right and wrong answers, and they need to know what the correct answer is. Professional/managerial-class students have learned that answers depend on the contexts of the questions. They are used to ambiguity, to open-ended questions in which one discovers not the “right” answer but the “best” answer for the moment. Working-class students learn to focus on content—the immediate meaning of a thing or situation. Professional/managerial-class students learn to focus on the

structure, to relate a thing to other things, to notice similarity and difference (Dews & Law, 273).”

Results from the surveys revealed almost 75% of students chose academic majors which were practical in the workforce when they began college— majors directly preparing them for a career or easily applicable in an occupation. Part of these decisions could be due to their parents’ limited, dogmatic views on the purpose of higher education and motivations for their children to attend. An excerpt from the essay “Bronx Syndrome” elaborates:

“My parents had a pragmatic view of a college education. One went to college to become a doctor, businessman, lawyer, or engineer. That was it. You most certainly did not spend time finding yourself. For them education had nothing to do with ideas, but for me ideas became everything. When I tried to share this discovery with them, they simply reiterated that going to college was to learn a profession so you won’t have to work with your hands and you’ll make a lot of money (Dews & Law, 45).”

Theoretical Framework

The communicative attitudes of behaviors by first-generation, working-class college students can be understood by utilizing a co-cultural theoretical framework. Using my survey results and previous research, co-cultural theory can help in understanding how and why first-generation, working-class college students negotiate multiple identities in their interactions on campus and at home. Developed by Mark Orbe in 1998, the co-cultural theory examines how “different members of underrepresented groups enact certain communicative practices in contexts where one or more social groups render their experiences as marginalized (Orbe & Groscurth, 42).” The main focus of the theory is to explain how members of a co-cultural group communicate when talking to members of the dominant group. According to the theory, co-cultural group members strategically enact communication practices that reflect larger co-cultural communication orientations. Orbe has identified 26 co-cultural practices across nine different communication orientations. The communication orientations are influenced by six factors: preferred outcomes, field of experience, abilities, situational context, perceived costs and rewards and communication approach (Orbe & Groscurth, 42).

The preferred outcomes of co-cultural group members fall largely into three categories: assimilation—trying to get rid of cultural differences and integrate into the dominant culture;

accommodation—trying to make the dominant culture understand and change their culture to be more accommodating to the life experiences of the co-cultural group and; separation—maintaining separate identities apart from that of the dominant group. Three communicative approaches used by the co-cultural group to reach their preferred outcomes are: nonassertive—behaviors that are non-confrontational and put the needs of other’s before the needs of one’s self; assertive—self-enhancing behaviors that take into account the needs of others and one’s self and; aggressive—behaviors that are often perceived as self-promoting and hurtfully expressive, putting the needs of one’s self before the needs of others (Orbe & Groscurth, 3-4).

A study by Mark Orbe and Christopher Groscurth in 2004 applied the co-cultural theory to examine what co-cultural communication orientations and practices first-generation college students enact in their interactions with others and whether any differences exist in how they communicate on campus and at home. The researchers gathered data from in-depth interviews and focus groups of 71 first-generation college students and 8 first-generation college graduates across six different Midwestern college campuses. The findings revealed first-generation college students communication orientations on campus varied but were largely clustered as nonassertive assimilation, assertive assimilation and assertive accommodation (Orbe & Groscurth, 43).

Within a nonassertive assimilation orientation on campus, first-generation college students described the co-cultural practice of *emphasizing commonalities* between themselves and other students whose parents went to college—these students described trying to fit in with “the college crowd” despite feeling like a “stranger in a strange land.” Sometimes, this meant students enacted the co-cultural practice of *censoring self*—avoiding discussions that would have given attention to differences in their family education levels (Orbe & Groscurth, 43). Within an assertive assimilation orientation on campus, some first-generation college students described the co-cultural practice to *overcompensate*, especially in their academic work. Several students identified themselves as conscious overachievers—individuals that strive to make the best grades in class, serve in leadership roles in various student organizations, and still find time to work and support themselves (Orbe & Groscurth, 43-44). Some students described how they practice *overcompensation* to feel like they belong in college—“at first I thought I didn’t belong here...I definitely don’t think that any more. But I still have to study 3 times longer than [nonfirst-generation college students] for my tests (Orbe & Groscurth, 44).” Within an assertive accommodation orientation on campus, some first-generation college students described how they had conversations about their life circumstances with other students, allowing them to

educate others about themselves and debunk some of the stereotypes about families of little formal education. Other students in the study described how they enacted the co-cultural practice of *intragroup networking* by locating other first-generation college students and forming networks of social support (Orbe & Groscurth, 44). One of the most common assertive accommodation co-cultural practices was *utilizing liaisons*, describing how other individuals—high school counselors, neighborhood friends, people from church, fellow students, and college faculty and administrators—supported and mentored the students' to help them succeed. Most often, the help was in the form of academic or career counseling, but also included social and cultural support (Orbe & Groscurth, 44).

The study revealed the most prevalent co-cultural communication orientations enacted by first-generation college students' at home are nonassertive assimilation, nonassertive and assertive separation, and assertive accommodation (Orbe & Groscurth, 44-45). Throughout the study, many students described their attempts to share their college experiences with family members—some of whom were “supportive, yet clueless” while others “seemed threatened by it all (Orbe & Groscurth, 44).”

First-generation college students who enacted a nonassertive assimilation orientation at home described using the co-cultural practice of *censoring self*—remaining silent when relatives made ignorant comments or used words incorrectly to maintain face, or not talking about college at all to avoid controversy. First-generation college students who enacted a nonassertive separation orientation with family and friends from home described making a conscious attempt to separate themselves from their families by *maintaining interpersonal barriers* such as avoiding parent's phone calls or *avoiding* interactions with home. A few students' described how *embracing the stereotypes* of being a college student—scholar, critic, informed citizen—further separated themselves from their family who viewed such intellectual activities as a waste of time (Orbe & Groscurth, 45). First-generation college students who enacted the assertive accommodation orientation with family and friends from home describe how communicating at home could mean hostile reactions from others who believe their attitude has become condescending as a result of their educational achievements and increased knowledge. This prompted many first-generation college students to spend less time at home and more time with other college students. Many students who communicated at home used the co-cultural practice *communicating self*, modeling positive academic behavior because they were motivated to visit home and share their experiences with younger family members and community members (Orbe & Groscurth, 45).

Results from the Manchester College surveys corroborate findings in Orbe's 2004 study. My surveys, however, offer more specific findings than Orbe received since my research focuses on first-generation college students who are *from working-class backgrounds*. Findings from the Manchester College surveys reveal the majority of co-cultural orientations enacted by Manchester College first-generation, working-class college students when *communicating with family and friends from home* are nonassertive assimilation, nonassertive and assertive separation, and assertive accommodation.

Twenty-six percent of first-generation, working-class college students responded they try to avoid speaking about their coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents even though their parents support their academic endeavors. Students stated they avoid talking about their experiences at college because it's easier since their parents don't understand many of the things they discuss. This nonassertive assimilation practice of *censoring self* is enacted by a sophomore English major: "My parents aren't interested and you can't have a discussion about Shakespeare when the other has never read it."

Several first-generation, working-class college students oriented themselves assertively or non-assertively with the preferred outcome of separation. Some tried to *avoid* communicating with their parents at all, purposefully separating themselves from their families, while others *maintain interpersonal barriers* between themselves and their parents with comments like "it's just nice to not have to be around them all the time" and "don't talk to and see them as often." Some first-generation, working-class college students enacted an assertive accommodation orientation at home, practicing *communicating self* with their parents. Responses from these students discuss how they feel comfortable discussing their coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents even though their parents don't agree with them or understand them. A sophomore political science major responds, "they [parents] may not agree with what I have studied [but there is] more open discussion with my parents, especially considering my career outlook." A first-year psychology major discusses how *communicating self* benefits him and his mother: "My mom wishes she would have went to college and finds whatever I talk about to be interesting. It makes her happy that I'm getting an education."

On campus, many first-generation, working-class college students enact an assertive assimilation orientation, practicing *overcompensation* in their academic and social endeavors. Almost all the first-generation, working-class college students who completed the survey mentioned how their background contributed to their work ethic—one characterized by working

hard at everything they do. A sophomore business major responds “I have everything to lose, one shot, puts the pressure on and makes me work harder because nothing was handed to me.” These students discussed how their working-class work ethic carried over into their academic endeavors and inspired them to work harder.

Recommendations

Using data from the Manchester College survey and other published research on the issue, it is apparent there is dissension between the blue-collar culture and contemporary academic culture. For first-generation, working-class college students this dissension creates a need for them to negotiate multiple identities. At its roots, this dissension between higher education and the working-class is essentially a communication problem. There has been extensive research conducted concerning first-generation college students and even working-class students, yet few researchers offer any practical solutions to help solve the communication problem. Kenneth Oldfield suggests four reforms in Humble and Hopeful: Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College for colleges and universities to better meet the unique needs of their first-generation poor and working-class students (Oldfield, 8). He suggests colleges and universities:

- “Develop a support system for poor and working-class first generation college students (Oldfield, 8).”
- “Address classism (Oldfield, 9).”
- “Diversify the social-class origins of the faculty (Oldfield, 10).”
- “Diversify the social-class origins of the student body (Oldfield, 11).”

Using adaptations from Oldfield and conclusions of my own, I recommend Manchester College adapt personnel policies and implement new programs. These recommendations will diminish the dissension between contemporary academia and blue-collar culture, allowing first-generation, working-class college students to communicate on campus and at home without negotiating multiple identities.

My first recommendation to Manchester College is to diversify the social-class origins of the faculty and the Board of Trustees. At Manchester College and many colleges and universities around the country, the small percentage of faculty from working-class backgrounds “reveal an academic world in which ‘blue-collar work is invisible’ (Dews & Law, back cover).” An excerpt

from the Manchester College employee handbook illustrates how little attention is given to socioeconomic status in higher education:

“According to its Mission and Values Statements, Manchester College is committed to encouraging the appreciation of human diversity and recognizing the worth of every person. As part of this commitment, Manchester College ensures equal access and equal opportunity to applicants pursuing employment with the College in faculty, staff or student positions. It is the policy of Manchester College to not discriminate on the basis of national or ethnic origin, race, color, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, disability, physical characteristics, veteran status or any legally protected classification (Manchester College, 12).”

Where is socioeconomic status in this list of diversity criteria? I’m not arguing socioeconomic discrimination in hiring faculty happens at Manchester College, I’m just wondering why socioeconomic status isn’t considered when discussing diversity. When trying to diversify the faculty at Manchester College, the college should also consider the socioeconomic origins of the potential employees. Faculty members who were first-generation, working-class college students will have a better understanding of the challenges first-generation, working-class students endure and be able to mentor and offer support to them more effectively. A faculty of diverse class origins will also allow them to share insights into their socioeconomic cultures, allowing faculty members of different classes to have a better understanding of and appreciation for each others’ class backgrounds.

Although the following suggestion may be difficult in comparison to the other suggestions, I believe its benefits outweigh the costs: Diversify the social-class origins of the Board of Trustees. As the governing members of Manchester College, their attitudes and behaviors, partially created from their social-class origins, permeate through all aspects of the institution since their decisions ultimately affect everyone associated with Manchester College. Similar to faculty, having Trustee members who were first-generation, working-class college students would allow them to understand and make decisions better benefiting first-generation, working-class students at the college.

An article in the October 16, 2009 edition of [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) discusses measures being taken to diversify the governing boards of higher education. In 2003, when the

Adler School of Professional Psychology began trying to diversify their governing board members, the majority of the members were white males. Now, six years later more than half of the 17 trustees are women and one-third are members of racial or ethnic groups, with the board chair being a black woman (Masterson, B5). The author argues other colleges and universities around the country should model Adler's commitment to diversity, recruiting minority members for their governing boards. "When an opening comes up, the board decides where gaps exist in representation related to age, gender, race, ethnicity, and professional background (Masterson, B6)." Again, where is socioeconomic status in the list? This shows how little attention is given to class, considering this school is supposed to be a model of diversity for other colleges and universities, yet they fail to consider class when trying to diversify.

The implementation of programs and policies which allow parents to be involved in the academic lives of their students is the most important recommendation I offer. As research shows, working-class parents often have a negative view of the academic world and the academic world often has a negative view of the working-class. These negative and often misleading views are in large part due to a lack of communication between the two—aside from first-generation, working-class college students, the reason the issue is known, the working-class and the academic world have limited interaction with each other. Creating channels of communication between Manchester College and parents of enrolled students will allow contemporary academic culture and working-class culture to interact and gain a clearer understanding of and appreciation for each other. This will diminish the dissension between academia and the working-class, allowing first-generation, working-class college students to communicate on campus and at home without negotiating multiple identities. Several ways of improving communication between Manchester College and students' parents are offered.

Manchester College would benefit from examining the practices of elementary and junior high schools. Most elementary and junior high schools conduct parent-teacher conferences for teachers to communicate with students' parents. The teacher discusses any school issues salient for the parents' child ranging from the curriculum and academic performance to social and behavioral issues. Likewise, parents are able to discuss issues the student is having at home that may be affecting his attitudes and behaviors at school. The conferences allow a students' teachers and parents' to understand the individual culture of each—the individual issues at school affecting the student's attitudes and behaviors at home, and issues at home affecting the student's attitudes and behaviors at school. This individual, personal approach helps creates an

understanding and supportive environment for the student at home and at school. This same idea could be utilized by Manchester College.

Optional parent-professor conferences would allow professors' and parents' to communicate with each other. For first-generation, working-class college students the conferences would be beneficial because they would allow professors have a dialogue with parents about salient issues concerning their student on campus, ranging from the curriculum, academic purpose and performance to social and behavioral issues. Likewise, the parent and professor could have a dialogue about salient issues concerning the student at home—circumstances concerning the students' life, the challenges of being from a working-class and the changes in their child's behavior since attending the institution. The dialogue would allow parents' to debunk some stereotypes many people in academia have concerning people of the working-class, and allow professors' to get an outside perspective of the classism existing in higher education. A parent-professor conference between Manchester College professors' and the parents of first-generation, working-class college students would allow the contemporary academic culture and blue-collar culture to gain personal insight into individual's lives, diminishing the dissension existing between the two cultures. This allows first-generation, working-class college students to have a more comfortable, supportive environment on campus and at home, decreasing their need to negotiate multiple identities.

Another way to help parents understand the academic world is to invite them to be a part of academia during certain occasions. For example, when students give a presentation, the professor could allow them to invite their parents to be an audience member. Parents are able to be audience members for their child's participation in college athletic events, concerts, plays, graduation ceremonies and other award ceremonies but parents aren't able to witness any of the child's academic endeavors. This would allow parents to see their child performing within the academic world. The student would no longer be able to negotiate separate identities because both contexts would be present at once. The ability for the academic world and the students' working-class parents' to see the student enacting the same communicative attitudes and behaviors will allow for a more accurate view of the student and possibly improve understanding between both contexts.

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Findings

A total of **134** students from Manchester College completed the questionnaire. Sixty-one percent of students who completed the survey were females and 39% were males.

- **33%** of students who completed the survey are first-generation college students from a working-class family
 - **39%** of those FG/WC students are seniors, **13%** are juniors, **23%** are sophomores, **25%** are first-years
 - **43%** of those FG/WC students are male, **57%** are female
 - **100%** of these students are white
- **35%** of students are not first-generation college students or from a working-class family
- **5%** of students are first-generation college students, but are not from a working-class family
- **27%** of students are not first-generation college students, but are from a working-class family

The focus of my research lies with the **44** students who are a first-generation college student from a working-class family. The following **bolded** data represents the responses from the 44 students who responded as first-generation college students from working-class families.

1. **38% of students responded yes to the following question and many others**

acknowledged throughout the survey that at least parts of the statement were true:

Many scholars who've come from working-class backgrounds claim they've created two identities: the scholarly, intellectual identity they have at the university/college and the working-class identity they have with their parents/family. They claim their parents have trouble understanding the academic world and the academic world is usually condescending to the working-class. Do you agree with these statements?

- **43%** of first-generation college students who are not from a working-class family agreed with the statements
- **39%** of students who are not first-generation college students, but are from a working-class family agreed with the statements

- 53% of students who are not first-generation college students or from a working-class family agreed with the statements
2. 100% the students responded their parents supported their decision to attend college—95% responded their parents supported their decision to attend Manchester College and 5% responded their parents supported their decision to attend college but wished they would have chosen a different college.
 3. 37% of the students responded their parents wanted them to go to college so they could get a good paying job and not have to work hard—54% of the students responded their parents wanted them to attend college so they could get a great education and explore academic possibilities that interested them.
 4. 25% of students responded that their parents do not provide any financial support for them.
 5. 58% of students responded their relationship with their parents has changed since attending college, while 42% responded their relationship has not changed.
 6. 74% of the students responded they feel like they can discuss fully, and without any discomfort, their coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents—26% responded they did not feel they could discuss fully, and without any discomfort, their coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents.
 7. 26% of students stated they try to avoid talking about their coursework and scholarly endeavors with their parents.
 8. 93% of the students responded they do not feel ashamed to be from a working-class background when they are at college—7% responded they do feel ashamed
 9. 89% of students responded that being a first-generation college student from a working-class background had some advantages—38% of the students responded they felt being a first-generation college student from a working-class family is an

advantage compared to their middle- and upper-class peers without disadvantages—51% of students responded it had both advantages and disadvantages—Only 11% responded it was a disadvantage without any advantages.

10. 55% of students responded their courses explore, in depth, class differences and the working-class culture—45% of students responded their courses do not.

- *51% of all the students who completed the questionnaire responded their courses do not explore, in depth, class differences and the working-class culture*

11. Here is a breakdown of the college major students chose when they entered college:

- **34% chose a major in education**
- **20% chose a major in general business, marketing, management, accounting**
- **11% chose a major in English**
- **9% chose a major in political science (2 as preparation for law school)**
- **7% chose a major in criminal justice**
- **7% chose a major in athletic training**
- **12% chose majors in chemistry, communication studies, social work, engineering, psychology**

12. Here is the breakdown of the college major(s) these students currently have:

- **30% chose a major in education**
- **20% chose a major in general business, marketing, management, accounting**
- **11% chose a major in communication studies**
- **11% chose a major in English**
- **9% chose a major in political science (2 as preparation for law school)**
- **19% chose majors in political science, sociology, history, exercise and sport sciences, psychology, computer science, social work, Spanish, criminal justice**

What are your plans after you graduate from Manchester College?

Do you think being a first generation college student from a working-class family is an advantage or disadvantage compared to your upper-class peers at Manchester College ? Explain.

a. Advantage

b. Disadvantage

c. Both advantages and disadvantages

- **Advantage**

- “I am the first in my family to attend college so I am a role model to them.”
- “Taught me the value of hard work and I have a lot of people rooting for me to succeed.”
- “Good work ethic.”
- “Gives me something to aspire to and make my parents proud.”
- “I appreciate what I have more, therefore I work harder.”
- “Because you already have surpassed your parents’ accomplishments, it’s like you don’t have a ceiling that’s holding you down. The sky is the limit.”
- “Working-class students understand what happens when you don’t have a degree.”
- “You feel proud of yourself and your parents share in your pride.”
- “I feel as if I have a bit more real life experience—street smarts.”
- “Better money skills.”
- “I didn’t have to follow a mold set by my family.”

- **Disadvantage**

- “We don’t come from money so it is a struggle sometimes.”
- “Lack support at home.”
- “It makes it hard to stay focused on school when I also have to deal with financial responsibility.”
- “No one to ask advice from.”
- “When I came I had no idea what I was doing or how to go about achieving my goal.”
- “You don’t know what to expect and your family isn’t a source for help.”
- “Some embarrassment.”
- “People may write you off as someone who isn’t competent enough to attend college.”